



Inside Oversight: Levin Center at Wayne Law Tutorials

SERIES 3 HOLDING A HEARING

Tutorial: Designing a Media Strategy for a Hearing

In this video, Levin Center experts offer tips and advice on how to design an effective media strategy for a Congressional hearing.

Instructors

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Transcript

Elise: Hi. I'm Elise Bean and this is Zack Schram, and we're here to share with you some tips we've learned over the years on designing a media strategy for a Congressional hearing. Both of us conducted oversight investigations for Senator Carl Levin on the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the U.S. Senate.

Zack: Hearings that generate a lot of media attention have a greater chance to effect change, provided the coverage is positive and not negative. Here are a few tips to help you design an effective media strategy.

Develop a press list

Elise: Tip Number One: Develop a press list. Of the thousands of reporters out there, you need to identify and alert the ones interested in the issues in your upcoming hearing. The best approach is to research past media coverage of those issues, identify the reporters behind the stories, and type up a list of their names,

employers, emails, and phone numbers. Also worthwhile is identifying the specific issues each reporter tackled, so you know exactly what they are interested in. Be sure to include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. Consider including the international press too, since most have Washington bureaus. Try to update the list regularly – a perfect job for an intern.

Coordinate with the press shop in the personal office

Zack: Tip Number Two: Coordinate with the press shop in your boss' personal office. Some press shops want total control of all media interactions, even if they have limited information about your investigation. A better approach is to convince the press shop to share media responsibilities with your office, so you can ensure the right information gets out at the right time to the right reporters. Interacting directly with reporters can also help your office establish investigative credibility, encourage better coverage of your boss, and even lead to some reporters sharing nonpublic information helpful to your investigation or hearing.

Elise: In the Levin world, the Subcommittee staff director and senior investigators took the lead with the press, while also sharing responsibilities with the personal office press shop. We split up such work as responding to press inquiries, drafting press releases, clearing materials with the boss, and briefing the boss before press interviews. Those jobs can be split in many different ways. The key is to do it ahead of time, before press emergencies or mix-ups cause problems.

Zack: If you work on a subcommittee, you may also need to coordinate with any press person at the full committee.

Consider how to work with your counterparts across the aisle

Elise: Tip Number Three: Think about how to work with your counterparts across the aisle on press matters. Our rule of thumb was to issue a joint press release on the hearing, with a quote from each side. That required us to negotiate over the hearing description, which helped inform each side about what the other one was thinking and forge a more united approach. Even if each side decides to issue its own press release, it's better to share the drafts before sending them out. The other side will soon see the release anyway, and sending a statement to the press with no prior warning is one of the quickest ways to sour bipartisan relations.

Zack: In addition, before a hearing, we always held a joint press briefing that both sides could attend, even if only one side was speaking. Knowing your colleagues would be present when you spoke to the press helped keep us accurate, tamped down the rhetoric, and helped us send a bipartisan message to the media.

Elise: Another area of cooperation involves press inquiries that are negative or related to a leak. In those cases, it's wise for both sides to keep each other fully informed about the press calls so no one is blindsided.

Identify sensitive media issues, and plan for them

Zack: Tip Number Four: When designing a media strategy, be sure to identify any sensitive media issues and plan how to handle them. Sensitive issues might involve a whistleblower, provocative documents, past statements by your boss or someone else, or criticisms by the subjects of the investigation. Whatever the issue, the key is to identify it, plan for it, and ensure your boss is comfortable with your approach. A related problem is a leak of sensitive information just prior to a hearing. Again, the key is working out ahead of time how to handle it, including how to interact with your counterparts across the aisle.

Design a pre-hearing, on-the-day, and post-hearing strategy

Elise: Tip Number Five: When the hearing is a month or two away, it's time to prepare a formal media strategy. It should have three phases: a pre-hearing phase, an on-the-hearing-day phase, and a post-hearing phase. The first, pre-hearing phase should include planning for press advisories, press releases, a possible press briefing, and press calls to get reporters to cover the hearing. The second, on-the-hearing-day phase, should include seating the press in the hearing room, handing out materials, answering press inquires, making Members available for interviews, and maybe sending out another press release on what happened at the hearing. The third, post-hearing phase should include collecting press clips, setting up additional Member interviews, and taking additional steps to generate media coverage, such as alerting the press to related floor statements or correspondence.

Write up the media strategy, with a timeline, and get approval.

Zack: Tip Number Six: Because so much has to get done in a short amount of time around a hearing, it's best to commit the media strategy to paper, with a timeline. To develop the timeline, it's best to work back from the hearing date to figure out what needs to be done when. Be sure to coordinate the strategy with the press shop in the personal office, and clarify who will do what. Everyone should know and signoff on the strategy. In addition, you may want to run key dates by your colleagues across the aisle so they can do their planning. To help you get started, the Levin Center has prepared a generic Hearing Media Strategy that you are welcome to download, use, and improve.

For the hearing media plan template, see:

law.wayne.edu/hearingmediastrategy

Be prepared to deal with the unexpected

Elise: Our final tip is to be prepared to deal with the unexpected. Many reporters are resourceful and aggressive, and may surprise you. The subjects of the investigation will be working the press as hard as you will, and may throw you a curve ball. Whistleblowers, litigants, public interest groups, and others may also contact the media. To deal with whatever happens, your best defenses are patience, keeping a sense of humor; sticking to the facts; and, if possible, working with your partners across the aisle.

Designing a Media Strategy for a Hearing

- 1. Develop a press list.**
- 2. Coordinate with the press shop in the personal office.**
- 3. Consider how to work with your counterparts across the aisle.**
- 4. Identify sensitive media issues, and plan for them.**
- 5. Design a three-part media strategy, with pre-hearing, on-the-day, and post-hearing phases.**
- 6. Write up the media strategy, with a timeline, and get approval.**
- 7. Be prepared to deal with the unexpected.**

Zack: The media can amplify your hearing or undermine its credibility. We hope these tips will help you plan an effective media strategy to publicize your hearing and deal with the unexpected.

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