

# Special Events

**Details ■ Press conferences ■ Action  
Agenda: Organizing a press conference ■ Where to hold  
your press conference ■ The day of the event ■ Press kits**

## Details

Special events can be a great way for you and your organization to grab the attention of elected leaders, the media and the public. Public forums and rallies also present an opportunity to identify new supporters and focus attention on your issue. The most critical component is proper planning and organization. You want to make sure your organization is portrayed in the best possible light. And always remember to invite the press because it will broaden your audience. Only a few people may come to your forum, but thousands more may read the news article or see the story on television.

Details are everything when planning an event. Below are questions for planning any kind of event. Not each item listed will apply to every event, but one overlooked detail can mean the difference between a good event and a great event... or a little headache and a migraine! (*Courtesy of Herrle Communications Group*)

**Audience** –Who will be there and why are they attending? Will there be special dignitaries who need special attention and if so, what kind? Will there be people who need special consideration like handicapped facilities?

Will people in the audience know each other? Will they need to? Who will take care of introductions?

**Big wigs**—Are any celebrities coming to your event? Are they politicians or stars? Do they bring an entourage? How many? Will they be asked to sign things? Stay for photo ops? Are they participating in your event or just attending? Do they need a special area to rest ahead of time? Do they require security? Do they know what their role is in your event? Do you know how to properly introduce them and what their titles are?

**Catering**—What did you choose for the menu? Did you plan enough food for 10 percent more than received RSVPs? Are the prices and quantities in line? Have you considered vegetarians? What about alcohol? What time will the caterer be there to set up? Are they dropping off or serving? If dropping off, what time will they pick up? Is gratuity included in the bill? Are they providing tables and chairs?

How about linens and table skirts? Do you have their pager number in case they're late? Who is taking care of leftovers? Will they go back to the office? Leave with the caterer? Be taken to a food bank? If you're keeping them, did

**Recommendation:**  
Buy a book on  
etiquette, and keep  
it in your office.

## Display tactics:

A display is a static presentation, like a large billboard advertisement. It should attract attention so that viewers will approach and review your information up close. Let your materials tell the story and let the display serve as a visual backdrop.

you bring storage bags or foil? Is the event over when the food is gone?

If you're having a speaker at a food function, will they start speaking after people have eaten? While they're eating? Will the places be cleared while your speaker is talking? Will the speaker be served first?

**Display**—Do you need a display at this event? If so, what kind? Do you need an extra table for it? Have the caterers taken care of that? Does the display table need a skirt? Will there be any materials to go along with the display?

Does the display need to be manned? Do you need chairs? Electricity? How far in advance will you set it up? Take it down? Do you need help bringing it in? Who is helping you? If you're setting it up outdoors, will wind be a factor? Does your display need any security?

**Evaluation**—When your event is over, how are you going to evaluate its success? Attendance? Media exposure? Financial contributions? Donor cards signed? Commitments made? No damage done? What about the bigger picture? Did you influence public opinion? Get people to change their behavior? Was that an objective?

Are the measurement tools in place? Who is counting attendance or collecting data for you?

**Freaks of nature**—Have you put any contingency plans in place? Will the weather affect this event? If it's an outdoor event, what will you do in case of rain? Snow? Sun? Do you have a tent? Need a tent? Is it an evening event that requires lighting? Darkness? Moonlight? Will really hot weather affect your event? What about the wind? Do you have provisions to tether things? How much time do you have if

you need to move?

**Greeting your guests**—Who will be the first person to greet the guests? Have you given yourself enough time in setting up so that you can greet and mingle with your guests? Do your guests know each other? Do your guests know how to mingle or are you expecting people to hug the walls?

Will you be ready for the guests that arrive 30 minutes ahead of time... the 'traffic beaters'?

**Hang time**—Will there be any down time between different elements of your event? Time between a presentation and dinner? Reception and presentation? A meeting and a reception? Will your guests know where to go? Is a change of attire required? Do your guests know this?

Is transportation required? Do they need a map? Are you at risk of losing guests in between events? How will you ensure they all get from event number one to event number two?

If you have return transportation, will your guests know where to be and at what time in order to catch the last bus? What are the options if they miss the bus?

**Invitations**—Did you send out invitations for this event? If so, how far in advance? Did you ask for RSVPs or Regrets Only? Is the invitation required to attend the event? Was it necessary to include a map with the invitation?

Do the guests need special parking passes? Did you specify a dress code? Is there a cost associated with the event?

How many people responded and are expected at the event? Did you remember to increase the food order by 10 percent more? How important is an accurate head count?

**Jerks**—What about the people who

show up just to complain? How will you handle complaints?

Is there someone assigned to answer questions and point people in the right direction?

What about the high maintenance people at a food function? Will you have a choice of food and beverage?

Are people clear about what's included in the event and what they might have to pay extra for?

Who is going to be in charge of escorting unruly people out of the event? What will you do if they want their money back?

**Kids**—Are children allowed at this event? If so, what ages? Will crying babies affect your event? Is there a room where noisy, crying or in-need-of-a-diaper-change children can be taken?

If kids are welcome at this event, are there things for them to do? Games or entertainment? Room to run around?

Is the menu suited for children? Do you have any trinkets or toys suitable for children? Is that necessary?

Do you need to arrange for sitters?

**Location**—Where is your event going to be held? Why have you chosen that location? What kind of parking arrangements must you make? Is it indoors? Is the room large enough? Where are the bathrooms?

Is it outdoors? What if the grass is wet? Is the area clean?

How close can you get your vehicle to the event site for loading and unloading?

**Media**—Is media attending this event? If so, how do you know? Did they get a news release? Invitation? Media packet? Follow up call? How many of those were necessary? How many were done? Who is greeting them? Escorting them? Is a press park-

ing pass necessary?

Who will be giving interviews? What kind of coverage do you want to get? Will you need to arrange special interviews?

What if they come uninvited?

**No shows**—Will no shows affect your event? Are the people who are key to the success of your event going to be there for sure? When do you substitute or eliminate? How many no shows can you have without jeopardizing the success of the event?

**Out of towners**—Are any people coming from out of town? Do they have directions? Are you sure? Do they need hotel reservations? Are you expected to entertain them or pick up their tab?

Do they need to be picked up at the airport? Who will do that?

If they are coming from another part of the country, have you told them what kind of weather to expect?

**Public address system**—Do you need a PA system for the event? When will it be delivered? How much time will you have to do a sound check?

Do you have the name and pager number for the person to call if the microphone doesn't work? Will someone be available to come fix it if there is a problem? How are the acoustics in the room? Will sound from other activities affect the event?

**Quantity**—Do you have sufficient quantities of everything for this event?

Food and beverage? Paper products? Trinkets and trash? Nametags and pens? Extra pens in case some walk away? Programs and news releases? Staff and volunteers? Tables and chairs?

Do you have extra supplies in your toolbox? Do you HAVE a toolbox?

Are there places to get additional

## Need help?

Notice the detail questions listed are categorized alphabetically. Use this organizational strategy to gather your answers. Start a notebook to better plan your event.

copies and office supplies at the last minute?

**Reservations**—Are there any special reservations needed for this event? Hotel rooms for out of town people? Who makes those? What about dinner reservations? What about equipment reservations? Autos? Cargo vans? Confirmation numbers? Get these in writing.

Will there be any entertaining associated with this event?

**Speech**—Are you giving a speech at this event? Is your boss? Is your staff? Are you prepared? Extra copies of notes? If you're using notes do you need a light at the lectern? If you're using visual aides have you checked them to make sure they're in order?

Have you checked that the equipment works? Do you need the room lights up or down? Who will be in charge of this?

**Timeline**—How far in advance did you start planning your event? How many things were left to the last minute? Did you give yourself enough time to get set up and still be sane when the event starts?

**Unforeseen events**—What will you do if your speakers don't arrive? Or your guest of honor? What if the food isn't there on time? The facility isn't ready? Do you have all of the necessary pager or cell phone numbers? Is your cell phone charged up? Do important people have your pager number?

**Volunteers**—Do you need any for your event? Who will train them? Why was this group chosen? Are they presentable and capable of doing the assigned tasks? Do they need constant supervision or are they the kind that can run with the ball?

**Wine and beer**—Is alcohol being served at this event? Is it allowed?

Appropriate? Is it an open bar or cash bar? Do the guests know it? Do they get free drink coupons? Where is the bar situated in relation to the rest of the room? Will a line at the bar create a bottleneck anywhere? Is the bar going to be open during your event? Is the bartender getting paid or working for tips? Will you allow a tip jar? Does the bartender know how to cut someone off if they're drunk? Do you?

**X marks the spot**—Is everything for your event in the right place? How are the tables and chairs to be set up? Where should the lectern be placed? Programs on the chairs or passed out? Will you be there sufficiently early to make sure everything is in its correct place? Have you allowed enough room for walkways and crowds?

**Yesterday**—How many of the last minute details could you have done yesterday? How many of the details could have been done a long time ago? How many things could have been delegated before today?

**Zzzz's**—Did you get enough sleep last night? Will you get any tonight? Did you give yourself some down time before your next event so that you don't go crazy?

## Press conferences

A press conference gives you the opportunity to announce your efforts as an organization. If a press conference has no purpose, it can result in a loss of credibility to the organization. Press conferences are held so that reporters and editors can obtain news they would not receive otherwise and have their questions answered. Here are some tips for organizing your press conference:

- Try not to schedule a press conference before 10 a.m. or after 2 p.m. Most media people work late hours and are not early risers. If possible, schedule a press conference for a slow news day; don't try to compete with a hurricane or political scandal.
- If you can schedule the press conference at a program site near the newspaper office or TV station, you will provide a great visual background for your story as well as a convenient location for reporters.
- Think kids. Most reporters like small children and they provide great "photo ops" (photo opportunities).
- Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Thursdays are generally good days for press conferences. Limit the number of speakers and the total time to 30-45 minutes.
- Prepare a list of families or other contacts for reporters who may

want to personalize the story. Have a sign up sheet for the press so you can follow up as needed.

### Where to hold your press conference

Sometimes the subject demands an on-the-scene location; other times, it's not necessary. Either way, find a good setting for your press conference. Determine where most major media offices are—you'll receive better coverage if the conference is in that part of town. Hotel conference rooms are often used for press conferences, as well as private clubs and other centrally located meeting rooms. Don't hold a press conference in a building with restricted access. If you must use such a facility, know which reporters are coming in advance. Give the list to the security guard and have a person on duty to make sure reporters are admitted immediately.

If you expect extensive radio and

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## ACTION AGENDA

### Organizing a press conference

- Be sure your press conference is newsworthy.
- Provide a visual backdrop that reinforces the message.
- Choose a time and place that is convenient for the press.
- Keep your comments brief—a few minutes for each speaker. Try not to have more than three or four presenters; you can always simply introduce other key players and ask them to have written statements available.
- Speakers should have written statements accompanied by a brief biographical statement. Be sure to send written statements to members of the press who were invited but could not attend.
- Allow plenty of time for questions.
- Notify members of the press several days before the press conference and be sure to make follow-up telephone calls.
- Contact the Associated Press (AP) and/or United Press International (UPI) to place your event or press conference in their "daybook," a daily listing of news events.

television coverage, consider sound and lighting. Ask in advance whether the meeting rooms have sound systems. If you cannot find a meeting room with a sound system, rent the sound equipment you need.

Check to see if the room has suitable lighting for television cameras. Decide how to light the scene so your speaker and props look best. Check each potential site to see if it is accessible to television crews. Make sure the passageways, doorways, and elevators are large enough to accommodate bulky equipment. If the crews bring their own lights, verify whether there are enough heavy-duty circuits for them.

Consider holding the press conference on location instead of in a conference room if it's about a highly visual topic that television reporters and newspaper photographers will want to shoot. If your press conference will be outdoors, plan for bad weather, adequate lighting, crowd control and noise control.

**News releases**—They should always be typed with wide margins and limited to one page. Use a format that covers who, when, where, why, how and what. Mention any photographic possibilities. If the conference or event is not in a well-known location, include travel directions. Whether you're contacting newspapers or broadcasters, send your release to the reporter who actually writes about your subject. If your event or press conference will offer photo possibilities, send a duplicate release to the photo assignment person. Let the reporter know who else the release has gone to.

**Reminder calls**—On the day of your event, preferably between 8 and 9 a.m.,

call each reporter, editor or assignment director to remind them. Be brief.

Introduce yourself, inform the reporter or editor that you're having a press conference or special event, describe it in 15 words or less, and ask if he/she received the announcement. Briefly convince him/her that your conference or event is newsworthy. If the person asks for background material, offer to fax or e-mail it. If you have already sent the person a release, ask if he/she is planning to cover the conference. Ask the reporter if you can provide any additional background material.

**Preparations**—If possible, prepare visual aids. Your message will be more effective. Charts and graphs allow reporters to better understand facts, figures and comparisons more quickly. Pictures, props, slides and videotape make for a more interesting presentation. If TV reporters can use your visuals, it makes their stories more interesting to viewers.

The speakers should be brief and to the point. A 20-minute presentation is long for a press conference. Some publicists limit their speakers to five-minute opening statements. Don't cover every detail; if issues aren't clear, reporters will ask questions.

Your speaker should be able to make a central point in 10 or 20 seconds. They will have a better chance of getting a statement on the air uncut and unedited.

Radio and TV people might ask for brief interviews after the conference presentation. Be prepared to schedule them on the spot and have an area set aside to conduct them.

If you expect a demonstration or harassment from your opposition, take steps in advance to quickly and quietly contain it. Make a list of things that

### A good press kit includes:

- A basic one-page release
- A longer three-or four-page version
- A copy of the speaker's statement
- Background information on your organization or cause
- A brief biography of the speaker
- Copies of any relevant documentation
- Promotional items such as buttons, T-shirts, or imprinted balloons

could possibly go wrong and figure out how you'll cope if they do.

### **The day of the event**

The people from your organization who attend the press conference should have a job to do—greeting journalists, answering questions, etc. Hand out press kits as reporters and editors arrive.

Always take a few moments to brief photographers about the issues. Offer them copies of the press release or a background sheet.

Start your press conference on time. Don't hold everyone up for latecomers. Record your press conference on audiotape and videotape, using broadcast quality equipment. The tape will help you write a news release for reporters who didn't attend and it can be edited into a video release or radio wraparound. Have someone at the telephone number listed on your news release so that media who cannot attend can call for information and receive an immediate response.

After the press conference is over, send a press kit or news release to any journalist who did not attend. Remember to track any coverage that your press conference receives. This will help you evaluate your success.

### **Press kits**

It is crucial to have a press kit for your organization ready so you will be able to take advantage of breaking news opportunities. A press kit contains a brief description of your organization and its top people, a print-ready copy of your logo, some quotes from your director, a page of statistics that support your cause, a relevant photograph and/or graphic and anything else that will make it easy for someone to

report accurately about your initiative. Remember, the easier you make it for someone to write a good story, the better your chances are that you will get good coverage. Reporters are as busy as you are! Don't send press kits out blindly—only as requested.