

# Cover Story



## Extra, extra, read all about it

## Share your township's story through earned media

Has your township accomplished something worthwhile and you thought, "I wish our residents knew about this." Did your township recently host an event and you wondered why more people did not attend?

Two words unlock this mystery: Earned media.

What is earned media and why should your township be concerned about it?

Earned media, in its simplest form, is favorable publicity gained through promotional efforts other than advertising. Earned media is the quickest, most inexpensive way for your township to garner media attention. The bottom line: It is media coverage you did not pay for.

While it might not cost a lot of money, it does take some time and effort on the part of township officials to help it along. Earned media is valuable and necessary to promote activities and highlight work that the township has done.

Let's look at some ways your township can use earned media to its advantage. Along our journey, we'll also look at how to effectively use media advisories and press releases, as well as how to work with the press.

### THE VALUE OF EARNED MEDIA

Most of us have heard the expression, "If it's in print then it must be true." There is credibility that often comes from a news story—whether in print, on the radio, on television, or even on an Internet news site. A news article about something your township is doing, or has done, establishes credibility that cannot be obtained through paid media.

It is important for a township to have an earned media plan in order to build and enhance its public profile. It gives your township a voice in the community. Each township has a special story to tell. It is unique and different because no two communities are exactly the same.

No one will understand the incredible story that your township has unless you—the township officials—are talking about it. Your township serves the community. You are the elected officials closest to the people. No one understands the needs of your community better than you. It is your job to communicate how you are meeting the needs of the families in your community. If you don't tell the story of why the new noise ordinance is needed, or how the improvements in the park will benefit the quality of life in your township, no one else will. It

is your responsibility as a township official to ensure that your voice is heard.

## IDEAS FOR EARNED MEDIA

There are opportunities around you each day that provide an excellent opportunity for earned media. Here are just a few ideas:

- **Township open house**

Invite residents to visit your township hall and meet their elected officials. The township could make it a “community day,” and include a car-seat safety check by the police department or invite children to see the fire trucks at the fire department. A community-driven event can promote safety and familiarize residents with their community leaders.

- **Open office hours**

Are residents too afraid to set up a formal meeting with their township officials? Perhaps. To take some of the pressure off, host open office hours. Invite residents to stop by within a certain timeframe to talk with their local officials about an issue. By reducing the intimidation or fear factor, residents will become more involved.

- **Parades**

Who doesn't love a parade? If the township doesn't currently sponsor one on St. Patrick's Day, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Christmas, etc., why not partner with a local organization that does? If you can't partner on an event, perhaps enter a float. The key is to do something to garner a presence in a larger community event.

- **New officials**

Most people have seen a picture in the newspaper of an elected official being sworn in—whether it is the president of the United States or state governor. If a photo of the elected official is taken, there is a good chance it will run in the paper. Why not have the picture be you, or the new police officers who were sworn in? Submit a photo, including information on who is in the picture, to a local newspaper for quick, easy coverage.

There are a number of other “earned media” opportunities that exist. The ideas listed above are just to help get the creative juices flowing. Remember, the media doesn't need you to write a story; they will write it with—or without—you. You need the media to tell your township's story.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

One key to garnering earned media is having a basic understanding of how media operates. And, the biggest thing to remember: Media is not the enemy. (Repeat this to yourself 10 times. The more officials understand that the media isn't out to get them, the better the relationship all officials will have with the media.)

Reporters are human. Like all people, they might have a bias. But most reporters are able to put that aside and focus on the task at hand—getting to the bottom of the issue and telling a compelling story.

Reporters generally look for stories that are interesting and have value for their readers/listeners/viewers. So when inviting a reporter to a township event, or telling a reporter about the latest township happening, it is important to approach it from the angle of why it is important to that reporter's audience.

An example:

“Hey, this is Supervisor Smith from Cherry Lane Township. This weekend I saw that your paper did a special feature on outdoor recreation. I didn't know if you were aware of this, but the township has received a grant for a new bike path along the river to increase healthy living as well as expand our outdoor recreation. A groundbreaking ceremony will take place next Saturday. May I send you some more information on it? We'd be honored to have you attend the ceremony.”

More likely than not, the reporter will say, “Sure, pass the information along.” And you just might get a story—or maybe even more. The reporter might: 1) cover the groundbreaking ceremony; 2) cover the grand opening; and 3) do a follow-up article on the popularity of the trail, including quotes from residents who are delighted to have the addition of the trail in their community.

**Remember, the media doesn't need you to write a story; they will write it with—or without—you. You need the media to tell your township's story.**

The second rule to remember when dealing with the media: Keep it simple. Don't go into a multi-paragraph explanation of what you are doing. Like the rest of us, reporters are busy people with tight deadlines. You have a very limited time to “pitch” to them.

Pitch? What's that? Don't panic. This term is used to describe telling a reporter about an event. It's how you “sell” them on a story. You “pitch” an idea out to them. Sometimes they say “yes,” sometimes they say “no.” The better the pitch, the higher the likelihood they'll cover your story.

## GETTING ATTENTION

As mentioned previously, earned media is great because you didn't have to pay for it. However, earned media does not mean there isn't a little work involved. Getting news coverage takes planning, preparation and persistence.

Even before the pitch, you need to establish a rapport or a working relationship with the media. Take time to get to know them—both on a personal and professional level. Find out what their deadline is—is it daily, weekly or biweekly? Ask what a good time during the day or week is to talk with them. The last thing you want to do is call them 15 minutes before their deadline, because two things will likely happen: they'll be very short with you on the phone and they probably won't cover your story.

**MTA hosts Summer Legislative Conference**  
*Township 'hot topics' on the agenda*

**MEDIA ADVISORY**

The Michigan Townships Association will hold its Summer Legislative Conference on ...  
... at the Bavarian Inn Lodge in Frankenmuth. ...  
... Citizens will speak

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**Anatomy of a media advisory**

Follow this “who, what, where, when and why format” to help get your township’s message across to the media as quickly and clearly as possible.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Contact: Name**  
(contact information)

**Date**

**Main headline focuses on biggest newsworthy item**

*Subhead gives a more specific angle of the story, local interest, etc.*

The opening paragraph should give the answers to “who, what, when, where, and why” as succinctly as possible. Try to make the sentences brief but full of information. Mention any persons of local interest, dignitaries, elected officials, or others who are key to the event.

**WHO:** *(list township, and names of officials who will attend your event)*

**WHAT:** *(describe event)*

**WHERE:** *(location of event, including address)*

**WHEN:** *(date and time of event)*

*(Insert information about photo opportunities available to media here.)*

**WHY:** *(briefly state reason for event)*

End your media advisory with a brief paragraph that gives the contact information (phone number and e-mail address) for the township media point-person in order to set up interviews or get additional information. May wish to include your township’s Web site address, for additional information on the township.

In addition to establishing a relationship with reporters, it is important that the township identify one person as the point of contact for the media. That person should serve as the main spokesperson for the township and is the one who pitches story ideas to the media.

It’s not necessary that only one person in the township speak with reporters, because others might be asked questions or may be better suited to speak on a given topic. However, one person should serve as the contact who reporters know they can call and who will point them in the right direction regardless of the topic or time of day. Having a reliable media point-person can go a long way in building your township’s relationship with the media.

When you have built a working relationship with a reporter, it becomes much easier for you to make a pitch. There are other things you can do to help your township garner media coverage, including issuing a media advisory and sending out a press release.

**The Media Advisory**

A media advisory basically encompasses the “five Ws:” who, what, when, where and why.

The purpose of the media advisory is to alert the media to a future event, and is typically sent just before the actual event. Include a catchy headline and write a paragraph or two explaining the event. The focus of the paragraph text is to answer the “why” question. It is also valuable to include the other “Ws” as well.

Following the text paragraphs, include the “what,” “who,” “when” and “where” separated so it is easy to read. On the “where,” be sure to include the full address, even though they may know where the event is taking place. Remember, the easier you can make it for the reporter, the more likely it is that he or she will cover your event. *(See sidebar at left for an “Anatomy of a media advisory.”)*

**The Press Release**

A press release is issued the day of the event, or as soon thereafter as possible. This is where you get the chance to tell your township’s story. It contains components of the media advisory in that you highlight the five Ws, but a press release also allows you to expand and build upon an issue. In a press release, you can include quotations from township officials. It is important that you write the press release as much like a story as possible.

The first rule of thumb when writing a press release is that you need to have a compelling, catchy headline. “Resident wins \$1 million; donates half to township” will draw someone in, whereas “Resident wins lottery; makes donation” isn’t as attention-grabbing.

Many who regularly write press releases follow the inverted pyramid style of writing. Think of a triangle, and flip it upside down. The point of the style is to include the most important information at the top.



In most writing, people start with a problem and then offer supporting data to prove a point or draw a conclusion. The inverted pyramid-style writing is just the opposite. It starts with the conclusion, and as the story develops, more information is given and greater detail is provided. The purpose is to ensure that at any point in the story—after the first sentence or the fifth paragraph—the reader can leave the story and still understand what the story is about.

Why is it important to include the most important information first? To ensure that your message is transmitted to the audience. There is a rule known as the 3-30-3 rule. You have three seconds to catch the reader's attention, 30 seconds in which to engage the reader, and three minutes that they may actually give to the story.

With all important information at the top, you ensure that the message you want out there might actually be communicated. And, you quickly let a reporter know what the story is about so that they can decide if it is worthy of coverage.

Press releases are an extremely effective tool. It is important for townships to use the press release as part of an overall media strategy. Although designed with the press in mind, it is important to think of it in terms of a *news* release. If you mentally call it a news release, you'll be sure to send information that is newsworthy.

### **WHEN SHOULD OUR TOWNSHIP START AN EARNED MEDIA PROGRAM?**

Your township, if it doesn't have an active earned media program, needs to start one today. Pick up the phone and call the local newspaper to personally invite them to the next township meeting. Let them know that you are there to assist



## CHECK LIST



### An earned media checklist

Before beginning any earned media effort, township officials should answer the following questions:

#### MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

1. What are the township's objectives?
2. Who are the primary audiences the township is trying to reach?
3. What do we want them to do?
4. What is the key benefit they will get from doing this?
5. What are three major points or core messages that we hope to get across?
6. Have we answered the "five Ws" (who, what, when, where and why) in our materials?

#### LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. What media does the township want to target with its message?
2. Do we have contact names, phone and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses to reach them?
3. Can the township partner with any community groups to help attract more media interest?
4. What approaches should we use to deliver our message? (e.g., news release, media alert, press conference, personal contact with reporters, etc.)
5. What is the timeline for using these approaches to deliver the township's message?
6. Who is responsible for creating any media alerts and for contacting the media? Is there a plan to follow up with reporters to ensure/encourage coverage?

them in any way that you can. If they have questions about why the township is doing something or when something will happen, offer to explain it to them. Shutting the media out is never the answer.

Just about all of us have read a news story where we see the phrase, "Officials were contacted and had 'no comment.' "

To most, "no comment" means the silent person—or their organization—is guilty. Sure, there is always the exception to the rule, but it is typically better to have the conversation to make sure your side of the story gets out.

Township officials do an incredible job serving residents in their communities. Unfortunately, they don't always do the best job of sharing information about themselves or the work the board has done on behalf of residents.

Don't be bashful. Get out and tell your story. It isn't as hard as you think it might be. In your mind, step away from being a township official and put yourself in the residents' position. What information would you want to know? Why is knowing that information important? The answers to those questions help you lay the groundwork for your message, and give you a really good reason to pick up the phone and pitch a story idea to a reporter.

What are you waiting for? There has to be something—an upcoming event or a big issue the board is debating—that is about to take place in your township. Why aren't you on the phone with a local reporter telling them about it?

You've got work to do—go to it! And then, sit back and enjoy the earned media your township will receive.

And remember, you'll have earned it! ■

**Jennifer Hoff,**  
former MTA public affairs liaison



### Townships and today's changing media

*Editor's note:* Around the state, numerous daily newspapers—including the *Ann Arbor News*, *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News*—have announced plans to either scale back or cease publication, and focus efforts on online editions. As a result, significant discussions among township officials are taking place about how to publish required notices if your local paper is nothing more than an Internet site. What is evident is that the concept of publishing notices is taking on a new meaning in the age of the Internet. MTA firmly believes the state law needs to evolve as well. Watch *Michigan Township News* and *Capitol Currents* for updates on this issue.