

Building a Stronger Union

News Media Tips and Tools For LIUNA Leaders

LIUNA Strategic Communications Department

Laborers'
International
Union of
North America

LIUNA!

Feel the Power

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Did you hear about...?

Did you hear about the State of the Union address? The local traffic or a major new construction project? Chances are if you heard about it, you read it in a newspaper – either in print or on their website – or heard it on radio or TV. Virtually everything we know about our community, country and world is based on news media reports.

News media is important – and if we understand how it operates, the news media can help our unions.

Consider:

- In New Jersey, a LIUNA local is able to get a major article and photos in a large newspaper detailing the plight of immigrant workers at a major employer. The workers have voted to join the union and are fighting for a contract. With the article in hand, a union official meets with an elected official, who promises to help. The newspaper article not only gave the workers' fight credibility, it spread the word to hundreds of thousands of readers and put pressure on the employer to be fair and on other elected officials to get involved.
- During the 2008 sit-down strike at Republic Windows & Doors in Chicago, dozens of workers won the attention of local, national and international media, which increased political pressure on the company's lenders to provide the workers with the severance and vacation pay they were owed.
- When members and other workers see and hear their stories in the news media, it confirms their importance and the importance of their unions, and emboldens them toward involvement and activism.

Of course the news media isn't a friend. Sometimes we have bad news and sometimes our story is distorted. The goals of the news media and those of unions are not the same, but there is common ground. By working together where there is common ground, we can use the news media to help us organize, grow market share, increase member activism and help inform members and all workers.

That's the purpose of this booklet – to help LIUNA leaders around the country work with news media to help our union grow stronger.

In this booklet you will find:

- Tips on picking a message that will mean better news reports.
- Tips on understanding how reporters at newspapers and broadcast outlets operate.
- A guide on how to institute a media plan, even on shoestring resources.
- Samples to use for news releases, press releases, letters to the editor, talking points and news conference agendas.

By understanding the power and impact of news media and making a plan for how to influence it, every local union can use the news media in a positive way.

What's a good message?

A good message persuades people to see things the way the messenger wants them to. For a good message to be heard, it matters who the messenger is.

Consider an unsafe construction site where workers are trying to organize a union to make their jobsite safer. Which headline persuades people best?

Union Boss Criticizes Contractor Over Safety Rule Enforcement

or

Construction Workers Say Jobsite is “Deadly Accident Waiting to Happen”

Of course, the second headline delivers the message best – that workers are joining together in a union to make their work better. Consider another:

Union Calls Strike Over UPS Proposals on Pensions, Scheduling Changes

or

UPS Drivers: “A Part-Time America Won’t Work”

The second headline delivers the message best – and in fact was among the headlines widely credited for the victory of UPS drivers over the company in their 1996 national strike.

Our message must make sense to people who will hear it – and those people usually are not like us. Even loyal LIUNA members don't live and breathe union, using inside jargon or keeping abreast of every nuance of their industries or the law.

Good messages talk about basic values everyone understands: “The company broke its promise and the law,” not, “The company committed an unfair labor practice,” or, “We’re fighting for community-supporting jobs,” not, “The Davis-Bacon Act should apply.” Good messages are short and easily remembered.

In A Nutshell:

- Skip the jargon or legalese.
- Talk about values – fairness, hard work or supporting families.
- Use workers as spokespeople.
- Keep the message short and simple.
- Say the message often.
- Think every day about opportunities to share our story

Members and most Americans understand what it's like to be a worker and believe messages delivered by workers. By putting the foundation of our union out front -our members and prospective members - our message will be heard and believed.

In LIUNA, there are always good stories to share through the news media. Don't underestimate the work our unions do every day to improve communities and families by fighting for fair wages, helping people advance in society through apprenticeship and training, working together with employers, and saving lives by making jobsites safer.

How the news media operates

Two things control news reporters' lives every single day – the need to fill space or air time with stories and the ever pending deadline.

That means if we have good story ideas and offer them in time, there's a good chance our good stories will be covered. On the other hand, not offering stories means reporters will find other stories – or offering stories too late means they will not be covered.

- Most newspapers decide what will be tomorrow's stories by 3 p.m. – and by 6 p.m. stories are finalized.
- Unless it's late-breaking news, TV news channels decide by 7-8 a.m. what stories they'll cover that day.

Give reporters enough advance notice to cover your story and get it right.

Relationships with reporters make the difference.

Find out who to call in your city and methodically build a relationship with each person. Cast your net wide – for example, include reporters who cover the construction industry, commercial real estate, transportation, economic, labor or workplace issues – as well as those who follow civil rights, immigration or other issues impacted by workers' unions.

- Spin your story in a positive way, but always tell the truth.
- Always return reporters' calls the same day – tomorrow is too late.
- Talk to reporters when they're not writing about your union, so they better understand you as a person and your goals.
- If you have a hot tip that you can harmlessly offer, use it to reward reporters with whom you're trying to build a good relationship.

In A Nutshell:

- Reporters have daily deadlines – old news won't be covered.
- Give reporters advance notice of your news.
- Always tell the truth.
- Always return reporters' calls.
- Build relationships.

Identify key reporters and have get-to-know-you lunches or coffee. Most reporters don't know much about unions or the daily lives of workers you represent. Educate reporters by telling them the fundamentals of what unions do.

Good relationships mean access to the news pages and the airwaves. Relationships mean fewer mistakes, more positive stories and some understanding and benefit of the doubt if there ever is negative news.

Great Press Takes a Simple Media Plan

Consistently helpful news media coverage requires hard work, but also a focused plan.

A media plan will make it easy to follow the steps to getting good news coverage.

In A Nutshell:

- Make a list of reporters
- Focus on a few key topics
- Make a timeline
- Use events or releases to reach out to the news media
- Designate accessible spokespeople, including members

- **Make a list of reporters** in your city by calling news outlets and finding out who might be interested in workplace, construction, training or other topics relevant to your union's work. On your list, include fax numbers, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Be sure to include all daily and weekly newspapers, wire services (AP and Reuters), television stations and news radio stations.
- **Pick just a few topics** to focus on over a given time period. For example, plan to focus on three topics during the next six months, such as worker training, family supporting wages for immigrant construction workers or perhaps a hostile employer where workers are trying to form a union.
- **Make a timeline or action plan**, calendaring in times for meeting reporters, educating them, and, finally, seeking and managing news coverage.
- **Have a few events** that focus attention on your topics and reinforce your message. These can be as simple as a news release or brief news conference, or even a worksite or "town hall" meeting.
- **Prepare a news advisory** before your event, and e-mail it to your reporter list two days ahead of time. Follow up with reminder calls to reporters the day before and morning of your event.
- **Prepare a news release** for reporters who attend the event, and e-mail the release afterward to those who don't show up.
- **Designate spokespeople** who can be easily reached and are versed in the message. Try to include working members, such as stewards, as well as union leaders or officials.
- **The purpose of a media plan** is to get your message out -don't forget to include written talking points or backgrounders on your key topics so that everyone delivers the same, consistent message in the most effective way.

Samples You Can Use

- Use a **news media advisory** to let the media know about your news event – make it no more than one page.
- Use a **news release** to write your version of the story – often reporters will use many of your quotes and phrases.
- Use **letters to the editor** for brief responses to published reports – 200 words or less.
- Use a **news conference agenda** so all participants understand the event
- Use **talking points** to keep everyone on the same page.

Sample News Advisory

****MEDIA ADVISORY FOR FRIDAY, JUNE 11****

Contact: Butch Willman at (360) 423-5690 or butch@local791.com

LIUNA Local 791 to Partner With Local Officials and Community Leaders at Rally Calling For “Good Jobs Now”

Event Will Highlight Hiring Practices at Port of Longview That Take Jobs, Economic Benefits Away from Community Residents and Businesses

LIUNA Local 791 will hold a “Good Jobs Now” rally to call on elected leaders to ensure that local construction projects go to local workers, ensuring that any economic benefits are enjoyed by the workers, families and small businesses in Longview.

WHAT: Good Jobs Now rally calling for good-paying jobs for local workers

WHEN: *[list time, day of week, date]*

WHERE: *[list name of location, street address and city]*

WHO: *[list noteworthy speakers and attendees, including workers, local union officials, political and community leaders]*

The event will also highlight the business practices of the Port of Longview, which leased land to a private company, EGT Development, to install a grain terminal. The lease allows EGT to not pay a prevailing wage to workers on the project, most of whom do not live in-state, thus depriving Longview workers and businesses of any economic benefit from the project.

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Sample News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[insert names, phones numbers and e-mail addresses of media contacts]

Leading Transportation Advocates Focus on Upcoming Efforts to Press Passage of Long-Term Highway Bill

LIUNA's Nearly \$1 Million Ad and Action Campaign To Start in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan

Washington, D.C. (insert date) – LIUNA – the Laborers' International Union of North America – today unveiled its new creative media campaign to press Congress to pass a long-term, full-investment Highway Bill this year. The campaign includes provocative, hard-hitting billboards, radio ads, online tools and events and activities around symbolic props.

With an initial investment of nearly \$1 million, LIUNA will first launch the campaign in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio. LIUNA General President Terry O'Sullivan said, "for LIUNA, passage of a highway bill is about jobs, but, as with every American, it's about ensuring the safety and reliability of our transportation systems."

The LIUNA campaign will zero in on the consequences of inaction. The campaign will highlight key facts:

- The average bridge in the U.S. is 46 years old, dangerously close to the average lifespan of 50 years.
- On average, 25 bridges collapse each year in the U.S.
- According to the transportation research group, TRIP, potholes and poor road conditions contribute to a third of all traffic fatalities every year.

O'Sullivan also warned Congress against using a temporary extension to further delay a bill. "Another short-term patch, simply duct-taping the roads and bridges we all rely on, must be off the table," he said. "To put the trust back in the highway trust fund, we must prevent further deterioration."

Joining O'Sullivan at the "Infrastructure Week" briefing at the Newseum were leaders from Building America's Future, the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, the American Automobile Association and Associated General Contractors of America.

Marcia Hale, President of Building America's Future, highlighted their new web application – the “I’m Stuck” app – which is designed to help drivers speak out about deteriorating highways in their area.

“We think it’s really important for the people who need to vote on the transportation bill and the Highway Trust Fund to hear directly from their constituents,” she said.

The gas tax was last adjusted in 1993. Its value has decreased 40 percent since then due to rising construction materials costs and more fuel efficient cars.

AAA’s Managing Director of Government Relations, Jill Ingrassia, shared a preference with others for adjusting the tax. “Asking Americans to pay more isn’t easy, but on this issue in particular, it’s the right thing to do,” she said. “Voters understand roads aren’t free and they are willing to support increased investment when they know that the revenue is going to be spent in ways that improve their travel experience.”

Said Ingrassia: “Congress and the President need to act.”

As transportation advocates step up their outreach efforts across the country, they will continue to press members of Congress directly. The American Road and Transportation Builders Association will be flying in “hundreds of members from all sectors,” their President and CEO Pete Ruane said at the briefing. “Members of Congress have a choice to make: they can move expeditiously to end a perpetual state of deteriorating critical transportation infrastructure or they can remain like Bill Murray in movie Groundhog Day, trapped in a repetitive cycle, doomed to repeat the same mistake over and over again.”

“There is no excuse,” O’Sullivan added. “Congress now has several viable, responsible options in front of them to pass a Highway Bill and save the Highway Trust Fund.”

The briefing comes as the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee reveals the details of a new multi-year bill. Obama Administration officials also introduced a plan of their own. And Oregon Rep. Earl Blumenauer has introduced a bill to adjust the gas tax to save the Highway Trust Fund, which faces a multi-billion dollar shortfall this summer, according to the Department of Transportation.

“We need to invest in this country,” Hale of Building America’s Future said. “We need to do it for the present, for jobs and for quality of life and we need to do it for the future to remain economically competitive.”

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The half-million members of LIUNA – the Laborers’ International Union of North America – are on the forefront of the construction industry, a powerhouse of workers who are proud to build America.

Sample Letters to the Editor

[Annoyed at a news story you read today? Happy to see it and want to offer applause? Write a letter to the editor. You can give your union exposure and get our message out. Letters to the editor should be short and sent into the publication within a day or two of the report the letter refers to.]

Dear Editor:

You reported yesterday that the cost of the Pecan Lane road extension was three-times higher than estimated – and blamed the workers and their union. Your report failed to point out that it was the construction company which bid a third of the cost to get the job, and which will accept three-times the pay for completing it. The wages of the employees who did the work are no more or less regardless of what the contractor ends up charging. Point the finger where it belongs – not at construction workers working hard to support their families and struggling to climb the economic ladder.

[your name]
[name of local union]

Dear Editor:

Your report on immigrant day laborers will hopefully be an eye-opener for our community. In the construction industry, we see unscrupulous contractors every day who cheat workers out of wages, refuse to offer any benefits such as health insurance, and ignore the most basic safety standards. Today, many of those workers are saying enough is enough and joining together in a union -and who could blame them. We're all immigrants in America – and we all deserve basic rights.

[your name]
[your local union]

Sample Event Agenda

News Conference to Announce New Training Program

[Pick a location that helps tell the story – e.g., at a training center or worksite. Keep remarks short and to the point.]

- Noon** Local Union president opens news conference with one or two points about value of training.
- 12:03 p.m.** Training Center director or instructor details new training program.
- 12:10 p.m.** Community leader [e.g. civil rights leader if training will benefit minority community; immigrant rights leader if it will benefit immigrant community] talks about benefits to the community.
- 12:14 p.m.** Partner in center says why they're involved [e.g. employer or educational partner]
- 12:17 p.m.** Local Union members tells from personal experience the value of training.
- 12:20 p.m.** Questions from news media.

Sample Talking Points

Typical talking points for a story about project labor agreements:

- **A project labor agreement (PLA) encourages critical projects to finish on time and on budget** and also ensures money spent is reinvested locally and provides workers a level of security that has become all too rare.
- **By setting wages, benefits, schedules and work site procedures beforehand, a PLA can eliminate many of the unexpected costs and delays** that prevent important projects from finishing on time and on budget and can also encourage a safer working environment.
- **A project governed by a PLA would require the use of local workers**, providing an instant jolt to the local economy in the form of secure jobs with decent pay and benefits. Cash-strapped states and localities no longer have to subsidize health care and other services for these workers and their families
- Secure in their jobs and free from high out-of-pocket health care costs, workers are more easily able to spend money at local businesses, boosting the overall economy and improving the prospects of other businesses to grow, potentially hiring more employees themselves.
- Security at the workplace can also result in a more stable life at home for workers, their spouses and children.
- **There's no evidence that PLAs boost costs** – in fact, several independent studies show that costs in all are equal, while taxpayers get more for their money.
- A 2005 report from the University of Maine found that PLAs “are a useful mechanism in any construction project involving a contractor and a range of skilled workers” and “maximize efficiency, stability, predictability, and productivity.” Another study out of the State University of New York at Cortland found that “there is no measurable cost difference between similar structures” resulting from the prevailing wage requirements in a PLA.
- **America is full of PLA success stories – in our nation's capital, part of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge was built under a PLA.** It finished under budget and months ahead of schedule. In Nevada, the new Hoover Dam Bypass created good jobs while providing a vital artery for commercial truck traffic.
- **Taxpayers deserve to get the most out of their money.** PLAs can help that happen by keeping projects on schedule and on budget and by ensuring community tax dollars are used to provide good jobs to local residents.