

Press Conferences: When to Hold It and How to Do It Right

Few media events are as misunderstood and abused as the press conference. Newsmakers love the concept of calling a press conference because it makes them feel important. Schedule a press conference, they reason, and reporters will trip all over each other to get the best seats in the house. That couldn't be further from the truth. The media actually despise press conferences for several reasons:

- Reporters are all fed the identical story. Unless a reporter can steal a few minutes alone with the newsmaker, the story in tomorrow's paper will be very similar to the one in the other newspaper across town, on the 11 o'clock news and on all the local radio stations.
- Press conferences (also known as news conferences) are often mistakenly called to make announcements that aren't very newsworthy. A reporter might have to fight rush-hour traffic, then search in desperation for a parking space, then learn the news conference he almost broke his neck to get to on time was for a minor announcement that could have been handled a lot easier and quicker with a press release.
- Press conferences are usually controlled by the organization that calls them. In other words, it's their show, so they get to make up the rules.
- Often the news conference is limited to a specific time period, like 15 minutes. So if time runs out before all the questions are answered, tough.
- A press conference seldom results in interesting visuals for television. Usually, there's little more to photograph than a bunch of talking heads.
- Reporters know that the press conference is nothing more than spin. A company will do everything necessary to put its best foot forward, even if it means refusing to answer certain questions.



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A press conference, in 99 percent of the cases, is NOT the best way to get the word out on your program or event. Nor is it the best way to make an announcement with news value. However, if you have to hold a media or press conference (a chairman's request, requirement of a grant, suggestion of a volunteer, etc.), here are some things to consider:

- Be sure your conference has a theme and a purpose beyond just your announcement. The theme needs to be something beyond just reading a media release. How does your topic fit into a larger issue, need or concern?
- Get program partners, people who will benefit from your announcement, or others involved in the project or program, there for the press conference.
- Hold the press conference in the afternoon in order to accommodate the schedules of reporters (especially television reporters). Something between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. is best. Anything earlier than 11 a.m. and you run the risk of no reporters being available. Something later than 3 p.m. runs the risk of not making the evening news or deadlines.
- If you want a weekly newspaper to attend your press conference then accommodate their deadlines and avoid Monday. In fact, Friday is probably best for weeklies. Generally, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday are the best days for press conferences.
- Pick a convenient location (a public or community building or room) that has easy access and good lighting. Be sure the room is large enough and decorate it with some posters or displays relevant to your announcement and/or organization.
- Have multiple and unique "sources" related to your topic available to the news media at the press conference. For example, at a recent press conference regarding an extension program with a new organization designed to improve childcare in the county, we had the following persons available: the organization's president, most board members, a young mother who has had difficulty finding childcare, another mother who has benefited from the program, a key employee of the program, children (and their parents) involved in the program.
- Have a meaningful press kits prepared that provide background on the program and its participants. Don't just fill a notebook with brochures and general material.
- Don't put a time limit on the conference (like 1 p.m. to 1:15 p.m.). In other words, if the news media has questions, accommodate them as long as it takes.
- Announce the press conference the day before the event with a "media alert" outlining the topic and who will be available to do interviews. Be sure to give complete and accurate directions to the location of the press conference.
- In advance of the press conference, decide who will be responsible for speaking to the media from your organization. That person should make a list of important talking points that need to be shared or addressed.