**Advantage Africa Partners’ Workshop**

**Handout 16.2: How to Develop a Constructive  
 Relationship with Journalists**

Here are some tips to initiating and building a constructive relationship with journalists. If you can give them what they want, you'll create a mutually beneficial relationship.

1. **Make initial contact**

If you're new to the job or your organisation wants to start developing a media strategy, the first step is to introduce yourself to the relevant local, national or trade media. You'll need to target the right person, who might be a news editor, a programme editor, a specialist correspondent or a general reporter. Don't be afraid to just call the newsroom and find out who would be the most relevant contact person.

* Keep your first conversation brief; you just need a contact person’s details.
* Send a fact sheet about what your organisation does and explain the type of stories you could offer and areas you could comment on. Ask what they might want from you.
* Follow up with a phone call. Where appropriate (probably more useful for local contacts) suggest meeting in person at their office or yours or try and attend events where you might meet.
* Follow them on twitter to learn more about them, their opinions, their style and what they write about. Often journalists will also ask for quotes or experts to contribute to articles using #journorequest #prrequest

1. **Work on your relationship**Journalists rely on you as a useful source of stories, especially in these days of instant news when they are under increasing pressure to find good material and file it quickly. The fact a story, comment or case study has come from a charity is irrelevant as long as it fulfils their news criteria. Always be conscious of the key things you need to provide:

* Be a reliable source of useful, relevant, trustworthy information in your subject area
* Offer interesting case studies which add distinctive value to a story. Make sure you have some ready as journalists frequently give little notice of requests.
* Provide ideas for stories
* Be quick, reliable and available when you’re approached for a reaction or comment. It's usually better to give a fast but brief reaction than a slow, detailed one.
* Find out the type of stories the journalist you're dealing with covers - and always check their output in case you can offer something relevant.
* Check your emails and voicemail regularly - or be prepared to miss opportunities.
* If you’re unavailable or away, give an alternative contact or out of office message.

1. **Be honest**Don’t promise what you can’t deliver. Deadlines are everything. Be honest. Don't make stuff up just to get noticed. Admit the things that haven't worked or the challenges you've faced, how you tried to overcome them and what you learnt or would do differently. You'll get their trust if you are honest and transparent.

**4. Don't come across as needy and emotional**It's fine to suggest a story angle but don’t try and control the message. You'll just annoy the journalist. They know their audience best. What feels like the most important story in the world to you might not interest them. Remain friendly but business-like.

**5. Listen to what journalists say they want**Here are some of the elements that journalists say they're looking for in a story:

* A strong news line
* An exclusive
* Stories about people, a powerful human angle
* Issues people can talk about
* Stories that share well on social media
* ‘How to’ lists/ 5 things you didn’t know about…

**6. Be on your guard**Don't overlook the potential risks when engaging with the media especially if a vulnerable beneficiary is involved. Consider any possible pitfalls of offering a story. You don't want to end up damaging your reputation. Protect people’s identity and dignity

Think about media guidelines you could draw up in discussion with trustees to create a safe framework for staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. While you can't control the message the media put out, you can ensure your interests are protected.

**7. Assess how much time and effort you can devote to the relationship**The more time you have to invest in building a relationship, the more likely you are to benefit from it. But the precise amount of resources you want to devote has to be a decision taken by you and your trustees. Try setting a goal of what would represent an improvement in media coverage and experiment with the amount of time and effort you put in. But bear in mind that you can put in lot of effort for little reward and then suddenly reap the rewards. So it's hard to say definitively whether it's better to adopt a policy of small and steady engagement or loud and intermittent. 

**8. Be prepared and polite**You can try for months to interest a journalist in a story and get nowhere, then suddenly they'll come to you with a request. Make sure you're always ahead of the game with information about your organisation ready.

If a journalist has used an interviewee you provided or you've liaised over a story, write and thank them afterwards. It's a good opportunity to also tell them what else might be coming up, or suggest a follow up story after a period of time if appropriate.