

Working with television news



Why focus on TV?

While online news sites are growing fast, television remains the nation's top news source:

- A [2018 survey by Pew Resource Center](#) found that 44% of adults prefer to get news from television, versus 34% online, 14% from the radio, and 7% from print newspapers.
- The same survey found that watching (47%) is the preferred way to consume news — both online and off — followed by reading (34%) and listening (19%).
- A [November 2019 Water Hub poll](#) found that Western voters turn to TV for water news. Respondents said they rely most on local television (25%), followed by network television (13%), cable news (10%), and local newspapers (10%).

With 24-hour streaming services, television stations have more platforms than ever to feed. Weather is the [most popular segment of local news broadcasts](#), and we are seeing weather reporters do more reporting on issues like climate change, pollution, and public health, making them good contacts to cultivate.

What kinds of stories work best?

- **Television stories are short!** They range from 30 seconds to two minutes, with anchor-read segments topping out at 45 seconds. That means you have to keep things super simple: have a clear angle, a single message, and one call-to-action.
- **Reporters and producers are looking for stories that will capture viewers' attention.** They need to be relevant, timely and engaging. Since many water issues are long-standing, you can add interest by introducing unexpected characters, settings, or solutions.
- **Good visuals are essential.** Events like rallies, river clean-ups, and planting days work well, but many have been impacted by the pandemic. If your group is still organizing volunteer and political actions, consider capturing photos and video yourself to share with local media. This [KTVZ story about COVID relief efforts in Central Oregon](#) shows what newsrooms can do with a few still photos supplied by a nonprofit and one live interview filmed at their convenience.

Getting the visuals:

- **Capture the landscape:** Whether you are documenting an event or recording a virtual interview, have your phone or camera horizontal.
- **Keep it still:** Use an easel or flat surface, if available, or support your camera arm.

- **Consider lighting:** a shaded outdoor area is best. For indoors, have the subject face a window, or use a ring light to illuminate their face. (In a pinch, you can open a blank word document on your computer to provide some brightness for virtual interviews.)
- **Center your subject** in the picture, and have the camera at eye level.
- **Get some action:** For video, try to capture a solid 6-second soundbite or action shot.

Packaging your pitch

Television reporters have to be generalists, covering a range of topics quickly. In order to get their attention and set up stories that will do justice to your issues, we recommend reaching out with a brief pitch that does the following:

- Highlights the news that makes this topic timely now
- Links to a backgrounder with additional information
- Notes the spokespeople available for interview and their connection to the topic
- Describes additional photo and video opportunities

Tight timelines and competition for eyeballs and ad dollars can lead to stories that are oversimplified or sensationalized. One way this comes up in the water space is coverage that stigmatizes or stereotypes impacted communities. To counter this, our partners have shared that they prepare pitches and backgrounders that emphasize systemic causes and lift up local leadership.¹

Reaching out and following up

Our resident broadcast media expert Marlene Peralta tells organizations that want more TV coverage that it's essential to join Twitter — it's her one-stop shop for tracking news and building relationships. Twitter is a good way to learn which reporters are following your issues and put your organization on their radar.

When you have news to share, we recommend sending email pitches to reporters, assignment editors, and news desks. Many media markets also have wire services that compile all the day's events into a single report for news organizations. In the San Francisco area, it's [Bay City News Service](#). Twitter messages (direct or public) can be a good complement to email outreach. We only recommend phone follow-ups in the case of truly newsworthy stories.

As with all media outreach, persistence is key. Most journalists will not reply to your message, and great stories can get crowded out by breaking news. Try again with different angles, considering hooks like holidays, seasonal events, and extreme weather.

¹ Trabian Shorters has some great resources on asset vs. deficit framing in social justice work: <http://trabianshorters.com/asset-framing/>.