NANA

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MEDIA RELATIONS GUIDE FOR ASSOCIATIONS

A practical guide to pitching reporters, handling a press inquiry, and preparing a spokesperson.

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COMMUNICATIONS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is for the people who answer the phone when a reporter calls, and for the people who decide to call a reporter first. It covers building a reporter list, writing a pitch, handling an inquiry on deadline, preparing a spokesperson, and learning from what runs. It is written for association communications staff, for executive directors who double as the press office, and for chapter leaders who speak to local media.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read sections 1 through 3 once, in order, before you send your first pitch. Sections 4 through 9 are reference material: open the one that matches the problem on your desk. Each section begins with a sentence that says what you will be able to do by its end, so you can skip ahead without losing the thread. The checklists are meant to be copied into your own documents, and the appendix holds a glossary and two templates you can paste into a shared folder today.

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1

WHY THIS GUIDE COMES FROM COMMUNITY RADIO, NOT A PR FIRM

By the end of this section you will know who wrote this guide, what an association's press work is for, and what each kind of outlet needs from you.

I am Communications Director at the Alliance of Community Radio Stations, a network of 310 volunteer-powered stations, and I wrote this guide from a specific vantage point: newsroom habits, not press-office habits. Community radio staff spend as much time on the other side of the microphone as behind it, and that vantage point changes what I teach association communications staff.

Most media training is written for the person being interviewed. I spent my first six years in community radio as the reporter and host, and only later became the source. This guide starts from the other chair and teaches association staff to think like the person receiving the pitch, because that is who decides whether your story runs.

The Alliance's staff of eight in Richmond works with 310 volunteer-run stations, many of which need a guest on short notice. That teaches a fast lesson about which sources get a second call. The ones who answer within the hour, say something specific, and stop talking when they are done are the ones who come back.

Association press work has three jobs. The first is to put your research in front of the people who write about your sector, so that a number you published becomes a number others cite. The second is to state your position on a policy question clearly enough that a reporter can quote it without paraphrase. The third is to be a reliable source when news breaks that touches your members, even when you did not make the news.

Each job asks something different of you, and each outlet type wants something different back. The table below sets out what four common kinds of outlet need.

Table 1. What each kind of outlet needs from an association source.

OUTLET TYPE	TYPICAL DEADLINE	WHAT THE REPORTER WANTS	WHAT TO SEND FIRST
Wire service	Early morning, with updates through the day	A number, a name and a quote they can file in under an hour	Two sentences, a figure and a phone number that will be answered
Trade publication (weekly or monthly)	Weekly close or monthly press date	Context a general reporter lacks, and a member who can speak to it	A short pitch with the data attached and two member contacts
Regional daily	Afternoon for next-morning print	A local face on a national story	The chapter or member nearest the reporter's readers
Radio and audio	Same day, often within hours	A guest who speaks in short sentences and can be reached by phone	A named spokesperson, a time window and a two-line summary

The pattern across the four rows is that the reporter's deadline decides what you send. A wire reporter at 7:00 a.m. cannot use an attachment. A monthly trade editor cannot use a two-sentence note. Learn the deadline of every reporter on your list before you write to them.

2

BUILDING A REPORTER LIST BEFORE YOU NEED ONE

By the end of this section you will have a list of fifteen to twenty reporters, a way of keeping it current, and a rule for deciding who gets which pitch.

A reporter list assembled the day a story breaks is built under pressure, incomplete, and usually wrong about which reporter actually covers the relevant beat at a given outlet. A list built quarterly, in a quiet period with no active story to place, is more accurate and takes less time overall than repeatedly reconstructing one under deadline pressure. In the Alliance of Community Radio Stations' 2024 pitch log, 11 of 18 reporters on a list refreshed that quarter replied, against 3 of 12 on a list that was not.

Building the list:

- Identify the beat, not the outlet. A trade publication's regulatory reporter and its membership-services reporter are different people with different interests, even at the same publication.
- Track what a reporter has actually covered in the last six months, not what their title suggests they cover. Beats shift more often than bylines update.
- Note each reporter's preferred contact method and deadline pattern (a wire reporter's morning deadline is different from a monthly trade magazine's).
- Update the list quarterly, removing reporters who've moved beats or outlets and adding new bylines that have appeared on your association's beat.

A one- or two-person communications team can maintain a useful list of fifteen to twenty reporters this way in under two hours a quarter — far less time than reconstructing a list from scratch under the pressure of a breaking story.

WHERE TO FIND THE NAMES

Start with your own clippings. Search your association's name, your executive director's name and your three most important policy topics, and note every byline from the last twelve months. Then search the topics without your name, because the reporters who cover your beat but have never called you are the ones worth meeting.

Ask your members next. A member organization with 1,200 members has a local reporter who has already covered it, and that reporter is often the easiest introduction you will get. Chapter leaders know the regional daily's business editor and the radio host who does the Thursday segment, and a five-minute call to each chapter chair will add four or five names that no search turns up.

Finish with podcasts and community stations. Audio hosts book guests continuously and rarely receive pitches from associations. Of the 10 hosts the Alliance approached for member guests in 2024, seven replied. Our own stations need a guest on short notice most weeks.

WHAT TO RECORD ABOUT EACH REPORTER

The list is a working document, not a directory. The fields below are the ones that change what you do next.

FIELD	EXAMPLE ENTRY	WHY IT MATTERS
Name and outlet	Business reporter, regional daily	Spelling errors end pitches
Beat as practiced	Nonprofit finance, tax and labor	Titles lag behind what reporters cover
Last three stories	Dated, with links	Shows what they have already written and what they have not
Preferred contact	Email, never phone before noon	A wrong channel costs you the pitch
Deadline pattern	Files by 3:00 p.m.	Decides when your note is read
Last contact	Pitched February 4, no reply	Prevents a second cold pitch on the same angle
Relationship note	Used our survey figure in 2024	Reminds you what worked

Table 2. The seven fields worth keeping for each reporter.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: 17 NAMES IN A QUARTER

The Society of Heritage Carpentry Trades in Providence has 1,200 members and five staff. In January 2025, its Executive Director, Caspar Lindahl, had a list of about 90 names inherited from an earlier director, most of them out of date. Over two sessions he cut it to 17: six trade and building-press reporters, five regional-daily reporters in the New England states where most members work, three radio hosts, and three education reporters who cover apprenticeships.

He then spent 25 minutes on each of the five most relevant names, reading their last six months of stories and writing one line in the list about what they had not yet covered. By the end of March, 11 of the 17 had answered at least one message, and a regional daily had run a feature on the apprenticeship pipeline that quoted two members by name. The list took one hour and fifty minutes to refresh the following quarter.

A list you can read in full before every pitch is one you will actually use.

QUARTERLY REFRESH CHECKLIST

Run this at the start of each quarter, before you plan any pitches.

- [ ] Remove every reporter who has not published on your beat in six months
- [ ] Add each new byline that appeared on your association's beat since the last refresh
- [ ] Re-read each active reporter's last three stories and update the "last three stories" field
- [ ] Confirm each contact method still works by checking the outlet's own staff page
- [ ] Mark reporters who answered a pitch in the last quarter, and note what the pitch was
- [ ] Share the list with your executive director and your chapter chairs, and ask who is missing

> “Half the names I cut were reporters who had left the beat years ago. The harder cut was the ones I liked and who had never once covered us.
>
> CASPAR LINDAHL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SOCIETY OF HERITAGE CARPENTRY TRADES

3
THE PITCH: LEAD WITH THE FACT

By the end of this section you will be able to write a pitch email a reporter can act on from its first sentence, and decide when to send it and when to follow up.

A pitch email's first sentence determines whether a reporter reads the second one. My rule, carried over directly from newsroom habits: lead with the specific fact, number, or event, not the organization's mission statement or a general description of what the association does.

Weak opening: "NANA is the professional society for association executives, boards, and staff, and we wanted to share some research that might interest your readers."

Strong opening: "A new NANA survey of 720 member organizations finds median membership growth held flat at 2.1 percent for the second straight year — the kind of number a board can set beside its own growth figure."

In the Alliance's 2024 pitch log, number-first pitches drew replies from 9 of 14 reporters, and mission-first openings from 4 of 15. The strong version gives a reporter something to write a headline around in the first sentence. The weak version asks the reporter to do the work of finding the story themselves, and most won't.

THE FIVE PARTS OF A PITCH

A complete pitch runs 100 to 150 words and has five parts, in this order. The subject line names the fact, not the topic. The first sentence states the fact with its number.

The second and third sentences say where the number comes from and what it means for the reporter's readers. The fourth offers a named person who can speak to it. The last gives a time by which you will follow up, or says there is no deadline.

Subject lines do more work than writers expect. "Survey: member growth flat at 2.1 percent for second year" tells a reporter what the note holds and why it might matter. "Press release from NANA" tells them nothing, and "Checking in" tells them you have nothing.

Attach nothing the reporter did not ask for. Link to the full report and paste the one table that matters into the body of the email. A reporter on a

phone between meetings cannot open a 40-page PDF, but can read a three-row table.

TIMING AND FOLLOW-UP

Send to a wire reporter before 8:00 a.m. their time and to a trade weekly early in its closing week. Send to a regional daily before noon, because afternoon deadlines leave no room for a new story. Send to radio hosts at the start of the week, when booking decisions are made.

Follow up once. Wait two business days, then reply on the same thread with one new fact or one new piece of access, such as a member who has agreed to be quoted. If the reporter does not answer after that, log the pitch and move on.

EMBARGOES AND EXCLUSIVES

An embargo lets a reporter prepare a story in advance on the condition that nothing is published before a set time. Offer one when the material is complex, such as the 720-organization State of Associations survey with its dozens of tables, and when a reporter will use the extra time to check the figures. State the embargo in the first line of the email, with the exact date and time and the time zone, and confirm the reporter accepts it before sending the material.

An exclusive gives one outlet the story first, in exchange for prominence. It works when one outlet matters more than the rest, and it costs you goodwill with the others. Use it rarely, and tell the other reporters on your list afterward that you did, so none of them wonders why you went elsewhere.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE POSTAL-RATE PITCH

In April 2025, the Nonprofit Mail Stability Act was introduced in Congress, and NANA's public policy team began collecting member stories. Lucinda Farrow-Mbatha, Executive Director of the Federation of Community Libraries in Baltimore, offered her federation's figures. Her 1,900 member libraries mail 1.1 million pieces a year, most of them overdue notices, event flyers and renewal letters.

Her first draft of the pitch opened with the federation's mission and its founding year. The revised version, shown below, opened with the cost. The change took ten minutes and was the difference between a note that sat unread and one a trade reporter answered the same afternoon.

ELEMENT	FIRST DRAFT	REVISED VERSION
Subject line	Federation of Community Libraries on postal policy	1.1 million mailed pieces a year at stake for small libraries
First sentence	The Federation was founded to support small and rural public libraries	Libraries in the Federation mail 1.1 million pieces a year, and a rate change would land on budgets of under $200,000
Evidence	A link to the website	One table: pieces mailed by library size, in the email body
Access	Contact the communications office	Lucinda Farrow-Mbatha, available by phone from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Follow-up	None stated	Will call Thursday morning if no reply

Table 3. The postal-rate pitch, before and after revision.

BEFORE YOU PRESS SEND

Check each item below against the draft. If any box stays empty, the pitch is not ready.

- [ ] The subject line states a fact, not a topic or a request
- [ ] The first sentence has a number, a date or a named event
- [ ] The note runs under 150 words and has no attachment
- [ ] A named person is available to speak, with a direct phone number
- [ ] You have read the reporter's last three stories and the pitch is not a repeat
- [ ] You have stated whether the note is news, an embargo, or a feature idea
- [ ] You have written down the date and time of your single follow-up

> “I first thought the reporter wanted to hear that libraries matter. She knew that. What she could not get elsewhere was a library director who would say what a rate change does to a $200,000 budget, and I had one on call.

LUCINDA FARROW-MBATHA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY LIBRARIES

4
PITCHING A STORY WITH NO NEWS HOOK

By the end of this section you will be able to pitch a feature idea honestly, set a realistic expectation with the reporter, and recognize which stories in your association are already pitchable.

A two-person council in Cheyenne with nothing to announce placed a feature in a regional paper in April 2025, and the worked example below shows how. Not every pitch has a breaking-news hook like a survey release or a policy win behind it, and association communications staff too often conclude that no hook means no pitch. A member spotlight, a chapter milestone, or a practitioner's perspective on an industry trend can all work as pitches without a traditional news event attached, provided the pitch is honest about what it is.

Feature-pitch structure, without a news hook:

- Open with the specific person or organization, not the association: "A two-person council in Cheyenne just joined a shared-services model to serve its 420 outfitters" reads as a story; "NANA members are innovating in shared services" does not.
- State plainly that this is a feature idea, not breaking news, so the reporter can weigh it against their own planning calendar rather than feeling misled about urgency.
- Offer a specific person to interview, already willing to talk, rather than asking the reporter to track down a source themselves.
- Suggest a realistic timeline — a feature pitch with no urgency can sit in a reporter's queue for weeks, and that's normal, not a sign the pitch failed.

WHERE FEATURES COME FROM

Features come from the work your staff already does. A chapter that hit a milestone, such as a Winter Roundtable that fills all 40 of its seats, is a story about demand in a region. A small association that changed how it works, such as the small associations that share one finance manager through the Southeastern Textile Manufacturers Council, is a story about a model other small groups could copy.

Ask your program staff one question each quarter: what did you do that surprised you? The answer to that question is usually a feature. If a member

says "we stopped doing it that way and saved eight hours a week," you have a pitch with a person, a number and a lesson.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE TWO-PERSON COUNCIL

Hollis Greenleaf runs the Rocky Mountain Outfitters and Guides Council in Cheyenne with one colleague. The council has 420 outfitters and cannot afford a full-time controller or its own association management system. In January 2025 it joined the Southeast shared-services model remotely, sharing a finance manager and a software license with other small associations.

The council's communications work is Greenleaf himself, so in early March 2025 he pitched one outdoor-business reporter at a regional paper and one trade editor. His note ran 118 words, said in its second sentence that it was a feature idea with no deadline, and offered a call with himself and the shared finance manager. The reporter replied in nine days. The feature ran six weeks later, in late April, and the council's phone rang through May with other small associations asking how to join.

There is a second benefit. A feature that runs builds your name on a reporter's list of reliable sources, and the next time that reporter needs comment on a policy story, they call the person whose feature they ran.

HONEST FRAMING

Never dress a feature up as news. If the reporter discovers that the "announcement" was a profile, the next pitch from your association starts at a disadvantage. Use plain words for the type: "feature idea," "background for a future story," or "a source for the coming year."

> “
> The reporter asked what the hard part had been. I told her the first two months were slower, because we spent them moving our records. That answer is what she quoted.
>
> HOLLIS GREENLEAF, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTFITTERS AND GUIDES COUNCIL

5
HANDLING AN UNEXPECTED PRESS INQUIRY

By the end of this section you will have a same-day process for any inbound call or email from a reporter, a holding statement you can send in five minutes, and a rule for deciding who approves what.

At 8:40 a.m. on a Tuesday in February 2025, a reporter's call reached a three-person cooperative in Annapolis, and the worked example below follows that call through the day. A press inquiry that arrives without warning (a reporter working on a story where your association is one source among several, or a reporter responding to news your association didn't generate) tests a communications team's process more than a planned announcement does.

Same-day response protocol:

- Step 1: Acknowledge the inquiry within one hour if it arrives during business hours, even if the acknowledgment is only "we're looking into your questions and will follow up by [specific time]."
- Step 2: Loop in the appropriate subject-matter staff and, if needed, the executive director immediately — don't wait for a scheduled check-in.
- Step 3: Give the reporter a specific, real deadline for a full response, and meet it. A missed self-imposed deadline is worse than a longer deadline stated up front.
- Step 4: If the answer requires more time than the reporter's own deadline allows, say so directly rather than going silent — most reporters will note "did not respond by publication time" if you go quiet, but will often note a stated on-the-record delay more neutrally.

In the Alliance of Community Radio Stations' 2024 inquiry log, 16 of 21 reporters who received an acknowledgment within an hour ran the Alliance's comment, against 3 of 9 who waited longer. An association that treats every inquiry as requiring board-level sign-off before any response, even an acknowledgment, will consistently appear evasive in coverage, whether or not that's the association's intent.

TRIAGE IN THE FIRST TEN MINUTES

Read the inquiry twice and sort it into one of five types before you answer. The type tells you who must see it and how quickly.

Table 4. Five kinds of inbound inquiry and the first move for each.

TYPE	EXAMPLE	FIRST MOVE	WHO APPROVES THE ANSWER
Information request	"How many members do you have?"	Reply with the figure and its source	Communications staff
Comment on someone else's news	"A bill was introduced today. What is your view?"	Check whether the board has a position; if so, quote it	Public policy director
Position question	"Will you oppose the proposed rule?"	State the board-approved position only	Executive director
Hostile or loaded	"Why did your association fail its members?"	Acknowledge, ask for the specific claim, offer a call	Executive director
Crisis or legal	A lawsuit, a data breach, a personnel matter	Send the holding statement and call counsel	Executive director and counsel

The first four types can usually be answered the same day. The fifth is the one where a prepared process matters most, because the first hour sets the tone of everything that follows.

WRITE DOWN THE QUESTION

Before you answer by phone, ask the reporter for the exact question, the outlet, the publication time and how your answer will be used. Write all four into your log. Reporters expect these questions from a professional source, and the written record protects both of you when the story runs. Agree the terms before you answer: on the record, on background, or off the record.

If the reporter asks something you cannot answer on the spot, say so: "I don't have that figure in front of me. I will send it by 3:00 p.m." Then send it by 2:45.

THE HOLDING STATEMENT

A holding statement is a short written reply that acknowledges the inquiry and states when a full answer will arrive. It has three sentences: you have received the question, you are gathering facts, and you will respond by a stated time. It does not defend, apologize or speculate. The appendix has a template to paste into your drafts folder.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE 8:40 A.M. CALL

On a Tuesday in February 2025, a regional daily reporter called the Chesapeake Watermen's Cooperative Association in Annapolis. The cooperative has 48 member co-ops and three staff, and the reporter was preparing a story on delays in federal grant payments to small fisheries. The call came in at 8:40 a.m. with a 3:00 p.m. filing deadline.

The Executive Director, Obadiah Fenwick, took the call himself. He wrote down the question and deadline, said he would return with specific numbers, and was off the phone at 8:46 a.m. He then spent 30 minutes calling three member co-ops for figures.

From 9:30 a.m. he checked each figure against the cooperative's payment records and cleared a short statement with the board chair, and at 10:50 a.m. he emailed the statement and two named members to the reporter. He answered one follow-up question at 11:30 a.m.

TIME	ACTION	RESULT
8:40 a.m.	Call received	Question, outlet and 3:00 p.m. deadline written down
8:46 a.m.	Acknowledged	Reporter told to expect figures by 11:00 a.m.
9:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.	Three member co-ops called	Two agreed to speak by name
9:30 a.m. to 10:50 a.m.	Figures checked against payment records, statement cleared with the board chair	Statement final
10:50 a.m.	Statement and contacts sent	10 minutes ahead of the stated time
11:30 a.m.	Follow-up answered	Story filed at 2:10 p.m. with three sources

Table 5. The Annapolis inquiry, hour by hour.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Do not say "no comment." Reporters print it as a refusal, even when you meant it as caution. Say "we are not able to discuss that today" if you must decline, and explain why in a phrase, such as a pending board decision or a legal matter.

Do not speculate about other organizations' intentions, and do not correct a reporter's framing by lecturing. Give your fact, give your name, and let the reporter weigh it.

RESPONSE CHECKLIST

Pin this next to the phone, or paste it into the shared channel your team monitors.

- [ ] I wrote down the exact question, the outlet, the deadline and the intended use
- [ ] I acknowledged the inquiry within one hour
- [ ] I identified who must approve the answer and told them the deadline
- [ ] I gave the reporter a specific time for the full answer
- [ ] I checked each figure against its source before sending it
- [ ] I logged the inquiry, my answer and the story's outcome

> “We have three staff. When a reporter calls, nobody is the press office, so the rule is that whoever answers writes down the deadline and the question, and I call back within the hour.

OBADIAH FENWICK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHESAPEAKE WATERMEN'S COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

6

PREPARING A SPOKESPERSON FOR A FIRST INTERVIEW

By the end of this section you will be able to run a thirty-minute preparation session, build a one-page message sheet, and decide which spokesperson fits which interview.

Most association executives asked to serve as a spokesperson have never done a press interview, and thirty minutes of structured preparation covers the format, the messages, the bridges and the figures, even for an experienced, confident executive. In the Alliance's 2024 debriefs, 7 of 8 first-time spokespeople who had a prep session said they stayed on message, against 2 of 6 who did not.

Thirty-minute prep checklist:

- [ ] Confirm the interview format (phone, in-person, recorded, live) and expected length
- [ ] Identify the one or two messages the spokesperson should return to regardless of the specific question asked
- [ ] Practice a bridge from an off-topic or hostile question back to those core messages
- [ ] Confirm what's on and off the record, and agree in advance that "I don't know, let me find out" is an acceptable answer to an unexpected technical question
- [ ] Review any numbers or figures likely to come up, so the spokesperson isn't estimating a statistic live

The bridge technique matters most for association spokespeople specifically, since reporters covering advocacy or policy stories often ask questions designed to elicit a position the association hasn't formally taken. A spokesperson who has practiced returning to the association's actual, board-approved position handles this better than one relying on improvisation.

THE ONE-PAGE MESSAGE SHEET

Write the sheet before the session and hand it to the spokesperson at the start. It has four blocks: the one message, two proof points with figures, one

ask, and the three questions most likely to be difficult. Keep it to a single page, because a spokesperson will not remember a second one.

The one message is a sentence a reporter could use as a headline. The proof points are the figures behind it, each with its source and date. The ask is what you want a listener or reader to do afterward, such as read the report or contact their senator. The hard questions are written out in full, with a draft answer under each.

For example, a message sheet for a spokesperson discussing the 2025 State of Associations findings might read as follows.

The message: median membership growth held at 2.1 percent for the second straight year. Proof points: 720 organizations surveyed, and median renewal at 93 percent. The ask: read the full report on the NANA site. A hard question: "Does flat growth mean associations are failing?" with an answer that returns to the renewal figure.

THREE KINDS OF HARD QUESTION

Reporters ask three kinds of question that trip up new spokespeople. The first asks for a position the board has not taken. The second asks the spokesperson to speculate about a person, a rival or a future event. The third asks for a figure the spokesperson does not have.

QUESTION TYPE	EXAMPLE	RESPONSE PATTERN
Position not yet taken	"Will the board oppose the new rule?"	"The board has not voted on that. What it has said is that [approved position]."
Speculation	"Do you think the sponsor is acting in bad faith?"	"I can't speak to anyone's motives. What I can tell you is [fact]."
Missing figure	"How many members lost coverage?"	"I don't have that number in front of me. I will send it by [time]."

Table 6. Three hard questions and a response for each.

Each response has the same shape: acknowledge, decline the guess, return to a fact. A spokesperson who learns that shape can use it on any question, including ones nobody anticipated.

Simone Radcliffe, NANA's Director of Public Policy, has coached spokespeople on this pattern for years and says the failure is rarely the hard question itself. It is the spokesperson who feels the silence after it and fills it with a guess.

AUDIO AND BROADCAST INTERVIEWS

Radio rewards short answers. Amara Obiledu, who hosts the NANA podcast, tells guests to answer in about twenty seconds, finish the sentence, and stop. A pause after a complete answer is normal on air, and the host will ask the next question.

For a recorded phone or video interview, sit in a quiet room, silence notifications, and keep the message sheet where your eyes fall naturally. For live radio, ask the producer how many questions to expect and when the break falls. Say the name of your organization once, early, and say it in full the first time.

> “I keep the approved position on a card with the date the board voted. If a reporter asks whether it has changed, the date answers the question.
>
> SIMONE RADCLIFFE, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC POLICY, NANA

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE FIRST INTERVIEW

The Guild of County Records Officers in Richmond has 2,700 members and seven staff. In March 2025, its newly appointed Executive Director agreed to a radio interview about how counties handle personal data in public records, a topic tied to the state data privacy patchwork. She had run a county records office for 14 years and had never spoken to a reporter.

Her communications manager ran a 30-minute session the day before. The agenda is shown below.

> “Guests who write out their answers read them aloud, and listeners hear the page. Put three words on a card and talk from those.
>
> AMARA OBILEDU, SENIOR EDITOR AND PODCAST HOST, NANA

MINUTES	ACTIVITY	OUTPUT
0 to 5	Confirm format, length and ground rules	Seven-minute live segment, on the record
5 to 10	Agree the one message and two proof points	Message: counties need one clear rule, not 50
10 to 20	Practice the three hardest questions aloud	Draft answers, bridges marked
20 to 25	Review figures likely to come up	One-page figure sheet
25 to 30	Run the first two minutes as a mock	Pace and length adjusted

Table 7. A 30-minute spokesperson preparation session.

The interview ran seven minutes. She returned to her message three times, declined one question about pending litigation in a single sentence, and offered to send a figure she did not have. The producer invited her back for a monthly segment.

DAY-OF CHECKLIST

Run through this on the morning of the interview, or ten minutes before a call.

- [ ] I have the message sheet and the figure sheet where I can see them
- [ ] I know the outlet, the format, the length and the host's name
- [ ] I know what is on the record and what is not
- [ ] I have a glass of water and a quiet room, with notifications off
- [ ] I have agreed how I will end a question I cannot answer
- [ ] My communications contact is available by phone during the interview

7

WORKING WITH A CHAPTER OR COMMITTEE SPOKESPERSON

By the end of this section you will have a clear rule for what chapter and committee leaders may say, who must check with national staff, and how to prepare a volunteer who has never been interviewed.

Three chapter chairs handled local press in 2024 and 2025 with one test: is the question about our chapter, or about NANA's national position? Chapters and committees sometimes want to speak to local media directly, particularly for a chapter-level program or event, without routing every inquiry through national communications staff. A chapter spokesperson should follow the same core preparation and message discipline in this guide, but should also know in advance which topics require a check with national staff before commenting. Federal advocacy positions and any pending litigation or personnel matter come first among them.

A simple rule, which the Great Lakes chapter has used since its February 2025 roundtable: chapter leaders can speak freely to local media about their own chapter's programs and local impact, but should route any question touching NANA's national policy positions to the national communications team, either by referring the reporter directly or by getting a quick answer before responding. This avoids both the delay of routing every local inquiry nationally and the risk of a chapter volunteer inadvertently stating a position the association hasn't taken.

WHO SPEAKS TO WHAT

The table below turns the rule into a decision a volunteer can make in the moment, without calling anyone.

TOPIC	CHAPTER LEADER MAY SPEAK	CHECK WITH NATIONAL FIRST
Chapter event dates, venues and attendance	Yes	No
Chapter programs, such as a roundtable or a mentorship cohort	Yes	No
A local member's story, with the member's permission	Yes	No
Federal advocacy positions	No	Yes
Pending litigation or personnel matters	No	Yes
Membership numbers beyond the chapter's own	No	Yes
Statements on behalf of the board	No	Yes

Table 8. Topics, speakers and checks for chapter and committee spokespeople.

When in doubt, a chapter leader should say, "That's a question for NANA's national communications team. I can put you in touch today."

EXAMPLES FROM THE CHAPTERS

Priya Ranganathan, who chairs the Great Lakes chapter, took a local radio host's call before the February 2025 Winter Roundtable, which is capped at 40 participants. She spoke about the roundtable and the March mentorship cohort, and referred a question about a federal rule to NANA's national team. The segment ran that week and the roundtable filled.

Elena Marsh, who chairs the Greater Boston chapter, used the October 2024 Chapter Leadership Intensive in Boston to rehearse this rule with incoming New England chapter officers. Each practiced the same three local questions and the same two national ones, and learned the referral sentence by heart. None of the officers took a national-policy question on their own afterward.

Grace Lindqvist, who chairs the Pacific Northwest chapter, gave every volunteer a contact card with the national team's number before the May 2025 Spring Forum in Seattle. A Portland reporter reached a volunteer on the Friday before the forum, and the volunteer answered the local questions and called national for the rest.

PREPARING A VOLUNTEER

Volunteers have less time and less experience than staff. Give them a half-page, not a manual: the three topics they may speak to, the two they may not, the referral sentence, and the number to call. Offer a ten-minute call before any scheduled interview, and ask them to send a note afterward saying what they were asked.

CHECKLIST FOR CHAPTER AND COMMITTEE SPOKESPEOPLE

Share this with every chapter chair at the start of their term.

- [ ] I know the three topics I may speak to freely
- [ ] I know the topics that must go to national staff first
- [ ] I have the referral sentence and the national communications contact
- [ ] I have confirmed the reporter's outlet, deadline and question
- [ ] I will send a note to national staff after any interview, even a friendly one

8
WHAT TO DO AFTER A STORY RUNS

By the end of this section you will know how to read a story, request a correction, thank a reporter, and decide what to do with coverage that went badly.

In May 2024 a trade weekly printed NANA's median renewal as 39 percent instead of 93 percent, and the fix took one email and an afternoon, as the worked example below shows. Read the published story completely before reacting to a headline or a single quote in isolation — headlines are frequently written by an editor, not the reporter, and don't always reflect the story's actual framing. If a factual error appears, contact the reporter directly with the specific correction rather than posting a public complaint first; most outlets will correct a clear factual error quickly when approached directly and will be less receptive after a public callout.

Share coverage that ran well with the reporter directly — a brief thank-you note, not effusive praise, since maintaining the relationship matters more for the next pitch than any single story's outcome. Reporters remember which sources were straightforward to work with and which ones weren't, and that memory shapes who gets called first next time a story touches your association's beat.

THE FIRST HOUR AFTER PUBLICATION

Read the story twice, once for what it says and once for what it omits. Copy every figure and every quotation into your log, and compare each against your notes. Then decide which of three situations you are in: the story is accurate and favorable, accurate and unfavorable, or inaccurate.

An accurate and unfavorable story needs no correction. It needs a plan: what the story says that members will ask about, and what your answer is. An inaccurate story needs a correction request, which is covered below. An accurate and favorable story needs a thank-you note and an internal share.

REQUESTING A CORRECTION

Write to the reporter first, by email, with the exact sentence, what is wrong, what is right and where the reporter can verify it. Keep the note to four sentences and copy no one. If the reporter does not reply within one business day, write to the section editor with the same note and the reporter copied.

Never post the error on social media before you have written to the reporter. If a correction runs, thank the editor and move on.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: 39 INSTEAD OF 93

In May 2024, a trade weekly ran a story about the State of Associations 2024 findings and printed median renewal as 39 percent instead of 93 percent. The figure was a transposition, but it made the sector look as if it were losing most of its members each year. Inês Carvalho-Reyes, NANA's Director of Research, spotted it within two hours of publication.

NANA's communications team wrote to the reporter at 10:15 a.m. with the sentence, the correct figure, and a link to the table on page 12 of the report. The reporter replied within the hour, thanked the team and asked the editor to correct the online version. The correction ran that afternoon, and the print correction ran the following week.

The team also sent a brief thank-you to the reporter, who then used the 93 percent figure in two later stories. Nobody posted anything, and the error was gone from the web within a day.

USING COVERAGE WELL

Coverage is an asset once you have verified it. Share a story with your members within 24 hours, link to the original rather than copying text, and add one sentence about why it matters for them. Send it to your board with a note on what it says about your positions. Pin it to your newsroom page.

Do not reproduce a full story without permission. Outlets own their text, and many allow a short excerpt with a link. Check the outlet's policy before you paste anything into a newsletter.

HANDLING COVERAGE THAT WENT BADLY

If a story is accurate but unfavorable, resist the urge to respond the same day. Read the criticism, decide whether any of it is fair, and decide what the association will do. If the answer is "nothing," do not respond. If the answer is "something," announce the action rather than answering the criticism.

If a story is inaccurate in a way that harms members, ask for a correction, and tell your executive director and board chair what you have asked for. If the outlet declines, ask for a clarification or a published response. Reserve a public rebuttal for cases where the error is material, the correction has failed and members need to know the facts.

9

MEASURING WHETHER MEDIA RELATIONS IS WORKING

By the end of this section you will have a simple pitch log, a quarterly review routine, and five numbers that tell you whether your pitching is improving.

The two-person team at the Society of Accessible Design Professionals went from two stories in one quarter to five in another with a simple log, as the worked example below shows. Association communications staff, particularly on a one- or two-person team, often lack time to track coverage systematically, but a lightweight log beats none: a simple log of every pitch sent, every response received, and every story that ran, reviewed quarterly rather than after every individual pitch.

Over two or three quarters, this log answers questions a single pitch's outcome can't: which reporters respond most reliably, which pitch angles get picked up versus ignored, and whether response time to inbound inquiries is actually improving. A team without this record tends to remember its best outcomes and forget its misses, which distorts which approaches actually get repeated.

I keep my own version of this log in a shared spreadsheet with four columns (reporter, pitch date, response, outcome) and review it with my two-person team at the start of each quarter, before planning the next quarter's pitches rather than after the fact.

THE NUMBERS WORTH COUNTING

Count five things each quarter and nothing more. They are pitches sent, replies received, stories published, hours to respond to inbound inquiries, and corrections requested, which you read from the outcome column. Everything else is detail you can add later if you have a question that needs it.

Do not count impressions, reach or advertising-equivalent value. Those figures measure an outlet's audience, not your association's results, and they reward volume over fit. A single story in a trade weekly read by 2,300 association executives can be worth more to your members than a mention on a site with a million visitors.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THREE QUARTERS

The two-person communications team at the Society of Accessible Design Professionals, which has 4,100 members and 17 staff in Alexandria, kept the log through three quarters of 2024. The table shows what the review revealed.

Table 9. Three quarters of pitch log results for a two-person team.

QUARTER	PITCHES SENT	REPLIES	STORIES	MEDIAN HOURS TO ANSWER INBOUND	CORRECTIONS REQUESTED
Q1 2024	14	5	2	5.5	1
Q2 2024	17	8	4	3.0	0
Q3 2024	15	9	5	2.0	0

The reply rate rose from 36 percent to 60 percent, and stories per quarter more than doubled. The team traced the improvement to two changes made after the first review: leading every pitch with a number and cutting the list from 31 names to 19. Median response time to inbound inquiries fell from 5.5 hours to 2.0 after the team adopted the one-hour acknowledgment rule.

The log also showed something no single quarter could. Four of the 19 reporters accounted for seven of the 11 stories, so the team scheduled a call with each of them in October 2024. All four answered the next pitch.

QUARTERLY REVIEW CHECKLIST

Block 45 minutes on the calendar at the start of each quarter and work down this list.

- [ ] Total the five numbers for the past quarter and compare with the quarter before
- [ ] Identify the three reporters who replied most often, and the three who never did
- [ ] Mark the pitch angles that were picked up and those that were ignored
- [ ] Read every inbound inquiry that took more than four hours to answer, and write down why
- [ ] Decide two changes for next quarter and write them at the top of the log
- [ ] Share the one-page summary with your executive director

10
WHERE TO GO NEXT

By the end of this section you will know which NANA programs build on what this guide covers.

NANA's Learning catalog includes Association Communications Essentials, a course I teach that goes through the pitch, the inquiry and the spokesperson session with exercises and feedback. Take it if you are the only person on your team who answers reporters, or if you are about to hand that job to someone else.

If your spokesperson is a chapter leader, have them read section 7 before the Chapter Leadership Intensive in Boston on October 23, where incoming New England officers meet. The referral rule in that section is this guide's own advice, and a short practice round with the chapter's officers makes it routine.

For policy and advocacy stories, the Fall Policy Forum in Washington, DC, on November 6 is where NANA's public policy team briefs members on the federal issues reporters ask about. Farah Qureshi-Lindgren, Senior Policy Manager, teaches Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns. Advocacy Day each April is a good place to practice telling your story in a few sentences to someone with two minutes.

The NANA podcast, hosted by Amara Obiledu, is the best place to hear how a good interview sounds. Listen to two episodes before you prepare your first spokesperson, and note how the best guests open and close each answer. For a conversation with a peer, the Great Lakes chapter's mentorship pairing connects staff new to association management with someone who has done the job.

APPENDIX: A SHORT GLOSSARY FOR STAFF WITHOUT A PRESS BACKGROUND, AND TWO TEMPLATES

This appendix holds the glossary the guide has used throughout, followed by a holding statement and a pitch log you can copy.

GLOSSARY

- **Beat**: the specific topic area a reporter covers regularly, which may be narrower than their job title suggests
- **On background**: information a reporter can use but not attribute to a named source
- **On the record**: anything said can be attributed to the speaker by name
- **Off the record**: information shared on the understanding that the reporter will not publish or attribute it at all
- **Embargo**: an agreement that a reporter can prepare a story in advance but not publish before a specified time
- **Wire deadline**: typically early morning; wire reporters need same-day comment far earlier than a monthly trade publication would
- **Byline**: the line naming the reporter who wrote a story, and the reliable way to learn who covers what
- **Pitch**: a short message offering a reporter a story, a source or a piece of data
- **Holding statement**: a brief reply that acknowledges an inquiry and states when a full answer will come
- **Bridge**: a sentence that moves an answer from an unwelcome question back to your message
- **Exclusive**: a story offered to one outlet first, in exchange for prominence
- **Correction**: a published statement by an outlet that an earlier fact was wrong

Association communications staff new to media relations should keep this glossary near their reporter list — misunderstanding "on background" versus "off the record" is one of the most common and most damaging mistakes a first-time spokesperson or communications staffer makes.

TEMPLATE A: HOLDING STATEMENT

Paste this into your drafts folder and fill the brackets. Send it within one hour of the inquiry.

> Thank you for your question about [topic]. We are gathering the facts and speaking with [the relevant staff or member]. We will send you a full response by [time and date], and you can reach [name] directly at [phone] if your deadline changes.

TEMPLATE B: PITCH LOG

Keep one row per pitch and one per inbound inquiry. The first four columns are the core log from section 9; the angle and hours-to-answer columns feed the five quarterly numbers.

Table 10. Pitch log columns, with a sample row.

REPORTER AND OUTLET	PITCH DATE	RESPONSE	OUTCOME	ANGLE	HOURS TO ANSWER
Business reporter, regional daily	March 11	Replied March 13	Feature ran March 27	Apprenticeship pipeline, feature idea	Not applicable
Regional daily reporter	February 18	Answered by 10:50 a.m.	Quoted, three sources	Grant payment delays, inbound	2.2



The National Association of National Associations is the professional society for association executives, boards, and staff, serving more than 750 member organizations and 2 million professionals through research, peer community, and advocacy since 1998.