

Handling Media Spotlight

A guide for Greens at the 2004 GP Convention

From the Media Committee of the Green Party of the United States

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Welcome to the spotlight!

We expect the Green Party's 2004 National Nominating Convention (Forward! 2004) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 23 to 28 to enjoy worldwide news coverage. Greens will be under the spotlight. Reporters will want to talk to you. Let's show ourselves at our best, and show the world how a real democratic party looks and acts!

How not to act at a convention: like the Reform Party! The Green Party has been growing from the grassroots up since 1984 in the US. We're part of the fastest growing political party in the world. There are elected Green officeholders in cities and counties across the US, and solid party structures in nearly every state. Greens have experienced unprecedented increase in membership since 2000. No matter what happens in Milwaukee, no matter what happens in November, the Green Party will continue to build a grassroots democracy movement in the US and to work to create our vision of a better world. Whatever opinions divide us, there are many values and goals that unite us. This is the story we want to highlight in Milwaukee!

Please read through the following suggestions for dealing with media and join us in making a commitment to put our best face forward this June in Milwaukee.

THE BASICS

Be on your best behavior!

When you speak before any meeting during the convention, remember that the cameras may be rolling. Speak cogently and clearly, focus on your message, be concise, be respectful, remember that we are representing the Green Party to the entire world. We want to show the world that Greens are intelligent and focused, and we respect all our fellow party members and their ideas. Debate civilly, emphasize ways to resolve disagreement within the party, and avoid denunciations, condemnations, accusations, and personal attacks. Remember that effective politics is based on persuasion and winning support -- on making friends, not enemies.

When you talk to reporters, be prepared with talking points (see the [Media Talking Points Guide](#))

This is your chance to get our message out to the world, so it's important to know what you want to say. When speaking with reporters, stick to three main points, repeating and emphasizing those points in every answer. The Media Committee has provided a list of useful talking points and story ideas for Greens attending the convention. You may also want to prepare your own list of points you want to make to reporters, if you favor a particular candidate or want to express a local or state Green Party message. Keep these lists handy in case you find yourself in an unexpected interview.

Respond to questions, don't necessarily answer them

No matter what question a reporter asks, your answer is a chance to get out your key messages. Remember that you can choose to RESPOND TO rather than ANSWER each question, thereby providing the reporter with the information you think is most important. If you reinforce and restate the key messages in each answer, those messages will be more likely to get in the story.

EXAMPLE:

Q: Didn't you spoil the 2000 election?

A: No. Nearly 3 million people voted the Green ticket in 2000 because they believe in our vision of...

Be a resource for reporters

A reporter's job is to fill column inches or air time. You have the raw materials they need to do their job: newsworthy events, expert testimonials, human interest stories. Your job is to convince the reporter that your news is the most compelling story for them to cover and share with their readers, viewers or listeners. Your goal then, is to establish a relationship with the reporter that allows this two-way street to flow smoothly. Be a resource for your reporters.

Don't lie, don't exaggerate to reporters

If you mislead reporters, they are going to learn the truth sooner or later, and when they do, your credibility will be ruined. Honesty, trust, and integrity are critical in your relationships with reporters. Lying is unethical and will only hurt the Green Party.

If you don't know...

If you do not know the answer to a reporter's question, do not make up an answer. You might say something off-message or regrettable. If a reporter asks you a question and you don't know the answer, say so and either

introduce someone who does know, or find out the reporter's deadline and promise to get back with the answer by deadline. And make sure you do it.

Don't presume that a reporter knows what you're talking about.

Many of us use all kinds of acronyms, jargon, political rhetoric, mission-statement talk, and inside lingo. Don't use this language with reporters. Translate all such terminology into language that reporters and audiences will understand. Be specific rather than abstract, and illustrate your ideas. For example, the phrase "economic justice" alone might sound vague to many reporters. Translate it into terms that mean something to people: the right to earn a decent paycheck, put food on the table, enjoy health coverage, and improve one's life.

Always return reporters' phone calls

Make sure you take reporters' phone calls. If you regularly miss their calls, they will stop calling. Even if you do not know the answer to a question, be a resource. Tell a reporter: "You know, that's not my turf, but here are three people who do work on that. You should call them. Here are their numbers." Reporters will appreciate the help.

Meet reporters' deadlines

Reporters live by deadlines. The newspaper has to go to the printer; the TV show has to air. These are not flexible times. If you have not called back by 3 or 4 p.m. at print newspapers, the reporter will get very nervous. By 4:30 p.m. you are out of the story. The same holds for TV news a couple of hours before air time.

If something big is happening in the news, make yourself available at deadline time and you may get into the story. For example, one organization that works on the rights of welfare recipients was in the office when President Clinton signed the welfare law in Washington. They released a statement, took calls, and were quoted in numerous articles. Be there. You may get only one shot. When something hot is going on, make sure you are in touch and know what is happening. Check your voice mail regularly, be available via cell phone.

One last point about deadlines: If a reporter sympathetic to your issue calls on deadline for a quote and you do not know what is going on, ask them. Reporters may describe the news for you, knowing that it will help you make a comment. They are not necessarily putting words in your mouth, although sometimes it's easy to tell what kind of quote they want. Usually, the article is more or less complete and your quote will serve to round it off. This is an

excellent opportunity to make sure your point of view is included. Listen carefully, think quickly, and stay on your message.

If it bleeds it leads

This is especially true about TV. Though it may reflect the sad state of American media, it's the reality. Drama sells. A news editor has a choice: run the piece on the horrible 16-car pile-up on the local freeway, using dramatic footage of rescuers prying people out of the cars and rushing them to the emergency room, or run the boring press conference in a fluorescent lit room with people in suits and ties talking about some obscure policy. Which would you rather watch?

Stage and package your news for maximum media impact and reporter interest. Don't spill blood, but include dramatic human-interest stories, poignant anecdotes, featuring compelling individuals and their testimonials. Obviously, the 16-car pile-up was not 'staged.' But to compete with the daily news, you have to present your news so it contains some human drama. Pick a setting that visually demonstrates the content of your message. If it's a children's issue, hold your event at a childcare center, playground or school; if it's environmental, choose a lakeside or toxic waste dump. (But make sure it's not too far out of the way for the media to cover it.) Make your event as appealing, personal and dramatic as possible. Be real. It is OK to be emotional; your internal alarms will start to sound if you are going overboard in the drama department.

Visualize your story for TV

Television is a visual medium. For every 8 or 12 seconds of soundbytes you may get into a TV news story, there will be another 30 to 45 seconds of visual material shown in the background. When planning your event, think how your message can be conveyed visually as well as verbally. If you have a short piece of video that illustrates your message, by all means give it to the reporter for use as 'b-roll' or background footage that fleshes out a news piece with pictures. (Greenpeace used to do this to great effect on their anti-whaling campaigns.) Don't forget to stage photo ops for print media as well.

Put a human face on your story

As much as possible, personalize your story to the media. It gives people a way to connect the issue, when they can connect to you personally. If the issue is welfare reform and you are personally affected by it, say so:

"As a (former) welfare mother..."

"As a teacher..."

"As a father of three kids..."

"As the daughter of an immigrant..."
"As someone who grew up in the Depression..."

Reporters are human beings

Follow the golden rule generally when dealing with reporters. Treat them as you would want to be treated.

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The Green Party of the United States

<http://www.gp.org>

FORWARD 2004! Green National Convention

<http://www.gp.org/convention/process.html>