

EXECUTING A SUCCESSFUL PRESS CONFERENCE

Whether a weekly media briefing, an exciting announcement, or to get out important information during a time of crisis, a press conference puts all eyes on your organization, department, and staff. Here's a few tips to make your message the focal point instead of the execution.

• *Compiled by Jamie Weir Baldwin, Michigan State and Scottie Rodgers, Ivy League* •

NUTS AND BOLTS

- Enlist your campus A/V people to assist with microphones and a mult box, as well as speakers so that the message is audible and clear.
- Have a wireless microphone so that everyone can hear the question being asked. Asking the media to identify themselves prior to asking the question also helps the people on the dais know who they are responding to.
- A mult box is a near necessity for any major announcements. It allows any television stations, etc. to get a clean copy of the audio coming from the microphones and cuts out a ton of the background noise. You can also purchase an adapter to plug in any inexpensive audio recorder to post the audio of the press conference of your website.
- If you are going to live stream the press conference on your website, test all of your equipment and the setup well in advance. Troubleshoot any issues. Then test it again. There is little that will fill your email inbox faster than a promise of a live-streamed event that is not available when people want to watch.
- Consider whether you will have a call-in feature, allowing out-of-town media to call in and listen and/or ask questions via telephone. If so, please see the advice above about webstreaming ... test, test, test.
- Identify whether you need a single podium, or if you are having several speakers with a Q&A session to follow, a table with several microphones.
- Remember your branding! Press conferences are big statements by your athletic department/organization. Invest in a backdrop that can have multiple uses, if necessary. Be sure that the backdrop isn't drawing attention away from your subjects, however - and if a branded backdrop is not in your budget, then make sure you have a solid, neutral backdrop that will remove other distractions in the background. Your campus A/V staff may be able to help with this.
- Don't forget your table. Still photos will often show a wide shot - a table cover and skirt is a nice, polished, professional look.

NOTIFICATIONS

- Be sure to give ample time for the media to respond to your alert of a press conference happening. With leaks, many personnel announcements are now done in advance, with the press conference to "introduce" the newest member of your coaching staff/administration. If it is intended to respond to something negative or sensitive, note the individuals who will speak and on what topic - but let the details come from the people who will speak.
- If there will be a web stream (audio or video) of the press conference, make sure that is publicized well. Utilize social media if the press conference will be of particular interest to fans - the general public loves being "in the know".
- Be prompt. Try not to leave the media waiting for extended periods for a press conference to start.
- If the announcement is significant or time-sensitive, consider providing an area for the media to work & file stories immediately following the press conference. Make sure that you - or a representative of your organization - is in that area to field questions or make clarifications if necessary.
- If the press conference and following coverage is going to have the media on your campus for a number of hours, providing at least drinks, if not snacks, to the media is always appreciated. This does not require a catering contract - bottles of water, maybe some inexpensive bagged snacks - will suffice.
- Encourage support by key players in your announcement. If you are announcing the hiring or retirement of a head coach, invite the players and other coaches in your department, to the press conference. If it is an athlete forgoing eligibility, the other team members - and the athlete's interaction with them - are good visuals for both still and television shooters, and good secondary interviews as a part of the overall story.

YOUR MESSAGING

- Be prepared, and be sure to prepare in advance EVERYONE who may be interviewed, either during the press conference or immediately after. Unified messaging is important - so developing talking points for your key speakers may be needed. You will often have questions from your media about the topic in advance so you can answer those questions via your talking points so your speakers are concise and direct in answering difficult questions.
- Have well-selected supporting printed material available - the press release, an FAQ, etc. While every piece of your message may not be discussed, this is a critical piece in having all the details of your message out to the proper outlets.
- In a time of crisis, identify the individuals who need to speak on behalf of the organization - and limit the number of those individuals. Crisis situations call for a single voice disseminating information. Reaction to crisis can have additional individuals, but work closely with your crisis communications team to make sure that the messages are consistent. Do not allow others to speak out of turn.
- "Happy" announcements - hirings, retirements, construction of new facilities, etc. - should feature several speakers. The athletics director is obvious in many of these, but major/name donors to a facility project, the chair of a search committee, a team captain, etc. can offer interesting viewpoints on the topic.
- If there is someone who you do not want approached about the topic of your press conference, do not have them present. Even if you don't put them behind a microphone, they may be approached by a media member off to the side and possibly put in an uncomfortable situation.
- Have a moderator who will act as the "traffic cop", as well as someone in the audience to get the wireless microphone around to all the media who have questions. Try to keep one person from asking all the questions.
- If you are opening your press conference to the public, have a designated area for those people to watch the press conference. The media has a job to do, and allowing the public to be participants in the press conference instead of observers can obstruct the media from getting what they need.