

Getting the Full Story

An introduction to media scans for nonprofits



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Whether you wait for the ping of a daily news alert or prefer to flip through the pages of the morning paper, chances are you keep up with the news. But sometimes we need more than a quick news digest. When media coverage is part of your nonprofit's strategy, there's great value in turning your news skimming into media scanning.

Media scans help organizations understand how reporters are talking about them and the issues they work on. For nonprofits, media scans are a practical way to assess how your organization and its leadership are covered, what peer organizations are making waves, or how changes in your field might inform your communication strategy.

This brief provides an introduction to media scans for nonprofits large and (especially) small. It covers:

- What a media scan is
- The benefits of doing a media scan
- How to get the most out of a media scan

Five reasons your nonprofit should do a media scan

Smart communication strategies start by understanding how your most important audiences see your organization and your issue. You can and should ask your audiences directly. But there's also a lot to learn from listening to the people that are also talking to them—including news media.

Media scans are a great way to look at what your most engaged audiences are hearing about the issue you work on and inform planning to ensure that your organization is part of the discussion.

What's a media scan, again?

Glad you asked! A media scan is a focused look at the news outlets and reporters covering your organization and the work that matters to you. It also digs deep into *how* your work is being covered, revealing the way your issue is framed, how your organization fits in, and whether and how your messages shape coverage.



Why should you do one?

1. You understand coverage of your organization and your issue

With a media scan, you can discover how the media covers the field you work in and what role your organization plays in the space. And, you can understand if you're being positioned the way you want to be or if there is work to do with journalists. For example, are you seen as a leader in your field, or have you been left out of key conversations about your work?

More generally, you can see how your field is being covered and find if there are any bright spots to prioritize or myths to debunk.

2. You learn about the competition

Other perspectives – the ones you agree with, and the ones you don't – are teachable moments. If other organizations on your side of the issue regularly appear in articles with quotes and mentions, while yours doesn't, you can learn which outlets and reporters are interested and what perspectives and talking points generate coverage. On the other hand, opposing views give you the insight you need to anticipate attacks and craft stronger responses.

3. You learn what's working

A reporter quoting your organization's CEO or referencing data from your latest report is both a win and a learning opportunity. You can learn what type of messages or materials the media has an appetite for, and you can replicate a winning approach you used for future work. The same goes for quotes, stats, or spokespersons from peer organizations – they teach you about the media engagement strategies that are gaining the most traction.

4. You reveal where the gaps and problems are

Not all media mentions call for celebration. You may come across unfavorable or untrue coverage about your organization or your focus area that needs to be quickly addressed.

Less timely, but equally valuable, you'll see where there are gaps in coverage. Perhaps your issue isn't being covered in a key region or outlet, and your organization can be the one to spark the conversation. Or maybe media is covering it, but not you.

5. You make connections

Noting the reporters and outlets covering your priorities is a simple way to update your press contact list for your next pitch. Plus, if a reporter had a particularly thoughtful article related to the work your organization does, there's an opportunity to build a long-term relationship with

him or her. One way to do that is by sending the reporter a note of thanks for covering your organization or focus area, and offer up a few ways you can assist with future coverage.

Five tips for better media scans

News alerts, weekly digests, or even by-the-minute notifications are always helpful. But when we need to sift through 100-plus headlines to find out what our nonprofit's media coverage really means, we look to media scans to do that. Here are five ways to get the most out of your media scan.

1. Plan before the scan

Nonprofit professionals are no strangers to goal setting, which is great, because any good media scan should start off with a clear goal. Decide one thing you want to the media scan to accomplish, like assessing the coverage of a recent campaign or gauging the national conversation about an issue that is important to your organization.

With that broad goal in mind, think of questions to help get you to specifics. Ask yourself what reporters, types of outlets, or content in the coverage correspond with your goal. Then, develop a concrete (and limited) set of research questions, like:

- Which reporters cover us most frequently?
- Which outlets are covering our issue, but aren't covering us?
- When the biggest outlet in our state covers our issue, what kinds of organizations are quoted most frequently?
- In a given article, is coverage of our position on an issue generally positive, negative, or neutral?
- How do news articles and opinion pieces frame the issue we're working on? For example, a broad topic like access to health care might be presented as a tough issue with lots of outstanding questions, or reporters may point to solutions through concrete quotes from advocates and health care providers.
- How does the outlet's scale—be it a national, trade, or regional outlet—affect coverage? For instance, are national nonprofits quoted across the board, or do regional outlets typically look to local organizations for spokespeople? And what about messages—are niche or trade outlets saying something different about our issue than mass-market outlets?
- What messages that are aligned with our organization's views get the most traction, and what opposing messages get the most traction?
- What voices (first-person experience, advocate, policymaker, nonprofit organization, corporate, academic, etc.) are featured prominently in coverage, either through quotes or other attribution?

- How has coverage changed over time? Stories about childhood hunger are common toward the end of a school year, for example, because summer vacation means the end of dependable nutritious meals through the National School Lunch Program.

And, one last thing you should do before the scan is list the search terms that will get you to the type of coverage you're looking for. Say you want to know the latest news on schools that are integrating more technology into their classrooms. You may find that searching "K-12 technology" gets you to the type of articles you're looking for, but "children and technology" misses the mark.

2. Add diversity to the scan

There is a number of ways you can design your scan to be diverse within your area of interest. If geography doesn't matter, scan both regional and national news outlets. Or, if you just want to limit the scan to your state, review outlets with conservative, progressive, and neutral editorial viewpoints. Or, continuing with the children and technology example from above, maybe you choose to look at both education-specific news outlets and broader national outlets that have an education section. And don't forget to look at both news and opinion coverage.

Whichever way you decide to divvy things up, make sure your scan has a mix that offers meaningful answers to the research questions you prioritized.

3. Look for themes and tone

Digging in and jotting down how reporters frame stories about your organization or the issue you care about will be a big help in the end when you need to make sense of the scan.

First, gauge the tone, looking at whether issues are covered with optimism, neutrality, caution, or critique, for example. Then, bulk the articles into focus area, or theme. Here's a trick to help you figure out the theme—read through the article, then put yourself in the reporter's shoes and think up a headline that best describes what the article is about. Note when you see these tones and themes start to form a pattern, and then make observations about what outlets or reporters a particular approach is coming from.

Then, take a close look at messages about your issue and your organization. Keep a tally of instances where the same messages come up repeatedly across articles, and determine whether the bulk of messages related to your issue is in favor of or contrary to your organization's perspectives.

As you comb through messages, keep an eye out for gaps, too. Maybe messages that your organization has actively pushed out aren't coming up in coverage. Or, in the case where there aren't key messages to convey but rather just facts to report, find out what organizations are tapped for their expertise and note if your nonprofit is on that list.

4. Note the voices used

Quotes from experts in the field or people on the ground also help set the tone of an article. As you read, look intentionally at the types of people that are often quoted, as well as the voices that seem to be missing from the conversation. And, pay close attention to how competing organizations are quoted and positioned in comparison to your organization.

5. Draw conclusions

In the end, a well-planned media scan will reveal ways your nonprofit can craft a strong media relations strategy. You'll learn about the outlets that typically cover your issue area, the reporters that are interested in your work, or the way your organization is talked about among local and national media. With those conclusions, you can make concrete recommendations for how your nonprofit can get the most out of its media engagement approach.

Need a hand?

If your organization could use help laying out or completing a focused media scan, [let us know](#).