Getting What You Want From the Media

Essential Media Relations Skills for Nonprofits

The Communications Handbook for Nonprofits and Foundations
Published by Steve Cebalt, Highview, L.L.C., Fort Wayne, Indiana, (260) 471-5870 • www.CommunicationsHandbook.com

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Introduction:

The Situation:

What is "The Media?" "The Media" means not only the traditional news outlets – newspapers, radio, and TV, but also much more, including grassroots means of distribution. For example: One small nonprofit organization distributes its newsletter in grocery sacks at each grocery in their community, reaching virtually every consumer in the community. That should be considered "The Media," too. Also included in the scope of "The Media" are online outlets such as influential blogs.

The Solution:

Small nonprofit organizations are newsmakers. Your programs and services are more relevant in today's turbulent economy than ever before. Your initiatives require community or political support to succeed. One way to build support for your goals is by using the media effectively as opportunities arise. So, now let's take a look at some steps your nonprofit organization can take to strategically prepare for such opportunities.

MODULE 1:
How to build a relationship with the media and your nonprofit

This module is for you if:

- **You want to gain perspective on media relations**
- **You want to develop a relationship with the media**
- **You want to learn how to sell your message to the media**
- **You want to distribute your organization's message effectively**
- **You want to know how to make a media pitch call**

This module offers a realistic overview of what the media has to offer you. After examining the steps in this document, you'll have a better understanding of ways to approach the media and which methods are best for your individual situation.

Key Points:

- Enhancing your perspective on media relations
- Emphasizing your relationship with the media
- Setting message priorities
- Using Push and Pull tactics to distribute your message
- Distributing your organization's message in an easy and effective manner

Steps:

1. First, some perspective on media relations.

It's important to appreciate that media relations is an important asset for a small nonprofit organization, but some perspective is in order. The news media can only cover your organization periodically and you don't control when the news gets published, or how it's edited. A story may run for a day and provide a boost, but the effect is short-lived. What do you do the next day, and the day after that? Today, more than ever, we have options such as targeted direct mail, newsletters, e-mail, event marketing, etc.

People are often surprised to hear a PR person urging a reduced emphasis on the mainstream media. And that may seem a little strange. But in our experience, you can have more impact by taking control of the timing and content of your message, and targeting your audience yourself. Become your own "media." Build your own media outlet.

- **The point:** Don't be too dependent on media relations in your outreach strategy. Most organizations have a full toolkit of communications tools that can reach target audiences directly, on your terms, and on your timetable, with no media intermediary. So, as they say, don't put all your eggs in one basket.

2. Media relations is much more than sending a press release.

The term "Media Relations" emphasizes relationships, and your relationships with media members are some of your most important assets. Meetings and phone calls with the specific reporters, bloggers and others who cover your field are crucial to building strong relationships.

If you don't know the area members of the media, reach out to them, introduce yourself, and send them some background on your small nonprofit organization. Offer to make a personal visit to the newsroom or hold a "brown-bag lunch" for all the media members in your market once a year to talk about news the organization is planning to announce. Ideally, someone in your organization should have a one-on-one relationship with all of the reporters that cover your field.

- If you lack this asset, these are your first steps – identify the reporters and work on a relationship. Letters, e-mails and phone calls are all that's needed to help put a "face" on your organization. Getting on a first name basis with reporters and sending press releases to John Smith in the Community Section instead of Community Section Editor, really helps separate you from the dozens of press releases that reporters get in a day. Your press release will be viewed as correspondence from a human, not just a random bit of data landing in a reporter's inbox.

- Starting a relationship is the first step, but with the turnover rates in the media being so high, it can be difficult to maintain strong relationships. Keep in regular contact with editors and producers so you know which reporters to contact and keep abreast of changeover in key positions.

- Periodically send copies of your latest publications to reporters to let them know what your organization is up to. Attach a business card and mail it separately from the bulk mailing list to let them know they're recognized as a special recipient.

3. Setting message priorities.

Some media messages are easier to "sell" to the press, but these aren't necessarily the most important priorities for your organization. It's important to convene a group of organization leaders and agree on which messages about your mission are vital to promote at the present moment. The media can't and won't cover your organization every day and if they do cover one of your topics today, they may not be willing to give you coverage tomorrow. Such limited opportunities reinforce that each outbound outreach effort should be tied to your organization's strategic message priorities. But here is one important exception: In our experience if a reporter calls you, unsolicited, always take advantage of the opportunity, whether it is strategic or not. If you turn down an interview request, they'll be less likely to call you next time. So the "strategic messaging" applies primarily to your outbound efforts.

4. Your media relations program should include a mix of Push vs. Pull tactics.

There are pros and cons to both Push and Pull strategies. Understanding the situation your organization is in and the reception you expect to receive from the media will help you gauge whether to Push or wait for the media to Pull.

- "Push" tactics are used to distribute your news, such as sending out press releases via mail, e-mail or fax. Push tactics also include pitching the media on story ideas in person or over the phone. News conferences also fall in the Push category. Push means you are the initiator. The degree of difficulty is higher with Push tactics because you are trying to create interest where none exists without your efforts. Among Push tactics, one of the most effective techniques is submitting editorials (longer op-ed articles or letters to the editor) because these are filtered less. There is a separate entry in this guide on op-ed articles.

- "Pull" activities are based on the demand that the media (or consumers on the Internet) have for your information. For example: a local foundation has just announced it's giving five nonprofits a $10,000 grant each, you being one of them; your local reporter may want to call someone (you!) to comment on how this will affect people in your organization. The degree of difficulty is reduced for Pull tactics because the reporter already is committed to a story and is seeking a source (you!) to provide information. So, a key to media relations is to position your organization for these opportunities using techniques we'll discuss in this guide.

5. Distributing your organization's message is easy and effective.

There are several ways to distribute news stories. One of the easiest and most effective methods is to call reporters and alert them to your news. Another effective distribution method is to target your pitch letter or e-mail to an individual who may have a specific interest in your news story and then follow-up with a phone call. There is more potential for a response to this method than sending a full press release.

Three other distribution methods for press releases include fax, U.S. postal mail and e-mail. While these methods can be "hit or miss," they are okay for routine announcements and can be utilized for little cost.

The key with using fax, mail and e-mail is the distribution list. Be certain that your list is accurate and comprehensive. As an example, rather than distributing to just the editor-in-chief of the paper, send your news also to the business editor, the features editor, the metro and local news editor and any other media personnel who may have a potential interest in your information.

A good mix of all distribution methods will ensure your highest potential for success. (Note: Snail mail is not yet obsolete for press releases; it still plays a useful role in the distribution mix.)

Often it's a good idea to give reporters your logo and some relevant pictures. A good procedure is to upload these images to an online service like Flickr.com and then put the link in your press release. Just briefly describe the image in your press release, i.e. "Headshot of John Smith available for download at www.flickr.com/ACMEnonprofit."

Advanced Tip:

Making a media pitch call.

The purpose of a pitch call is two-fold: 1) educate the media about your organization; 2) encourage them to do a specific story, or a story of their own idea that meets your objective. It's good, but not essential, to first send an e-mail summary before making a call.

There are three types of calls:

- **Spray and pray.** The term "spray and pray" is used when you simply blast out a press release and hope for the best. It's a technique used for routine press releases such as calendar listings, etc. In this case, in your follow-up calls, you just want to confirm that the person received a press release that you sent. Very often they will say they did not (even when they did). So tell them (don't ask) that you will re-send. Get their fax and/or e-mail. Resend. Also, update your database with their name and fax/e-mail if you don't already have it. Capture any useful feedback they volunteer, i.e. "We don't accept press releases because we only print ads" (like a penny saver publication).
- **Pitch calls.** These are a higher level of call. You want to interest the reporter in a specific story; a sample script is below. You need not reference the release right at the outset. Begin by getting the right person for the story you are pitching. Have a 15-second presentation ready as to why their readers/viewers/listeners would be interested in your news. Make it newsy! The script below offers more guidance.
- **Exclusives or advanced pitches.** Here you are calling a media outlet to offer them something no one else will get. Be careful with these, and use them sparingly. This requires some management analysis to determine whether/when an exclusive is appropriate.

SAMPLE SCRIPT for spray and pray:
"Hi, I'm Steve Cebalt, calling for the ACME Health Nonprofit. We sent a press release on a health care news item, and I'm calling to make sure it got there and that we sent it to the right person..." That's pretty much it – ad lib from there. All you want to do is ascertain that your list has the name of the right person. If your list lacks a name, this is a good time to get one, i.e. "We sent that to the newsroom – is there a specific person who should receive this type of news information?" Then you can update your database.

SAMPLE SCRIPT for pitch calls:
"Hi, I'm Steve Cebalt, calling for ACME Health Nonprofit. I have a news item that is likely to interest a large part of your (readership) (viewing audience) (audience). Our area has been chosen as a test market for a new nonprofit public health campaign focusing on arthritis. New statistics show that 1 in 3 people in our community has arthritis, so this information is likely to be of interest to a lot of (readers) (viewers) (listeners). This new public-health campaign uses TV and print announcements in your hometown to educate consumers about arthritis of the knee. People can call a special phone number 24 hours a day and speak with a qualified nurse, and take an arthritis assessment quiz. It is the first time the health field has waged a public campaign of this nature. We think this would make a good business or health story. I can put you in touch with a local surgeon to discuss the arthritis aspects of the campaign, or I can put you in touch with ACME Health Nonprofit executives if you want to focus more on the business aspects of this pilot program. I can send you a press release with more details."

Expect some negativity from reporters. Many reporters say they don't need follow-up calls on releases, for example. Yet experience shows time and again that making these calls drives up results by as much as 100 percent. Even reporters who respond negatively may go on to do a story. So don't take negativity personally; it's just part of the process and it's a numbers game. The more calls you make, the better your results. Be sure to always track and document everything from the call. All the information they offer may be important. Capture it in your database somehow (the data-capturing process may vary from project to project).

MODULE 2:
How to deliver your message to the media

This module is for you if:

- **You want to utilize op-ed articles as a PR tool**
- **You want to use your organization's website as an online newsroom**
- **You want to use a nonprofit TV Public Service Announcement**

This module discusses grassroots and often overlooked ways to get the media's attention. From creating an online newsroom to finding out more about how PSAs really work, this document will help you understand alternative ways to address the media and get your organization's name in the news.

Key Points:

- Delivering your organization's message in an op-ed article
- Utilizing your website as an online newsroom
- Recycling your press release to get the media to pick up your story
- Using grassroots media tactics to convey your message
- Using the News Digest format to increase the frequency of your press contacts without increasing the number of press releases you have to write
- Using the Media Memo format to help the media frame your issue the way you want them to grassroots media tactics to convey your message

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Steps:

1. Op-ed articles.

The opinion page, opposite the editorial page in most newspapers, is commonly overlooked as a PR tool. However, this space has the potential to provide your nonprofit organization with four to six publicity articles each year. If your article is under 700 words, you rarely risk your information being edited down for space. You can express opinions freely, making the opinion page a unique, largely unfiltered platform for delivering your message. Along with your commentary, you can include pictures, the organization's name and any other important details. If you have an opinion or a shared interest about something already in the news, this is an ideal way to link that interest to something people are already talking about.

2. Online news room.

To develop good relations with the media, you want to make information easy for them to access. One way to do this is through an online news room. On your organization's website homepage, you can include a link for "media" or "news room." Now at their quick disposal, the media will find everything they need from press releases and photos to organizational background information. In our experience this simple website page will make the exchange of information between your organization and media much more seamless and efficient.

For those who have trouble getting their websites updated frequently, a blog can operate as an online newsroom. If you can send an e-mail with an attachment, you can manage a blog, without the need for a webmaster. For details on this option, look at another one of our courses, “Facebook? MySpace? Blogs?” for an in-depth explanation of how to set up and operate a blog.

3. Media recycling.

On any given day, outside factors may affect whether or not your press release will be picked up by the media. If a flurry of breaking news has filled the day, this doesn't mean your message has to be lost. If your news is important, then try to find a way to "recycle" your story. This can be done by simply changing the headline, releasing on a different day, or adding a more compelling component to your press release. The key for success is to be aware of what's happening in the news around you and then make your decision on when and how to release your news. And if it doesn't work the first time, try it again with a slightly different headline and introduction! It's good to recycle.

4. PSAs – and how to use them.

A nonprofit TV Public Service Announcement is free to your organization and can be customized with your logo by your local TV station with little effort. While many nonprofits undervalue PSAs because of the belief that they are shown only in the off hours, this is in fact not the case. A recent study showed that nonprofit PSAs are given good spots during all day-parts. The key variables are the quality of the announcement - and your relationship with the local media! (Again this emphasizes that the relationship you build with reporters and media decision-makers is the most important factor in your success).

- Be aware that often the person at the TV station who decides if and when PSAs are run is not a reporter, but rather a person in the programming or public affairs department. Be bold and ask the station for a report detailing when the PSA aired, explaining that you want the information to properly acknowledge their support and to accurately report their generous contribution of airtime. If you spend any money with that outlet, you may expect your PSA to run far more often as a result!
- This is not true of news coverage. Whether you spend money with a media outlet or not will usually not factor into their coverage decisions. Some small papers and magazines weigh your ad spending when deciding about news, but most dailies and larger news outlets have a solid wall between the advertising and newsroom departments.

By the way, we offer a related course, YouTube Your Site, where we show you how to use YouTube to find existing PSAs produced by the Ad Council that you can use both on TV and on your Website. You can often find existing PSAs, produced by top ad agencies, that you can use for free in your local market, and via a YouTube video embedded on your website.

5. Grassroots media.

When you think of "The Media," don't limit yourself to newspapers, radio and TV stations. In many markets, especially smaller ones, you can achieve more by cooperating with banks and utilities to include your message as inserts with their bills; or by having grocery stores, Home Depot and other retailers insert fliers into sacks at the checkout. The library can be a real ally in many communities. Schools may be willing to send information home with students, and churches may also be very supportive with inserts in their bulletins, if the message is appropriate. These are all forms of grassroots media and should be seen as every bit as important – maybe more important – than traditional media outlets. Many small nonprofit organizations publish and mail their own newsletters and e-newsletters, which is the ultimate form of media – you control what it says, when it is published, and to whom it is sent!

6. News conferences.

This method is not a favorite for the media, nor is it a great tool for conveying your message, but news conferences can be helpful if used sparingly and structured appropriately. They should be short, around 5-10 minutes, and only used for large announcements. It's best to simply make the announcement, and then, rather than a public question-answer time, make yourself available for private, one-on-one interviews with reporters. Have just one or two spokespersons who make brief comments, and hand out a press release with all the details. Announce the press conference with a Media Alert – a document that simply states that your organization is having a press conference, where, when – and why! Don't give away your story, but you have to give the editors enough of an idea so they can decide whether to commit precious staff time to covering it.

6a. Another news conference tip.

Our recommendation is to give reporters as much information as they want about our news announcement, in advance – i*f they ask.* This helps them prepare a better story than having to rush the story on a deadline. We fully understand that we take a risk that some media outlet will use the story ahead of time, and in fact this happens often. And you know what? It doesn't hurt the media attendance at the press conference at all. The advance publicity actually seems to help overall. And if another media outlet were to complain that we gave a competitor the info ahead of time, we'd simply say that the competitor took the initiative to ask for it, and our job is to provide reporters with information! As long as everyone is treated equally, this works very well and increases media coverage. **BUT THERE IS AN EXCEPTION!** Some announcements are very time-sensitive, such as the naming of a new CEO, etc. In a case where advance publicity would be harmful, we don't share anything with anyone, ever, period. We also don't offer information on an "embargoed" basis, which means giving it to a reporter with a gentlemen's agreement that they won't publish it ahead of time. That's too risky when the news is confidential. But most of the time, you are holding a news conference to make a splash, and if a reporter wants to do the story ahead of time, encourage it! The goal is not getting people to attend your news conference, after all – it's getting the reporters to do a story. The news conference is just a means to that end.

6b. And about those "press kits..."

A lot of PR people get spun up about the "press kit" to be handed out at a press conference. Many PR firms charge big bucks to create elaborate binders with loads of stuff for the reporters. Press kits are a waste of time. They are outdated – they are a relic from the pre-Internet era. Today, if a reporter needs more info, they can go to your website. So all you want to hand out at a press conference is one well-written press release that has everything the reporter needs to prepare a good story. Anything else you give them merely competes for their attention, and they may end up writing about things you care little about. Do yourself a favor: Just make sure the press release has all the background info they need, and the reporters will be delighted, and you'll save yourself a lot of needless hassle.

6c. Don't forget the picture!

Here's one more way to simplify your press-conference preparation. As we noted under the section on press-release distribution, it's a good idea to give reporters your logo and some relevant pictures. A good procedure is to upload these images to a free online service like Flickr and then put the link in your press release, so reporters can download the images. Just briefly describe the image in your press release, i.e. "Headshot of John Smith available for download at www.flickr.com/ACMEnonprofit."

Advanced Tip:

The News Digest.

This is a one-page document that is formatted like a press release, but instead of the full text of a press release, you only need to write a headline and a few sentences to entice reporters' interest. You can get three or four of these briefings on one sheet of paper. The briefings do have to be very well written, but it is certainly less time-consuming than doing a full press release. If they want to do a story, reporters can contact you for an interview or for a full press release. Do this monthly or as often as your news conditions warrant.

BONUS TIP:

The Media Memo.

Let's say the media keep missing an important point, or have failed to cover an important issue adequately. Borrow a trick from the politicians and send a "Media Memo." This is a statement that suggests to the reporters a new way of looking at things – a new question to ask. Often, when you watch TV news and hear an anchor posing a question to a candidate, the question was submitted by the opposition in a Media Memo. The Memo itself is not meant for publication, but rather to help educate reporters on an angle that has been overlooked.

MODULE 3:
How to get better results from the media

This module is for you if:

- **You want to find a new way to position a news story**
- **You want helpful hints for answering reporters' calls**
- **You want to learn how national and state news can serve as platforms for your nonprofit**
- **You want to learn about a press release send-out strategy and checklist**

This module offers more advanced tips on packaging your news, such as submitting photos with your story and attaching your news to state and national trends. In addition, this document features a checklist that can help you decide which PR strategy to use and guides you through the steps needed so you don't overlook any of the small but important details.

Key Points:

- Enhancing your press release with a good photo and headline
- Putting the right face on your story
- Responding to a reporter's call
- Sending out press releases
- Taking advantage of national, state and other news

Steps:

1. Photos first, then headline, then the story.

Here's a good tip: Before writing one word of a press release, consider "What picture would tell this story?" A press release with a decent photo (or idea for a photo) is worth much more to a reporter than one with just text. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words.

With newsrooms increasingly short-staffed, more of them are using photos submitted by newsmakers rather than photos they have to go and take themselves. Other newspapers still prefer to take their own pictures, but your photo will suggest to them that the story warrants a photo. A photo can elevate your story from a briefing buried on an inside page to the front of a section, or maybe the front page!

Once you have a photo in mind, consider the headline. The reporters won't use your headline, but your headline positions the story in their minds as either important or not. Once you have a photo and a headline in mind, THEN you are ready to write a great press release.

2. Put the RIGHT face on your story.

One of the biggest mistakes that small nonprofit organizations make is telling their story "by the numbers." The number of people you serve or the number of outputs is really not useful to reporters because they have no context for such data. Instead, break it down to the individual. To do this, your organization must have a system for collecting success stories.

Most of the time, rather than focusing on people in poverty, for example, your case is best supported by stories that focus on people who represent "the system," such as:

- The business owner who offers benefits such as high quality, affordable early care and health care, rather than the workers who benefit from these programs, or employees at a competing company who cannot care for their sick children.
- A program manager that is trying to create good jobs rather than the people who are unemployed.
- The job trainer rather than the people who attend his or her classes.

Extensive research shows that consumers respond much more favorably to stories that portray a solution-oriented "difference-maker" than stories about someone's suffering. When using actual stories, the purpose is not just to demonstrate how needy or desperate your clients are, but to show how you are at the center of a solution. This is best done by focusing on the people who operate programs that help clients.

However you do it, don't make the mistake of trotting out a bunch of numbers and data and overlooking your key media-relations asset – stories of individual people changing lives for the better as a result of your efforts.

Also, be sure that if you use real people in your press materials or offer them up to reporters as interview subjects, you get them to sign a release form drafted by your attorney and that you comply with all privacy and compliance standards that may apply. Consult an attorney for details, since we are not able to provide legal advice in any way and every nonprofit's situation in this regard is unique.

3. The moment of truth: when the phone rings.

When a reporter calls you, consider it a prime opportunity. He or she is already planning a story – you don't have to sell them on your news. You just need to be ready to respond. We're often faced with these calls and we've compiled a list of tips to help answer reporters' questions effectively:

- Respond quickly. Reporters are always in a hurry – treat their calls with urgency before they call someone else to get the quote or comment they need.

- Ask this question: "What is the issue that drove you to call me?" Note that the key word is ISSUE, not topic. Explain that to answer accurately, you need to understand the context of the piece. This can keep you from getting quoted in a negative article when you were expecting something else. Always understand the issue the reporter is writing about before commenting.

- After you get the answer about the issue, say, "John, could I call you back in 5 minutes?" Get off the phone for a few minutes to collect your thoughts and any relevant data or facts. Based on the issue and your organization's strategic goals, what is the best comment you can make?

What audience do you want to influence with your comment? What is the most interesting way to say it? Try to make your comment "quotable" and lively. Avoid jargon and "sector-speak." Talk about how your organization is affecting real people. Write your statement down. Have a key phrase that you want the reporter to use. Use it more than once in your answers to his or her questions when you call back. Say it slowly and clearly so he or she can write it down.

- Don't provide much more than what they ask! The more you say, the less likely that your key phrase or quote will be chosen. Stick to the topic. Most phone interviews will be just a couple minutes long. Unless they ask, don't educate them on the entire sector - just give a quote-worthy answer to their question and get off the phone. Success!

- When you have to say "no comment," use other phrasing and explain why. Don't be afraid to say, "We are just not the right ones to answer that question," or "I don't know," or "We're not able to discuss details yet." Of course, sometimes you are legally or otherwise obliged to answer questions, but most of the time you have some control. Comment whenever you can, but there are times when some variation of "no comment" is the only appropriate thing to say.

4. PR is a numbers game, within limits.

How often should you contact reporters? The answer: As often as you have a legitimate reason to do so. Some organizations that do a lot of events (something with a date, place and time) send 200 press releases a year! Just beware of press-release fatigue. If all your press releases look and seem similar, media outlets will give them less weight. Mix up your techniques with a combination of phone calls, e-mails with links of interest or background info, notes in the mail, examples of stories done in other markets on the same topic you want to promote, etc.

- One tip is to use the News Digest technique mentioned previously in this guide to reduce the overall volume of press releases. Change the format and look of your releases. It's a good idea NOT to put your logo on your releases – just send them on blank white paper; this forces reporters to read them rather than dismissing them on a busy day because they see the logo and aren't in the mood for an announcement from your agency.

- Also, you don't always have to send a press release. Make phone calls, send short e-mails with story ideas, and use other outreach tactics.

- The more you contact reporters, the better off you'll be, because to a large extent PR is a relationship business – and it's a numbers game, too. Your great press release may not get published if there are other big news events on a particular day, so frequency is part of the formula for success. Just change up the tactics so you don't look like you're sending the same stuff all the time; use all the tools in this guide!

Advanced Tip:

The gift of national, state and other news.

If there's a story on your local TV station about the harsh winter coming up, that's a great platform for you to follow-up with a reporter about free or low-cost home-weatherization solutions offered through your small nonprofit organization. In our experience "The Trend Is Your Friend." Watch the national news and let reporters know how your organization is addressing the issue in your community.

Bonus Tip:

Do-It-Yourself Nonprofit Press Release Strategy and Checklist

Strategy:

What is your story? ____

What photo would help tell this story?______________________________________

What would be your dream headline? ____

Who is your audience? ____

Given the above information, what is the best way to get your story out?

☐ Phone calls to reporters

☐ Pitch letter/e-mail

☐ Exclusive offer to individual news outlet

☐ Press release

☐ Press conference

Press Release Checklist:

☐ Name of organization

☐ Label: For Immediate Release or Media Alert

☐ Note about photo availability or photo opportunity.

☐ Contact: phone number, address, date

☐ Headline: describe the content of the story

☐ Body: where the actual story goes

☐ Ends or ###: This indicates the end of the press release

☐ "Boilerplate": Additional Information: background information about your organization

Follow-Up:

☐ Phone calls/e-mails to reporters after news sent out

☐ Document answers from reporters

☐ Create online News Alerts (see the course on Communications Research for a description of how to set up automated online news alert systems)

☐ Recycle your story on another day if you don't get good results the first time you try!