

Working with the Media

Online, print and broadcast media is a valuable way to raise awareness of a missing person and to keep the search for them active.

Missing People can help you to make informed decisions about working with the media and can also help to facilitate communication on your behalf.

The following guidance attempts to inform families with a missing loved one about the potential outcomes of using the media, advise on how to get the most out of any interactions with the media, and to offer practical guidance relating to how the media works and your rights you have.

Whether you choose to contact the media is a personal decision. It is certainly one of the speediest and most effective ways of reaching a large audience. The experience of having to deal with journalists, answer personal questions about your missing person and yourself and being thrown into the media spotlight may not be one you feel you can handle. We will support your decision either way.

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For further information and guidance on the issues addressed in this guidance sheet, or for support relating to any aspect of someone going missing, call Missing People's free and confidential 24 hour helpline on **116 000** or email 116000@missingpeople.org.uk

Whilst this information has been provided in good faith, it should not be taken as legal advice. For information tailored to your circumstances, please contact your police force, solicitor or an advisory organisation as appropriate to your query.

Should I contact the media to help with my search?

Different journalists have different interviewing and reporting techniques and styles. Whilst most journalists will be sympathetic, some may behave in ways which seem insensitive to what you are going through. You should think about whether you want your circumstances or the circumstances of your missing loved one made public. It is likely that you'll be asked probing and personal questions about your missing person so it's worth thinking about how this will make both you and your missing person feel.

Though some cases will attract lots of media attention, in other cases it can be very difficult to gain any media interest at all. Whilst this can be frustrating, we can support you in ensuring the local search is effective and coordinated, with or without the interest and support of the mainstream media.

We are happy to offer advice to help you reach an informed decision but the following may be helpful when considering your options:

What are the advantages of using the media?

- People may report sightings or be able to provide other valuable information
- The missing person may see or hear any message you wish to send them and choose to make contact if they know you are worried for their safety
- You may get some comfort from feeling you are doing all you can to find them
- Other families in the same situation may come forward to offer support
- Continuing coverage will keep the search fresh in people's minds

And what are the drawbacks?

- Media interest may feel overwhelming, intrusive or frightening and you may feel that your privacy has been invaded
- There is no guarantee that your story will be used or that it will be represented in the way that you would like so you may feel that you are losing control of an already out of control situation
- The missing person may not welcome the attention or wish to be 'found' and it can be hard for someone who has been missing to then 'walk back into their life' knowing that extensive publicity about them has been distributed
- Publicity may put already vulnerable people at even greater risk by forcing them further away if they do not wish to be found – this is a decision that the police can help you make

First Steps

I want to involve the media in my search. Where do I start?

Who do you call and what do you say when you get through to the right person? Which are the best sites to make an appeal online? How can Missing People help reach as many people as possible?

Before you begin

- Decide whether this kind of publicity will be the best thing for you and the person who is away. Consider what impact it may have on your life, on those around you, and on the well-being and safety of the missing person themselves
- If you choose to use publicity to search for your missing person, ask Missing People to make a poster and web appeal which you can use as the basis for other press releases
- Discuss any plans you have with the police. Agree with them about what information should be shared and what is best kept private
- Choose photos of the missing person which are clear images of their head and shoulders
- Give careful consideration before offering precious images for use by the media as the memory of the image may remind you of when they were missing

First steps

- Choose the media outlets you are going to approach. Your reasons for contacting a particular outlet might be based on circulation, readership, familiarity, personal preference or that of the peer group of your missing person
- If you prefer to contact media outlets directly, the contact details of any publication including telephone numbers and email addresses will be available on their website
- A telephone call may produce a quicker response than an email. The best person to speak to on a newspaper, radio or television programme is the News Editor or any other journalist on the News Desk. If you don't immediately get through, ask for the name of the appropriate person, their direct line and request that they call you back urgently. If they don't, keep trying until you get through to them
- Although you don't have to get permission from the police to work with the media, it can be easier to manage the search effort and co-ordinate information if you have the support of the police in doing so, particularly in the case of press conferences and television appeals

How do I get the media interested immediately?

- It's an unfortunate reality that the media will be more inclined to publish an appeal for some missing people more than others. Your story is more likely to be run if it is thought that readers will empathise with the particular circumstances. There may be less interest if the person has gone missing before, for example
- Newspapers and magazines often base their stories on a 'hook'. Did your missing person have any special talents? Did they go missing from a specific place or close to the date of a particular event or anniversary? Is their disappearance totally out of character? Do you suspect they may be in a particular area? What message do you want to convey to them right now?

Next steps

Having contacted your chosen media, the ideal outcome is that you manage to get through first time to the News Editor and they agree to run your appeal quickly and sensitively. But that doesn't always happen. Editors are often frantically busy or working to a deadline and may not call you back straight away or even seem that keen to help in your search for your missing person.

Try not to feel disheartened or take it personally if one particular publication or programme doesn't show the level of interest that you would like. It might just be that the story doesn't fit their 'readership profile' in terms of the age, history or gender of your missing person but there may be another publication whose readers will be able to empathise more and who will be happy to run an appeal.

Social networks are another way of reaching a huge audience and enabling anyone with information or possible sightings to respond to you immediately. The team at Missing People can advise on how you can use social media safely and to the best effect.

Working with Journalists

The best way of publicising your appeal quickly and in the manner you want it to appear is to develop a friendly relationship with journalists who want to interview you. The importance of maintaining boundaries and not being persuaded into doing or saying anything you don't want to cannot be over-emphasised however. Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple 'I don't want to go into that' should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with.

Preparing yourself

- You can turn down any interview and you don't have to say why. If it doesn't feel right, don't agree to an interview
- Not all publications will agree to it but it's worth asking for what is called 'copy approval' – a guarantee that the journalist will read the finished article he or she writes back to you before publication and allow you to raise any concerns you may have
- Be aware that any photographs of your missing person that you give to a journalist will become public property. Whilst you will obviously need to provide one or two so that people can see what your missing person looks like, it is advisable to protect your and their privacy by not allowing free access to your photographs
- Any quote you give during the interview can be used for publication. If there is anything you don't want included, make a mental note to avoid even mentioning it. Likewise it can be useful to note down any facts you consider vital for the appeal and definitely want published
- Be aware that if someone does wish to run an appeal, they may approach other people for additional information about your missing person. They may also present the story in a different way to what you expect, using a different 'angle' or including a sensational headline for example

Coping with the spotlight

- However much it may work in your favour when searching for a missing person, interacting with the press can feel intimidating if you are not used to it. It may be a good idea to have someone with you who is more removed from the situation to step in and answer questions if necessary, and provide support.
- If you have reported your person as missing to the police, they may suggest or be able to help you arrange a press conference on neutral territory
- Be aware that if you choose to involve the media, you will automatically come under a degree of scrutiny yourself and this can feel intrusive. People may recognise or approach you in public for example

Interviews

One of the first decisions you will have to make is whether or not you are comfortable with the idea of being interviewed in your own home. Some people may find the familiarity of being on their own territory reassuring. To others, the idea of having strangers in their personal space at a time of great distress may feel intrusive. A compromise might be the more neutral space of the home of a family member or friend, or a public space such as a café or park.

Either way, a journalist is going to ask you several questions, some of which you can anticipate and be ready to answer. These may include 'has the person has gone missing before?', 'what do you think happened to them?' and 'do you believe they are still alive?'. Below are some of the things you are likely to be asked to provide:

- Your missing person's date of birth, full name and any names they are known to use
- A physical description of your missing person and of the clothes he or she was wearing when last seen
- The place they were last seen if known
- The most recent colour photographs you have
- As much personal information as you are willing to provide
- A contact number for people to ring with possible sightings. We would recommended only providing the contact number for Missing People and the police as this number will be shared publicly so you should avoid providing you own telephone number

Choosing which information to you disclose

Any information you disclose to a journalist may become public. Consider how your missing person will feel if details of their relationships, sexuality, financial problems, health or criminal record were made public. Was this information told to you in confidence and would the person wish it to be known generally?

You may be asked questions about their physical or mental health such as 'Were they depressed'? or 'Had they been diagnosed with any illness?' If you don't want to go into detail, one possible answer is to simply say that they take medication on a regular basis or had been 'unwell' to describe any health issue.

Bear in mind how your missing person might react if he or she heard your appeal. Try to make the message to them positive and encouraging instead of one that might cause them to feel shame, guilt, resentment or pressure.

Answer what you consider to be fair and relevant questions in as much detail as you choose but a simple 'I don't want to go into that' should stop any line of questioning you are unhappy with.

What happens afterwards?

It's normal at a distressing time to feel emotionally drained after an interview. Talking to a stranger about your feelings and concerns for the safety of your missing person may leave you feeling exhausted and upset.

- Try to pace yourself so you can gather your strength and have some private recovery time. Your physical and mental resources are going to be limited right now and the fresher you feel during any dealings with the media, the more effective you will be
- Don't hesitate to call the journalist if questions or concerns occur to you after the interview
- Keep the journalist informed of any new sightings or information
- Prepare yourself for mixed emotions when the copy is read back to you or you see the article in print. You may find this more distressing than you expect

If you are approached by a spokesperson who offers their services

Using a media spokesperson can relieve a lot of these pressures but only if it is someone you feel you can trust and is genuinely going to act in your best interests. Find out as much as you can about their reputation, contacts, whether they have acted for anyone else in your situation, exactly what they are offering to do to help you and how they intend to go about it in order to make a decision.

There are several advantages in saying yes:

- They will be very media savvy and have extensive contacts and established relationships within the press
- It will save you the time you would otherwise spend trying to find out who to talk to on a newspaper or television station
- Using a professional to act as your spokesperson will free you from dealing with journalists if you don't feel able to cope with it

The main disadvantage is that you may feel you are losing control of the situation. You may also not want someone who does not know your missing person speaking on your behalf.

Trust your instincts. Is the person someone you wish to have a lot of contact with? Do you like/feel you can trust them to act in your best interests? Are they genuinely sympathetic and supportive to your situation? Ask him or her to spell out clearly the terms on which they are offering to help, including any costs that are involved.

Maintaining Media Interest

We will maintain our appeal for information about your missing person for as long as you wish on our website, through our Facebook and Twitter accounts and poster campaigns.

In the first few days after your missing person has disappeared, your contact with the media may be frequent. But if your missing person has not been found within a few weeks, it's important to be aware that the media attention may wane and you will have to work to keep the appeal active. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Think of ways to move the public to continue support. These might include significant birthdays (especially if your missing person is a child or young person), monthly or annual anniversaries of the disappearance, International Day of the Disappeared on 30th August or International Missing Children's Day on 25th May
- Prepare a press release to coincide with important or new developments involving your missing person such as birth of a grandchild, events in the life of their children such as graduation, illness in the family. Send it to all the journalists you dealt with when you first launched your appeal
- Give the story of your missing person a new 'slant'. Consider asking a high profile individual such as politician or celebrity to help by making a further appeal for information and continuing to raise awareness
- In collaboration with the police, announce any developments, recent sightings or new information separately to help spread coverage over a longer period of time
- Keep a list of the names and mobile phone numbers of journalists you felt comfortable with so you can stay in contact with them should they move from one publication to another
- If your missing person has been missing for some time, you may wish to consider circulating an age-progressed image to raise awareness of how they might look now. Missing People can advise you on how to go about this

Advice for TV Interviews

By Julie Etchingham of ITV News



“My first piece of advice for you if you’re going to be interviewed is try not to be intimidated and try to relax. You are there because people really want to hear your story and your personal experience – you are not there for a grilling! Take it as a great opportunity to tell your story passionately, and make your argument persuasively and clearly.

First of all it’s important to understand what type of interview you are being asked to do, and on what type of programme it will appear. A face-to-face chat on the Daybreak sofa is quite different to a down-the-line interview with Sky News. The interview may be broadcast live, or it may be pre-recorded. If it’s pre-recorded, the broadcaster may wish to run all of it, or only a short clip. It’s important to establish exactly what type of interview it is, so don’t be afraid to ask the producer or researcher beforehand.

Live face-to-face

This is likely to be in a studio, where you’ll be brought onto the set to sit shortly before the interview begins. It means you may not be able to chat to the presenter beforehand, but you will have an opportunity to speak to a producer, who should be able to let you know how long the interview is likely to be and the areas of questioning.

Before the interview think through the main points you wish to get across, as well as how you’d like to tell your personal story. But don’t think about taking any notes on set with you, as you’ll be too tempted to look down at them! The interviewer is there to get the best out of you and will quickly step in if you lose track.

If the interview is only two-three minutes long, think carefully about the essential points you need to communicate.

You'll have a microphone attached to you by a sound recordist. For women I would strongly advise wearing a jacket and skirt or trousers - a dress or blouse can be tricky to get the microphone on without running the wire underneath!

Don't look at any of the cameras – just concentrate on looking at the interviewer, or if you are being interviewed alongside someone else – look at whoever is speaking.

Try to be as chatty as possible, but not long winded....and avoid answering a simple yes or no. Make sure you get the best out of your time on air!

Pre-recorded face-to-face

My advice is pretty much the same as for the above. This interview however may be edited, so make sure you answer in full sentences, in case they lift one clip out of it and put it into a news report. The best soundbites are 15-20 seconds long – so if there is a key message you wish to make, think carefully beforehand about how you can fit it in during that time. For guidance, most people speak at about 3 words per second.

Also – if the item is pre-recorded, don't be afraid to ask to do an answer again if you're not happy with it. Most broadcasters simply want you to express yourself in the best way possible, so if it takes a second go, then so be it!

Again – don't look at the camera – keep looking at the interviewer.

Live down-the-line interview

This is used a lot by news channels. You may find the channel is happy to send a camera crew to your home. If you're happy with this, you may have to find a quiet spot in either a garden or sitting room, with the phones off!

You will need to stand directly in front of the camera and look straight into the lens. A sound recordist will pin a microphone on you, and also give you an earpiece which they'll help you to put in. You'll be able to hear the interviewer, and possibly the gallery but never both at the same time.

You'll need to keep looking straight down the lens of the camera for all of the interview – don't be tempted to look to the side or to look down, as this can look a little strange. And keep looking in for a few seconds even after you've been thanked at the end of the interview.

In conclusion...

These are just a few notes to give you some reassurance before you embark on interviews. By and large, TV newsrooms and feature programmes are very friendly places – so never be afraid to ask if you're unsure about anything, or need more information."