

Promoting volunteering: Experiences of liaising with the media on volunteering issues

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Action Media Unit**



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The Institute for Volunteering Research

The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) is a specialist research and consultancy agency on volunteering. IVR is an initiative of Volunteering England and the University of East London. It was set up in 1997 in response to the increased demand for research on volunteering. Over the past nine years IVR has carried out a wide variety of research, consultancy, and evaluation projects on many different aspects of volunteering. For more information see: www.ivr.org.uk

The Voluntary Action Media Unit

The Voluntary Action Media Unit (VAMU) is a three year project funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Set up to investigate the relationship between the voluntary sector and the media, the project was conceived by and is now managed by TimeBank. TimeBank's partners in the project are the Media Trust and the Institute for Volunteering Research. For more information about VAMU visit: www.vamu.org.uk

1. Introduction

This report presents the results of two surveys, one conducted with Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) and the other with Volunteer Development Agencies¹ (VDAs) by the Institute for Volunteering Research in March/April 2006. The aim of the surveys was to gauge the extent to which organisations liaise with the media to promote volunteering, the barriers they experience in doing so and what they need to improve or develop the way they engage with the media on volunteering issues.

This research builds on a previous study conducted by the Voluntary Action Media Unit (VAMU) which investigated the relationship between charities, the media and commercial PR agencies². This research found that while many who work in charities had positive experiences when working the media, others felt that there was a lack of understanding about the voluntary/NGO sector as a whole. This piece of research focuses on the experiences of VIOs and VDAs in liaising with the media specifically in the promotion of volunteering.

1.1 Methodology

Two online surveys were sent to Volunteering England members in March 2006 - one to VDAs and one to VIOs. In addition, the survey for VIOs was sent to organisations through VAMU's networks and the UK Volunteer Programme Managers e-forum.

In total, 97 useable surveys were returned from VDAs (representing a 27% response rate) and 172 surveys were returned from VIOs (a response rate cannot be estimated as the survey was passed through a number of networks).

VDA responses

Forty two percent of responding VDAs defined themselves as an independent organisation, while 57% were integrated with another organisation (for example, with a Council for Voluntary Service).

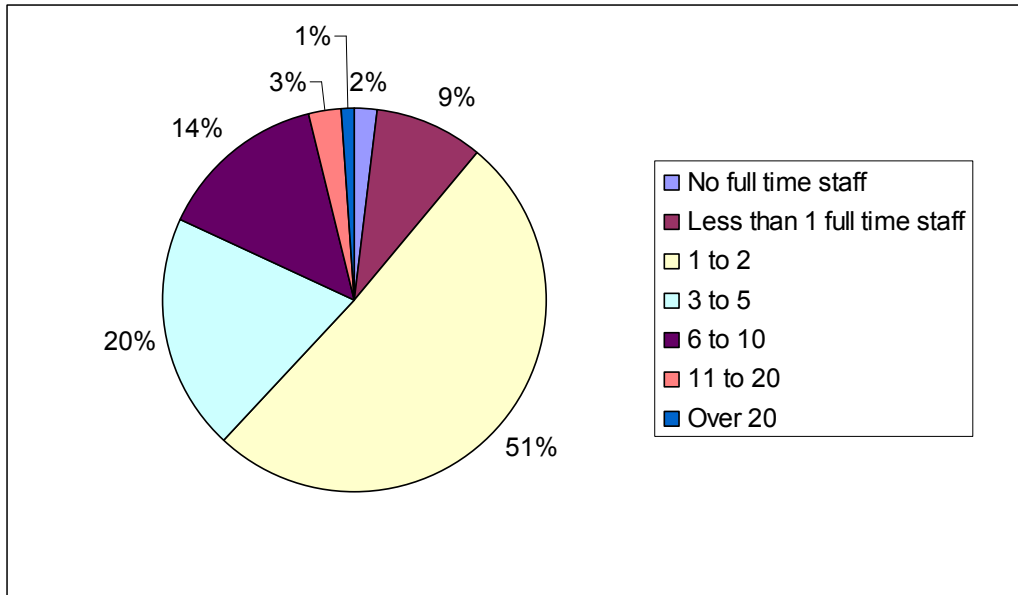
Those responding to the survey were most commonly Managers (44%), while 28% were Volunteer Co-ordinators, 7% Directors and 5% worked in PR, marketing or media.

The majority of responding VDAs (62%) had two full time equivalent staff or less (figure 1).

¹ Volunteer Development Agencies most commonly referred to as Volunteer Centres provide support to volunteers and volunteer involving organisations at a local level. They are responsible for the brokerage of volunteering opportunities, marketing volunteering, good practice development, developing volunteering opportunities, campaigning and developing the strategic direction of volunteering at the local level.

² See report: Voluntary Action Media Unit (2005) Culture Clash? An investigation of the relationship between charities, the media and commercial PR agencies www.vamu.org.uk

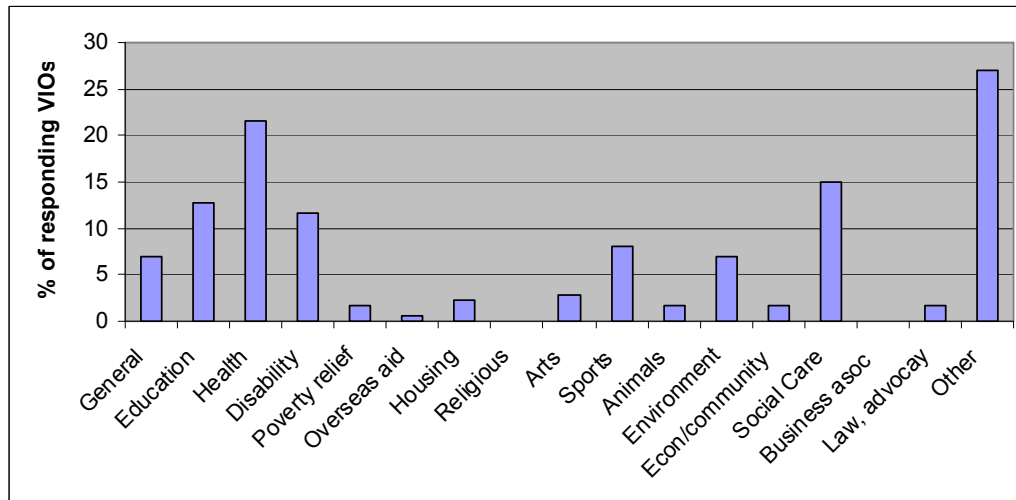
Figure 1: Number of staff in responding VDA organisations



VIO responses

Volunteer Involving Organisations from the voluntary and public sectors responded to the survey and represented a wide range of fields (figure 2). A high proportion of responses came from health and social care fields (37%). A number of organisations said that they could not categorise their main field of work under the classifications given with many indicating that they worked with specific groups of people, in particular young and older people.

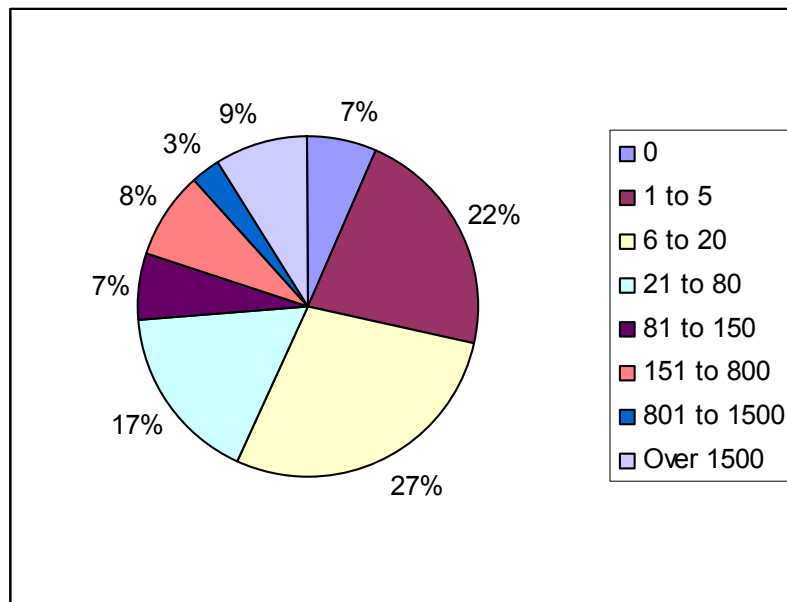
Figure 2: Main fields of work for responding VIOs



The responding VIOs represented a good spread of organisations in terms of income. One in five (19%) had an annual income of £10,000 - £100,000, 28% £100,000 - £1 million, 26% £1 million - £10 million and 20% had an annual income of over £10 million.

Different sizes of organisations were also well represented in the responses, from small organisations with no full time staff to large national organisations with thousands of employees (figure 3). The majority of responding organisations (56%) had between 0 and 20 staff.

Figure 3: Number of employees in responding VIOs



Many of the respondents who completed the survey were directly responsible for volunteers, 42% were Volunteer Co-ordinators, 19% were Managers, 12% were working in marketing or media departments and 10% were Directors. The majority of respondents indicated that they were responsible for communicating with the media on volunteering, either solely or alongside others in their organisation. However, 13% said that this was someone else's responsibility and 4% did not have anyone in their organisation whose role it was to communicate with the media on volunteering issues.

1.2 Structure of the report

This report is structured in three parts. Following this introduction, section two will summarise the key findings from the research, this will include a discussion of the barriers faced by organisations in their liaison with the media. The results of the two surveys are presented together, however it should be noted that in some cases the questions asked of VDAs and VIOs varied and as such the results for some issues cannot be compared. The final section will draw out some conclusions from the research.

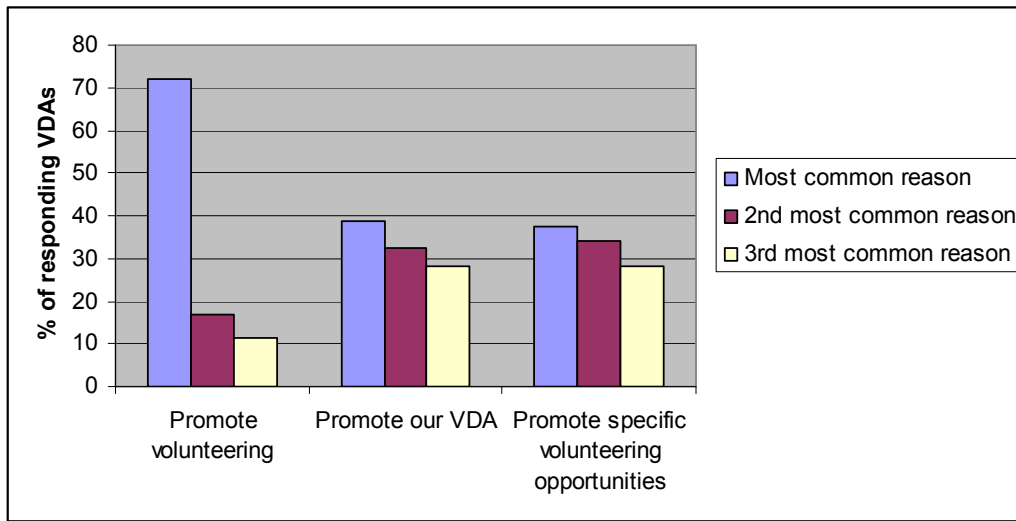
2. Findings from the surveys

2.1 Reasons for liaising with the media

Most responding organisations liaised with the media to get coverage of volunteering stories (89% of VDAs and 84% of VIOs). A less common activity was using the media to place advertisements for volunteers, although this was clearly important (54% of VDAs and 48% of VIOs used the media in this way).

The survey revealed that VDAs were most likely to use the media to promote volunteering (72%), although publicising the work of their organisation and promoting specific volunteering opportunities were also important motivators for approaching the media (figure 4). VDAs also indicated that they publicised events such as Volunteers Week, promoted publications or initiatives, and celebrated achievements through the use of the media. VIOs were not explicitly asked about their motivations for media liaison.

Figure 4: Most common reasons for VDAs to liaise with the media



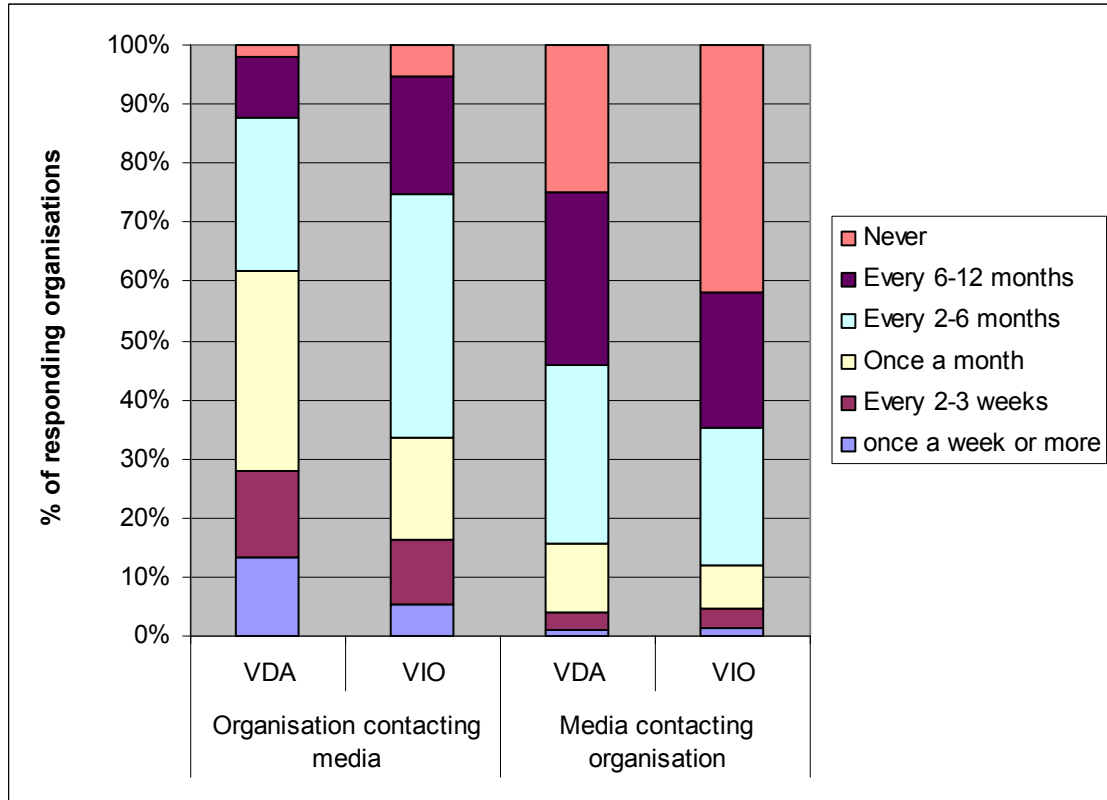
No of responding VDAs = 97

2.2 Level of contact with the media

The organisations responding to the survey reported that they contacted the media more frequently than the media contacted them about volunteering issues (figure 5). Sixty two percent of VDAs said that they approached the media once a month or more but only 16% said that the media contacted them at this frequency. VIOs tended to approach the media less regularly than VDAs to get coverage of volunteering. Thirty-four percent of VIOs said that they got in touch with the media once a month or more and 12% reported that the media contacted them at this level of regularity.

Few of the organisations indicated that they never approached the media about volunteering issues (2% of VDAs and 5% of VIOs) however a significant number reported that the media never contacted them (25% of VDAs and 42% of VIOs).

Figure 5: Frequency of media contact



No of responding VDAs = 97, No of responding VIOs = 167

2.3 Coverage and types of media

Local media was the most popular medium used by organisations to get coverage of volunteering stories. Local and regional newspapers were in particular targeted (70% of VDAs and 53% of VIOs said that they approached local or regional newspapers regularly). Local magazines, newsletters and local radio were also popular (34% of VDAs and 26% of VIOs regularly contacted local or regional radio about volunteering stories). VIOs were more likely to approach trade or sector press than VDAs.

Fewer organisations made contact with the national media. This was particularly the case for VDAs, probably due to their regional focus and in many cases smaller budgets. One in five VIOs said they regularly approached national media to get coverage of volunteering in the media, while one in forty VDAs did so (figure 6 and 7). Several organisations commented that they thought it was more effective to engage with local rather than national media to get coverage for their organisation or to promote volunteering. One VIO, for example, said:

At the national level we get some coverage however, this tends to have little effective local impact. We need to gain more local / regional coverage that focuses on our specific needs.....so that we can truly help young people succeed and achieve potential in this area.

Another noted:

As we are a local charity, we do not usually deal with national media, and local knowledge and contacts are usually the most important issue.

Figure 6: Types of media approached by VDAs

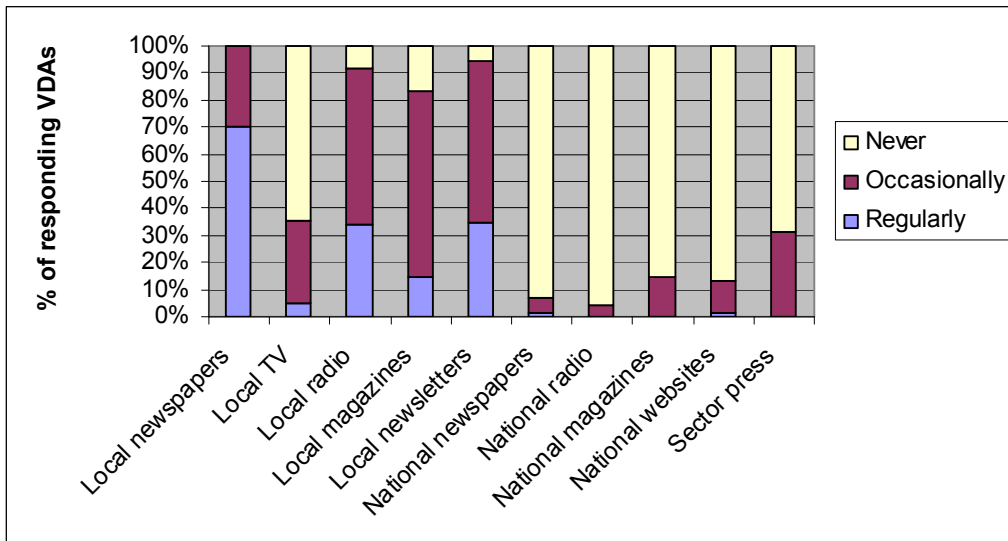
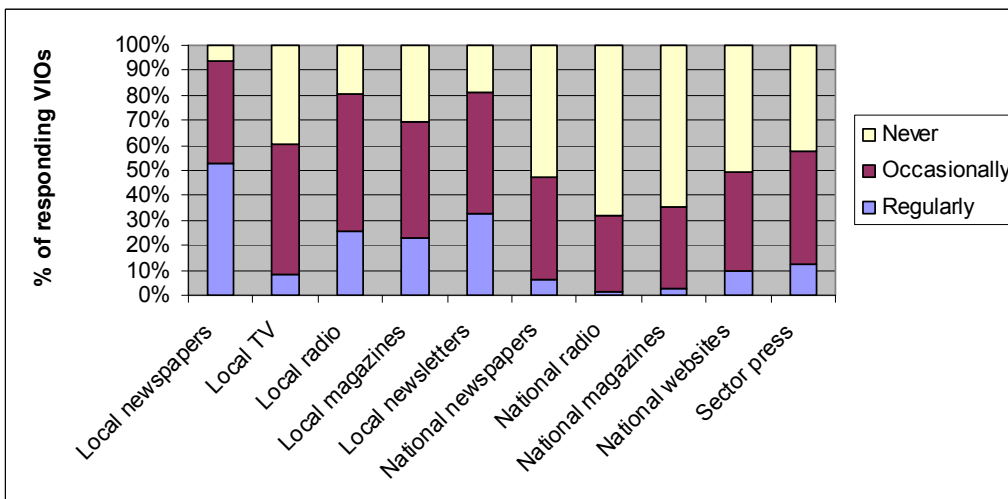


Figure 7: Types of media approached by VIOs



Respondents were asked which types of media gave their organisation most coverage of volunteering issues. Organisations had most success in getting coverage in the local media with local and regional newspapers particularly supportive (79% of VDAs and 61% of VIOs got most publicity through this medium). Local radio was also good at giving coverage to VIOs and local/regional newsletters for VDAs. Commenting on their level of contact with local media, organisations said:

We have a regular weekly slot in the local paper so we do try to maintain a good link with them so that we are not dropped!

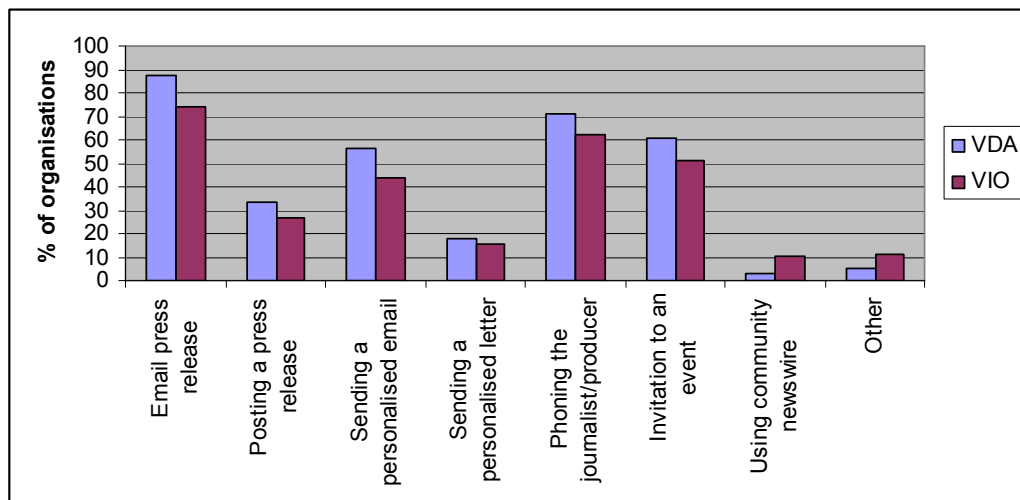
Our main sources of media contact are local newspapers or local radio. Obviously, they receive many stories from local organisations, and can't print them all.

VIOs received more exposure in trade and sector press than VDAs which is likely to reflect their preference for using this medium compared to VDAs. None of the respondents reported that they got most coverage on volunteering in the national media.

2.4 Ways of communicating with the media

Sending a press release via email was the most popular way for organisations to communicate with the media (88% of VDAs and 74% of VIOs used this method). Most also phoned journalists or producers directly to try to get them to cover volunteering stories. Other commonly used techniques, particularly amongst VDAs, were sending journalists invitations to events and sending personalised emails to media contacts. The usage of community newswire was relatively uncommon, but more popular amongst VIOs than VDAs (11% of VIOs and 3% of VDAs used this method) (figure 8).

Figure 8: Ways of communicating with the media



No of responding VDAs = 96, No of responding VIOs = 149

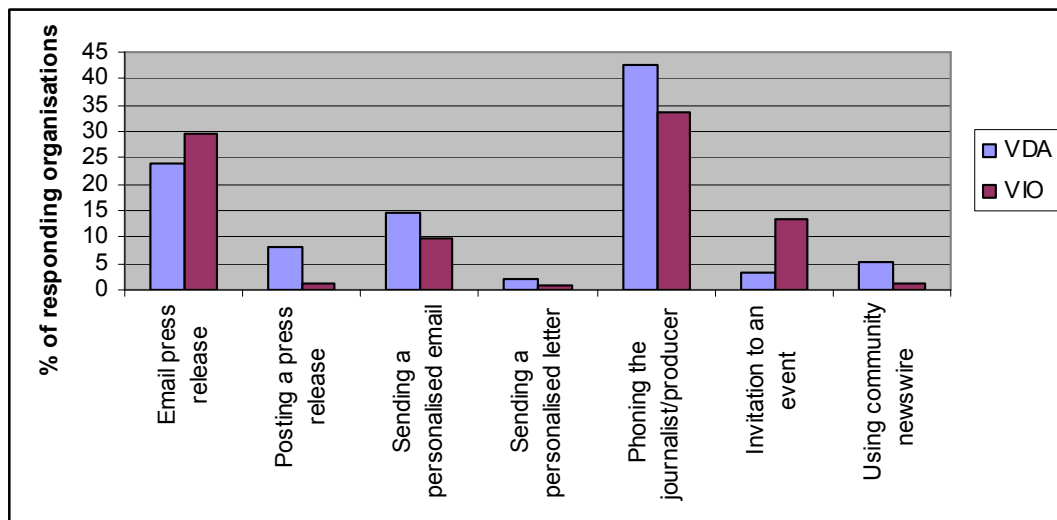
'Other' methods used by VDAs included: Council newsletters; local websites and specialist publications.

'Other' methods used by VIOs included: Community websites and newsletters; specialist publications; and organisational newsletters

Many of the organisations surveyed felt that the most effective way of communicating with journalists was to phone them directly (figure 9). However, the most popular way of communicating a story to the media was by e-mailing a press release. Many organisations sent invitations to events to journalists, but did not think that this method was particularly effective in getting coverage. It is possible that sending press releases and invitations to events are popular with organisations because these are perceived as relatively quick methods of reaching many media contacts at once. One VIO, for example, said:

The only thing we really do is send in press releases to advertise specific volunteering opportunities. We don't really have time to do anything more than that.

Figure 9: Most effective ways of getting coverage in the media



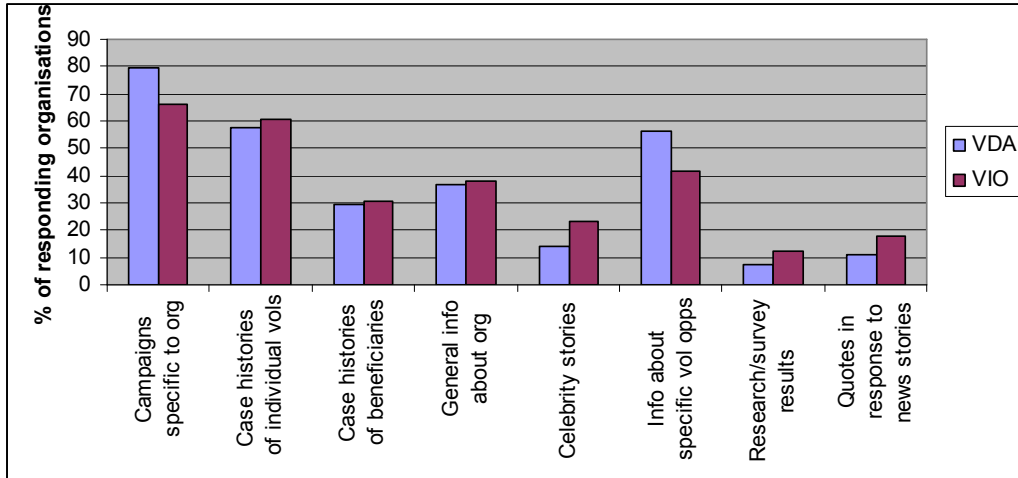
No of responding VDAs = 96, No of responding VIOs = 143

From a list of eight approaches, organisations were asked which three were most successful in getting media coverage on volunteering issues. Figure 10 shows that those most commonly cited were campaigns specific to the organisation (79% of VDAs and 66% of VIOs), case histories of individual volunteers (58% of VDAs and 61% of VIOs) and information about specific volunteering opportunities (57% of VDAs and 42% of VIOs). Other approaches used by organisations to get coverage included events, for example, fundraising events or those linked to Volunteers Week.

Some respondents thought that the most effective way to promote volunteering and recruit volunteers was to get stories about their organisation and its work in the media. Organisations reported that these stories might not be about volunteering, but can help to increase awareness of the organisation amongst prospective volunteers and raise its profile. One VIO, for example, said:

The best way to get volunteers is to get news stories about the charity's work in the media.

Figure 10: Most successful approaches for getting media coverage on volunteering issues

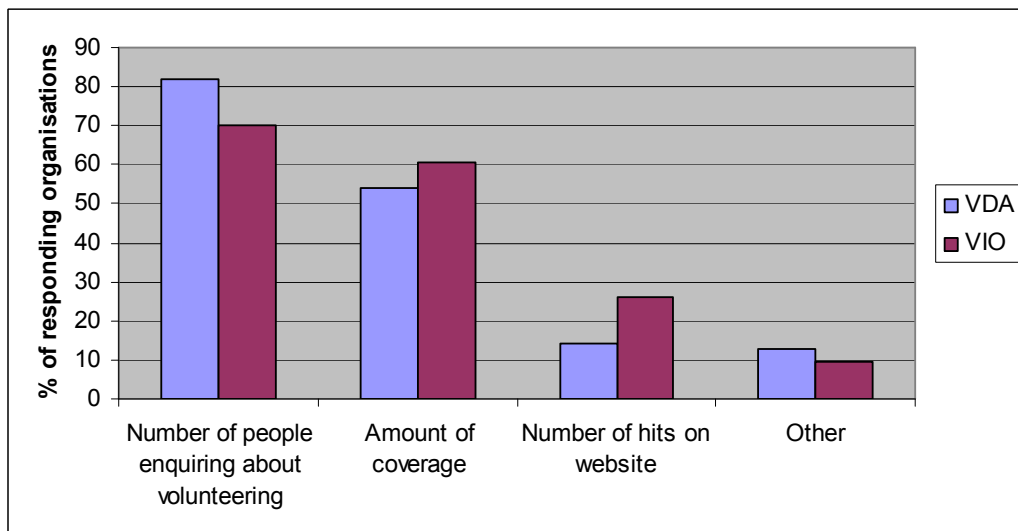


No of responding VDAs = 92, No of responding VIOs = 137

2.5 Measuring the success of media coverage

Most organisations reported that they measured the success of media coverage, however, one in five VDAs and one in four VIOs did not. The most popular way of measuring the impact of coverage was through the number of enquiries received by the organisation (82% of VDAs and 70% of VIOs used this method). The amount of coverage (e.g. the number of items in the media or column inches) was also another commonly used indicator (figure 11).

Figure 11: Ways of measuring the success of media coverage on volunteering issues



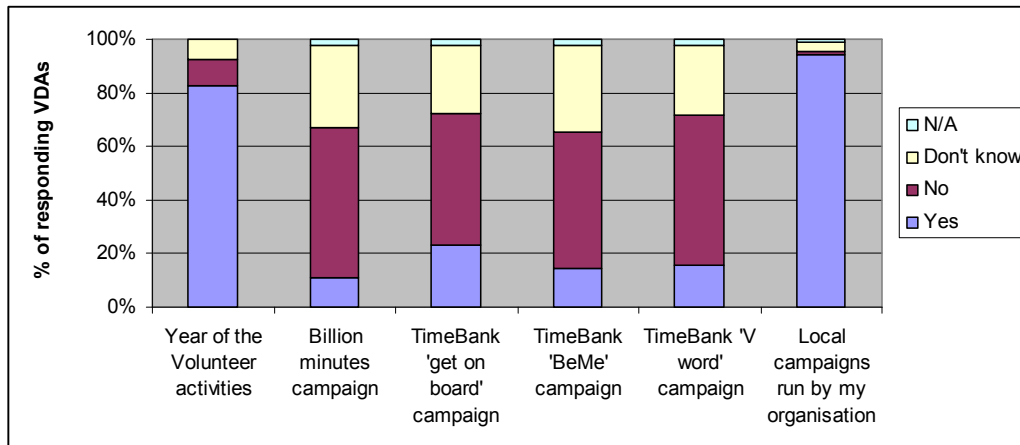
No of responding VDAs = 78, No of responding VIOs = 107

2.6 Successful campaigns

Organisations were presented with a series of campaigns and asked to comment on how effective they have been in recruiting volunteers in their area (figures 12 and 13). Respondents were most positive about the effectiveness of their own local campaigns. Ninety five percent of VDAs and 89% of VIOs indicated that they thought these had been successful in recruiting volunteers. The Year of the Volunteer received a mixed response with VDAs reflecting more positively on the campaign than VIOs (83% of VDAs and 38% of VIOs thought it had been successful in recruiting volunteers).

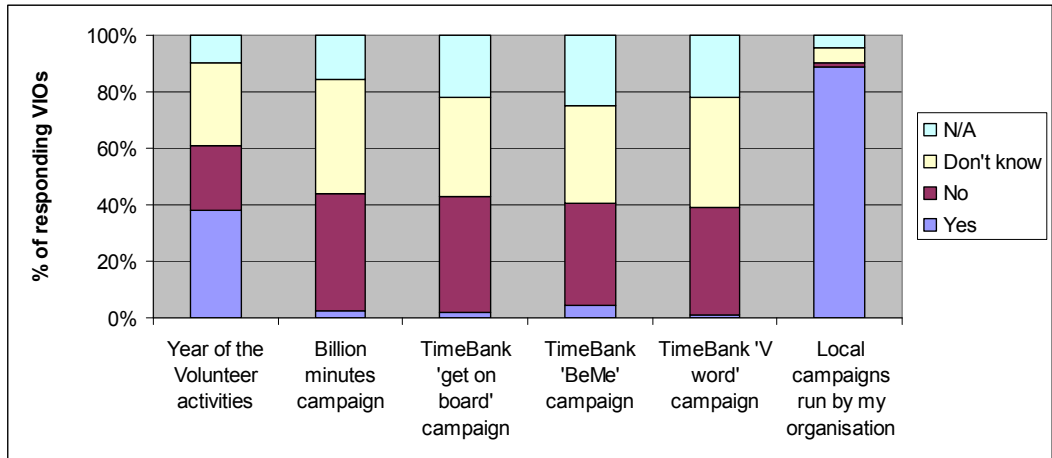
Similarly, VDAs were more positive about the TimeBank campaigns compared to VIOs but this is likely to reflect the regional nature of these initiatives (the 'V' word campaign to recruit older volunteers, for example, focused on the areas of Liverpool, Manchester, East Sussex, Kent and London) and the fact that they were not promoting individual organisations. The TimeBank campaigns also had significantly smaller budgets compared to larger scale initiatives, such as Year of the Volunteer and Billion Minutes.

Figure 12: Success of communications campaigns in recruiting volunteers for VDAs



No of responding VDAs = 84

Figure 13: Success of communications campaigns in recruiting volunteers for VIOs



No of responding VIOs=114

2.7 Barriers to getting coverage

An important part of the survey was identifying the problems (if any) organisations experienced in getting coverage of volunteering in the media (figure 14). One in eight organisations reported that they did not experience any problems or barriers at all. Commenting on their positive experiences with the media, one VDA said:

Sounds big headed, but we have had an excellent relationship with the local press over many years. A journalist comes to our office once a week for the latest voluntary opportunities. We give her print outs from V-Base, and some background info, and she writes a column for us!

Of those that did have problems, lack of time to liaise with the media was the most commonly cited barrier (77% of VDAs and 56% of VIOs). The time needed to devote to developing relationships and writing materials for the media were in particular highlighted. Commenting on these barriers, VDAs said:

Time is the big one. It takes time to cultivate relationships, and all too often people move on and then we are back to square one. The media like 'sexy' stories and sometimes twist things, which makes you consider if you should contact them.

Media coverage is relatively easy to obtain and the expertise exists in staff. The biggest problem is finding time to capitalise on the many opportunities available to us and begin/develop relationships with key media contacts.

VIOs noted:

Due to us being a huge organisation and only having a small team, we often don't get time to proactively promote volunteering. And when we do, it's not always easy to pick out a really good story that would stand head and shoulders above others and capture journalists' imaginations!

We have no problems getting media coverage nationally or regionally. The only problem we have is finding the time to take up all the interview opportunities.

Lack of media interest in an organisation's stories was cited as a problem by approximately half of the respondents. Some commented that it was difficult to engage the media with the subject areas dealt with by their organisation. A number of respondents thought that the media were not interested in volunteering and only focussed on contentious issues. One VDA, for example, noted:

Sometimes it is hard to 'sell' volunteering as an issue - newspapers are more interested when we've had things stolen although they seem to like it when we do activities in conjunction with schools and so on.

One VIO said:

We have some great stories but the media is not always interested in them. We have to make stories political or controversial for the media to be interested and then the Trustees are nervous because they do not want the organisation to be seen in such a controversial light.

Some organisations reported that they found it difficult to identify newsworthy stories for the media and that it was particularly challenging to find a good news 'angle' to promote volunteering or volunteers. For others, not knowing who to approach in the media was a problem, particularly for VIOs. Some respondents did have contacts in the media but didn't know how to develop and expand on these.

Internal issues were also clearly a problem for a number of the respondents. Some reported that communication with the media was not a priority in their organisation. Others indicated that volunteering stories competed with a number of other organisational agendas and as a consequence it was difficult to get coverage for them. One VIO noted:

Our organisation has many stories for which they require coverage. Volunteering issues therefore have to compete internally with many other issues affecting the hospital.

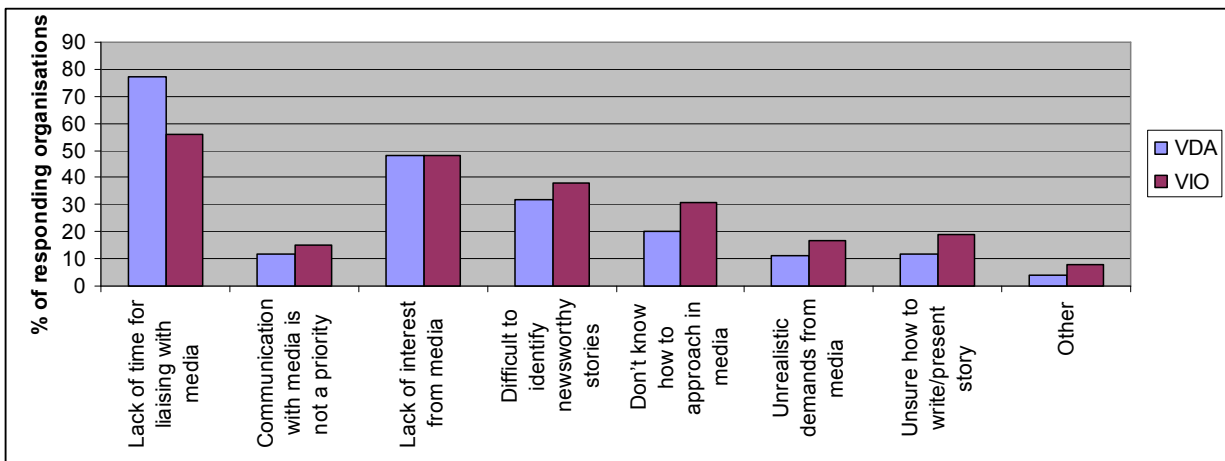
Another said:

Volunteering stories are a lower priority than others for our press officer - has to be reactive to Government policy changes etc. so volunteering can get dropped.

An additional barrier mentioned by several organisations was that the media made unrealistic demands on them. Organisations noted that that they either could not provide the type of story the media wanted or could not meet their tight deadlines. One VIO noted:

[We have] very short timescales for responding to enquiries. In particular we work with disabled volunteers - it is not always quick or easy to get the right person to be available for an interview in a short space of time.

Figure 14: Barriers experienced by organisations in getting coverage of volunteering issues in the media



No of responding VDAs=82, No of responding VIOs=124

2.8 Training for staff

The survey found that those responding for VDAs were more likely than those from VIOs to have received media training (54% of VDA respondents compared to 42% of VIO respondents). Training for VDAs was predominately provided by the Media Trust or a local CVS/Volunteer Centre. All but one of the VDA respondents said that they found the media training they had received useful.

Training for staff within VIOs tended to be given by a wider range of providers, including the Media Trust, CSV, CVS and Citizens Advice Bureaux. Most of the respondents were positive about the training they had received.

2.9 Resources used in the preparation of volunteering stories

Organisations were asked about the resources they used to prepare volunteering stories. Most used existing lists of local contacts, although this was more common amongst VDAs (91% of VDAs and 76% of VIOs used this resource). Photographers and photo libraries were also popular with one in four VDAs (24%) and one in three VIOs (35%) reporting that they used these. One VIO said:

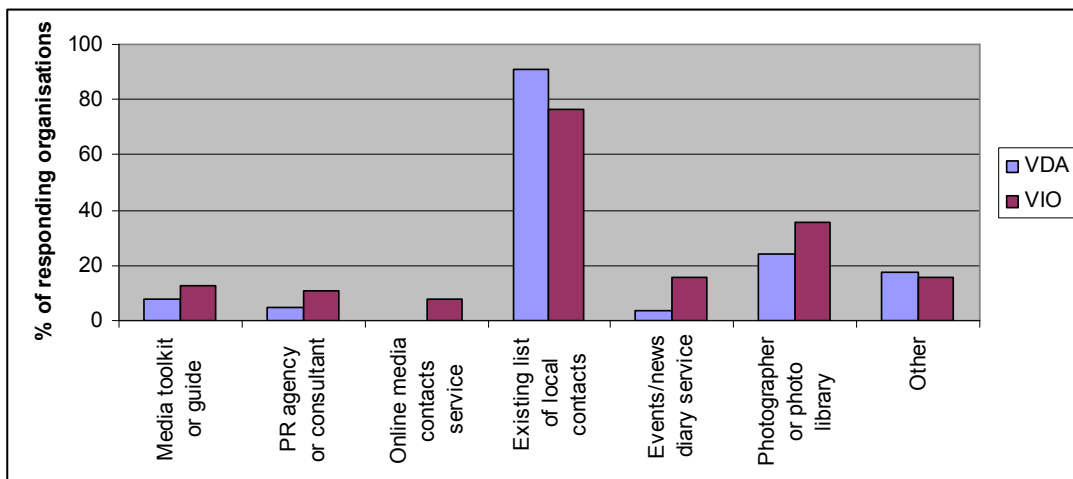
[!] make my own contacts!! As you get to know who is pro [the organisational cause].... whether they are having a quiet news day...and who you can nag at until they do your story !!!! Having a really good digital camera as sometimes the picture speaks volumes !!

Another noted:

We find that it's always worth sending out a good photo with a press release if possible to the print media - tends to result in a more prominent placing in whichever publication if they decide to use the story.

The survey results suggest that VIOs were more likely than VDAs to use a wider range of resources for preparing stories, including media toolkits, online media contact services and events/news diary services. Several respondents indicated that their organisation used template press releases which allowed staff across the country to pitch stories with the same aims and messages.

Figure 15: Resources used by organisations in preparing volunteering stories



2.10 Budgets for marketing/advertising volunteering in the media

Responding VDAs were less likely to have a budget for marketing and/or advertising volunteering in the media (45% of VDAs compared to 54% of VIOs). VIOs with larger incomes were more likely than those with smaller incomes to have budgets for promoting volunteering through the media.

Few of the responding organisations indicated the amount of budget they had for these purposes. Amongst the thirteen VDAs who responded, most had a budget of between £500 and £1,000. For VIOs, budgets varied significantly from £100 to £20,000, however most had a budget for marketing and/or advertising volunteering of between £500 and £3000.

2.11 Help needed by organisations

Organisations were asked what would most help them to get more coverage of volunteering issues in the media. The responses varied but those most commonly identified included:

- More staff time, particularly in relation to developing contacts with the media and researching, identifying and writing newsworthy stories. This issue was raised in particular by VDAs, but was also important for VIOs. A number of respondents said that having a staff member or volunteer dedicated to working with the media would significantly help their organisation. One VDA said:

Having the time to get to know the volunteer involving organisations we work with and being able to identify good news stories that capture media interest and promote volunteering issues.

One VIO said that they needed:

A volunteer or volunteers with media relations skills prepared to devote time to helping us develop media relations - we have some interesting projects under way.

- More financial resources and larger budgets for media activities were identified as a need by organisations, in particular VDAs. This was often discussed in the context of organisations needing to buy space in the media to advertise volunteering. One VDA said:

We have a good relationship with local press/TV and know we could have more coverage if we could afford it, so money would help

- More training, particularly in writing stories, using photographs and images and being creative was identified as a need, particularly amongst VIOs. Commenting on what they would benefit from, one VDA said:

To have some training in being able to produce copy that is immediately usable without the local paper having to do much tweaking.

A responding VIO reported that they needed:

Training for those of us who are expected to deal with media issues relating to our roles, ways to present stories and grab interest (without a celebrity!)

- Organisations called for greater awareness and interest in volunteering from the media. The respondents in particular identified the need for the media to highlight the important role played by volunteers and to focus on the positive impacts of volunteering rather than presenting negative stories. Commenting on what they thought was needed, VIOs said:

The media in general having a much better knowledge of volunteering and just how much a part it plays in community activities.

For the media to have more space dedicated to volunteering... there are no 'volunteer' correspondents, or lots of obvious slots in magazines to place stories. A lot of volunteer stories are 'nice' stories, so aren't naturally often of interest to national newspapers.

A sea change in the attitude of the press - an interest on their part in the good and wholesome stories coming from the volunteering sector rather than an emphasis on how the sector responds to pessimistic and alarmist news stories.

- A number of organisations said developing contacts with the media would help them get more coverage of volunteering issues. Some found it difficult to maintain relations with the media once their key contacts had moved on or wanted to expand the number of people they approached about volunteering stories. One VIO said:

We have established links with one particular journalist but how do we do this for all types of media other than just print?

Commenting on what would help them, one VDA said:

A network of contacts and a better understanding of how they need stories presented.

3. Conclusions

The research has shown there to be considerable variation in the way that organisations liaise with the media on volunteering issues and the experiences they have in doing so. While some organisations are in regular contact with the media, in particular the local media, others are not. Some have budgets for promoting volunteering, while others do not. A number reported having very positive relationships with their media contacts while others have had negative experiences that have deterred them from engaging with the media.

In general, the research showed that many organisations do engage with the media on volunteering issues and many are in contact with the local media on a regular basis. It is evident that VDAs engage less frequently with the national media, possibly a reflection of the fact that they have less capacity and resources than many VIOs for media activities and have a local and regional focus.

Organisations were more proactive in approaching the media about volunteering than the media were in approaching them and a number reported that the media never contacted them about volunteering. The research did suggest however that there were a number of positive relationships between organisations and the media. This was atypical in the research previously conducted by VAMU which focussed on the relationships between charities and the national media in particular (VAMU, 2005).

The surveys revealed high levels of reliance on emailing press releases, amongst both VDAs and VIOs in communicating with the media, a finding consistent with VAMU's Culture Clash research (ibid). However, organisations also used other methods including, personalised emails and sending journalists invitations to events. Contacting journalists directly over the phone was seen to be the most effective method for getting coverage of volunteering. The research found however that time was consistently a problem for both VDAs and VIOs and may explain why the less time consuming method of sending press releases was more popular.

Campaigns specific to organisations and the use of case histories of individual volunteers were seen to be the most successful ways of getting media coverage on volunteering. This resonates closely with research undertaken by VAMU (ibid) which found that the media are particularly interested in human interest case studies.

A number of organisations participating in the research were positive about the relationships they already had with the media and one in eight organisations reported that they did not experience any barriers in their liaison with the media. For those that did, the most common problem was a lack of time and was often discussed in the context of respondents having too many other priorities. Lack of financial resources for media liaison was also clearly a problem with many organisations reporting that they did not have budgets for advertising and marketing volunteering.

Reinforcing findings from previous VAMU research (ibid), some organisations were also concerned about the media's attitudes to their organisation or volunteering. Many thought that the media lacked understanding about volunteering and were not interested or responsive enough. Some said that the media did not recognise the limitations on organisations and that they could not 'conjure up' stories at the last minute. There was also a concern that the media did not recognise good stories about volunteers and were more interested in sensationalist news.

Identifying newsworthy stories about volunteering was also clearly a problem for a number of respondents. Some commented that they found it difficult to get the right 'angle' for stories to make them attractive to the media. This may in part reflect the perception amongst some organisations that the media is not interested in certain types of volunteering stories or particular issues.

Many organisations indicated that they wanted to develop the way in which they liaised with the media in order to better promote volunteering and their organisation. Many reported that they thought this could be brought about through allocating more staff time to engaging with the media or by developing the media skills of employees through training. Organisations were also keen to develop their contacts with the media to expand the scope of their media coverage.

This research has revealed that organisations are dealing with a diverse range of issues in their efforts to liaise with the media. For some, working with the media to promote volunteering is relatively straightforward while for others a number of barriers stand in their way. It is clear however that many of these barriers are not insurmountable. For many organisations, the key is building better relationships and networks with media contacts as these can lead to a greater quality and quantity of media coverage for volunteering. The question we must now ask is how these relationships can best be developed.

References

Voluntary Action Media Unit (2005) Culture Clash? An investigation of the relationship between charities, the media and commercial PR agencies
www.vamu.org.uk