

Technical Assistance Bulletin

You Can Increase Your Media Coverage

April 1999

Good media coverage contributes to effective alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) abuse prevention efforts. You can ensure good media coverage by understanding the why's and how's of media relations -- which will smooth your way in working with editors and reporters. First and foremost, make sure your media relations are proactive and compel media coverage. You need to develop and maintain media lists, identify media spokespersons for your organization, use news releases and advisories effectively, hold news conferences and briefings, prepare letters to the editor and op-ed articles, and get your public service announcements (PSA's) on the air. And you also need to keep track of how you are doing by monitoring and measuring your media coverage.

Frame issues in ways that compel coverage.

1. Make Sure Your Media Relations Are Proactive

Frame prevention issues in ways that compel media coverage. Use:

- **An angle or "hook"** that makes information compelling or controversial. For example, the fact that teachers removed their wedding rings attracted mass media coverage of a "No Gold" Day celebration, which was designed to build students' self-esteem and help them avoid the flashy lifestyle that often accompanies drug dealing.

Cyclical, calendar-based events make good hooks or pegs to get the message across. For example, on New Year's Eve how do you combat holiday drinking? Enlist bartenders in speaking out against excessive drinking, and get them to explain how they keep patrons from getting into trouble.

Work with local police to tie in their drinking barricades with your message. If they are doing something on a particular weekend or evening, make sure that your spokesperson is ready to amplify your message by using the figures from the police on those stopped while impaired. And then let the media know you have a spokesperson available. It's a natural story.

Look for national hooks for a story. All kinds of organizations are struggling with the proposed changes in health care. Use that information to bring in local coverage. For example, get a local person to talk about using prevention and treatment, when appropriate, instead of jail.

Make sure you are up to date on Government releases as well as publications like the New England Journal of Medicine. If they issue a report in your area, be ready to call your local assignment editor with a spokesperson with figures localizing the national story.

- **An unusual method of delivery.** To promote a local campaign to stop alcohol- and drug-impaired driving, a popular drive-time radio disk jockey was presented with a breakfast basket tied with red ribbons.

And an environmental group sent their release glued to a large plastic container. The station couldn't help but see it and read it!

- **An out-of-the ordinary association with something already in the news.** When traces of poisonous substances were found in Chilean grapes, tobacco control activities pointed out that even larger amounts of these substances are found in a single cigarette.
- **An "opportunistic" exploration or elaboration of an issue** that becomes newsworthy, often because of a crisis or special events. When a local teenager died of alcohol poisoning after a "keg party," health activists worked with a national newspaper to explore such "sidebar issues" as teenage drinking, alcohol availability, and laws about hosting keg parties.

A local story can catch the eye of a national TV editor. Create local stories and bump them up! TV news often seeks a local organization for an angle on a news story. Look for ways to turn a negative story into a positive prevention focus.

- **The telephone actively.** Call the assignment editor a week before the event, the day before the event, and then follow up if you don't see a representative of an organization. Simply say, "I did not see anyone from your group at our news conference, and I want to know if I can give you information you may have missed, or find out how we can help you in the future." This suggests to the media that their coverage is important to you.
- **The telephone reactively.** This is not used much, but it should be. When there is a breaking story, call the news outlet and offer an expert, or an opinion. For example, over the weekend a teenager was killed in a car crash, where alcohol apparently was involved. Seize this story as an opportunity, tragic though it is, to call and offer information. There is a problem with teenage drinking, particularly around graduation and prom - offer someone who has been looking at the problem in the community.

2. Identify Media Spokespersons for Your Organization

Choosing an effective media spokesperson is important. In some cases, the person who handles media relations may speak officially, but usually reporters want statements from persons with more rank. Therefore, the media relations person generally does the behind-the-scenes work, and the organization's executive director, president, or chairperson is the designated spokesperson who makes the actual statements to the media.

Unless it is within a tightly structured environment like a news conference, having many people talk with reporters is not a good idea. When reporters talk to different people at different times the stories may not match exactly, and the resulting media story may be negative. Therefore, to make sure everyone is "reading from the same script," it is a good idea to limit media relations to a maximum of three persons. And if the media want to talk to "rank-and-file" people, select in advance those who will portray your program in a more favorable light rather than let the reporter come in and choose.

3. Develop and Maintain Media Lists

An up-to-date media list is an important tool for anyone working with news media. The best list is one you create yourself. It takes time, but then you are sure it contains the information you need. You can purchase media lists, of course, but such lists tend to become outdated quickly, and in addition, purchased media lists often overlook small, new, and transient publications and programs.

The best list

You can create your own list by using your local library's reference books on local and national media, media lists from local celebrities, public relations agencies, or public relations professional organizations, and your own media contacts. Also, ask your contacts for names of others who cover your issues.

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Keep your detailed media list in a loose-leaf binder, using one page per media outlet:

- For a **daily or weekly newspaper**, you need information on name, format, circulation, distribution area, publication date(s), street address, mailing address, telephone number, owners, chain affiliation, publisher, managing editor, community service director, advertising manager, news and public affairs directors, columnists, and deadlines. You also need information on whether the paper accepts public service advertising, has a letters to the editor section and/or an op-ed page, prints public service news releases, or has a calendar listing. Be sure your list includes college and university publications.
- For a **radio or TV station**, you need information on name, location on the dial, format, audience, broadcast area, hours on air, street address, mailing address, telephone number, owners, network affiliation, general manager, news director, editorial director, public service director, advertising manager, public service programs, and news programs. You also need to know whether the station accepts PSA's and in what form (announcer-read or prerecorded on cassette, record, or reel-to-reel tape), does on-air editorials (and provides opportunities for editorial responses), and has locally produced news programming and staff reporters (or is fed through a network affiliation). Be sure your list includes college and university radio stations as well as public radio and television stations. And don't forget the wire services and local bureaus of national newspapers, magazines, and broadcast entities.

Check you media and mailing lists regularly for accuracy. Remember: using a wrong name can be a disaster.

4. Use News Releases and News Advisories Effectively

Media stories are generally of two kinds: "breaking" news stories and stories planned in advance. Breaking news stories happen suddenly, often without warning. They usually dominate the headlines and provide the lead story on broadcast news programs.

Tag your issue into a "breaker" and ride the wave of interest in your area. For every problem, your organization has a possible solution. Or when a breaking story on alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs arises, offer your services as a resource. For smaller markets, consider making "actualities" available by telephone. That way, the smaller radio and television station can call a number and get sound bites.

Many other stories are planned in advance and originate with a news release or news advisory. When your organization uses a release or advisory, you are providing information to the media in a planned and professional way. You are alerting newspapers, magazines, radio, and televisions to a story that should be covered - and you are alerting them all at the same time so that no one gets a "scoop" and limits your access to other media.

News Release

You can write a news release in advance of an event (to encourage media coverage and public awareness), concurrent with an event (to make sure that key points are highlighted), or following an

event (to inform the public of what happened). Major media generally use advance or concurrent news releases; weekly newspapers often use all three types.

Provide information to the media in planned and professional ways.

Most media organizations are inundated with news releases. Yours is more likely to be read and taken seriously when it is typed on letterhead or news release stationery and prepared in the standard format. "For immediate release" (and the date of the release) and "for more information contact" (and the name and telephone numbers of the contact) are at the top of the page. Follow this with a catchy or informative headline or title. Begin the first paragraph with a dateline and include the essentials: who, what, where, why, and when. The second paragraph has more information about the event or activity; a quotation by a spokesperson is a good idea. The following paragraphs have additional information, if necessary. The final paragraph can be generic and describe your organization. (A standard descriptive closing paragraph for all news releases is a good idea.) Shorter is better for a news release; but if it continues to a second or third page, place "-more-" at the end of each page to alert the reader that the release continues. Paragraphs should not continue to succeeding pages; and identifying information should be placed at the top of each continuing page. At the end of the release, place "-30-" or "###."

Remember: Correct and complete contact information is essential. Include your evening and weekend phone numbers in addition to work numbers because editors and reporters often work on weekends and after 5 p.m. if they cannot reach you to verify an upcoming event or get a quote, they may bypass your release.

If you do get turned down after a follow-up call, don't be discouraged. Ask the editor to keep you in mind on future stories related to your issue.

News Advisory

You can use a news advisory -- an invitation no longer than a page in length -- instead of a news release to alert the media to a news conference or media event worthy of coverage. Type the news advisory on letterhead or news release stationery. "For immediate release" (and the date of the release) and "for more information contact" (and the name and telephone numbers of the contact) are at the top of the page. Follow this with a catchy or informative headline or title. List in outline form what (the event or subject), where (the location), when (the time), and who (the principals or major players). Place "-30-" or "###" at the end.

When you use an advisory, always distribute a more detailed news release at the event or on the day of the event, and send copies to reporters who were not present.

Distributing news Releases and News Advisories

Releases and advisories are usually distributed by mail. In larger media markets, a newswire service may increase the likelihood that your release or advisory is noticed; for small community media, hand delivering or faxing may work. To guide your distribution efforts, find out and follow media deadlines for daily and weekly newspapers (and any Sunday editions), wire services, television and radio stations, and magazines.

5. Hold News Conferences and Briefings

New conferences or briefings are a good idea when you have important news to announce - like the results of a study or the kickoff of a special campaign. But remember to use them sparingly because

attendance requires a major commitment of time for news media. And if possible, check schedules in advance to be sure you are not setting up a no-show event.

At a conference or briefing you can provide the media information in person, and the media have an opportunity for a visual or a live audio.

Don't call a news conference if you don't have news to report.

The format for most news conferences is a basic presentation followed by an opportunity for attendees to ask questions. Media kits - containing a fact sheet (two-page maximum), biographical sketch of leader(s), current news release, examples of news coverage, PSA (if distributed to radio/television), and black-and-white photographs -- are usually distributed. Using a checklist for preconference, conference day, and followup activities will help you make sure arrangements are in place for such essentials as rooms, speakers, budgets, media kits, refreshments, transportation, equipment, and microphones and electrical outlets.

A new briefing, which allows you to bring the media together informally and answer questions out of the glare of the spotlight, can be a useful alternative. Responses are also "on the record," but you can communicate more background information.

6. Prepare Letters to the Editor and Op-Ed Articles

Most newspapers devote at least one page to opinions, presenting them in, for example, editorials, letters to the editor, regular columns (both local and nationally syndicated), political cartoons, and contributed articles. In major media, the best way to maintain control over your messages and get your ideas across with minimal changes is to write a letter to the editor or an op-ed article.

Letters to the Editor

One of the simplest yet most effective forms of "controlled" media is a letter to the editor. If your local newspaper does not provide instructions, call the newspaper editorial department and ask for any specific rules you should follow (for example, on how to address the letter and maximum length). Type the letter and include the full name of the author and a telephone number the newspaper can use to check authenticity.

Monitor published letters to get a feel for their style and tenor before you write yours. Make sure your letter says something different from those already published. If you are responding to an article, editorial, or letter published in the newspaper, do it quickly - before the momentum of the story is lost - and refer to it by headline and date.

Occasionally you may want to encourage your volunteers, clients, or other supporters to write letters on an ATOD problem prevention topic. Different letters on a single topic will strengthen your case; form letters or any indication of an organized letter-writing campaign will weaken your effort.

Remember that it is generally wiser to discuss errors in articles in a telephone call to the reporter rather than in a "set the record straight" letter to the editor. Writing a correction letter is a step to take only when other avenues have failed. In fact, sometimes it is better to let the issue die rather than revive it and give the editor a reason to restate the newspaper's position. However, when the newspaper has taken a position in its editorials, it is entirely appropriate for you to oppose or support the position in a letter.

Op-Ed Articles and Guest Editorials

The op-ed section, usually on the page opposite the newspaper's editorial page, generally presents regular columnists (national and local), but there may be opportunities for a guest columnist. Ask the editor for submission guidelines. An op-ed piece -- usually three double-spaced, typed pages -- gives you more space to address issues from the prevention perspective or to present your organization's position when it differs from that endorsed by the newspaper. Remember to be succinct, and avoid going off on all tangents that detract from your main theme. Have another person with skills as a writer review your article before you submit it.

Maintain control over your messages by writing letters to the editor and op-ed articles.

Opportunities for expressing your opinions on broadcast media are few, but some television and radio stations air editorial opinions and invite "opposing viewpoints." Using such an avenue when available means that you can reach a wider audience with your message.

7. Get Your PSA's on the Air

PSA's are either general messages or specific announcements. General messages urge behavior changes (don't use drugs). Specific announcements give details of upcoming events or activities (come out for next Saturday's anti-drug march). A number of general message PSA's are nationally produced and feature celebrities or have been created by major advertising and production firms. You may want to work with your local station to localize the national PSA's with the telephone number of your organization (if this is permitted) so that you can concentrate on developing local PSA's to announce community activities and special events.

Many television and radio stations broadcast PSA's. These free commercials can be 10, 15, 30, or 60 seconds long. Because of competition for the limited time allocated for public service announcements, the shorter ones are more likely to be aired. Copy is read at a slightly slower pace for television than for radio: 10 seconds equals 20 words of text for television but 25 for radio.

PSA's generally air in the off hours, for example, early Sunday morning and after midnight, when the audience is smaller and selling air time is more difficult. However, for major campaigns, particularly those in which the station has a strong commitment, PSA's are sometimes aired during the daytime or evening prime time.

Stations often predetermine PSA themes; find out in advance. See if the station conducts ascertainment meetings, and get on the mailing list. Find out the PSA format that the radio station prefers - announcer-read "live copy" or prerecorded on cassette, record, or reel-to-reel -- to keep your PSA off the bottom of the pile. Many stations prefer announcer-read PSA's because they draw attention to their on-air personalities and do not compete with prerecorded paid commercials. Some all-news and talk stations prefer prerecorded PSA's with music backgrounds as a change of pace.

Television stations use announcer-read PSA's, accompanied by one or more slides and prerecorded film or video spots. The rule of thumb is to include one slide for each 10 seconds of air time. Some stations will ask you to produce slides or photographs to accompany the PSA; others prefer to produce their own slides.

Shorter PSA's are more likely to be aired.

Hand deliver PSA's for radio and television at least 2 to 3 weeks ahead of time - more if possible. Time all PSA's, and include a word-for-word written text with prerecorded PSA's. For all PSA's, include a beginning date and an ending or "kill" date. A maximum of 3 months is a good idea.

8. Monitor and Measure Your Media Coverage

Media coverage can in general be placed in three categories: coverage that is generated through your media relations efforts, coverage of your organization and its specific issues that is generated independently, and coverage of ATOD problem prevention issues that are not specific to your program. Monitoring and measuring these categories of media coverage is vital. When you know how your organization and ATOD issues are being covered, you can better judge the successes and failures of your media relations and plan your future encounters with the media.

Monitoring and measuring media coverage helps you to:

- Correct misstatements and errors
- Identify persons in the media who are attuned to ATOD problem prevention issues
- Classify the ATOD issues that are regularly covered
- Position your organization properly with respect to national and regional stories
- Replicate successful media strategies
- Identify areas that need more media coverage.

Clipping services provide an excellent resource for monitoring stories that appear in newspapers and magazines. However, no clipping service can track all the stories, and it takes several days to several weeks before you receive the clips. This means that you need to review the major dailies and weeklies in your own community regularly for stories on your organization and on ATOD problem prevention in general and clip relevant articles.

Broadcast monitoring services provide video and audio copies of television and radio reports, but they tend to be expensive. You may want to use them when an important story is breaking and you need complete coverage; or you might want to ask staff or volunteers to tape the programs. Such homemade tapes will not have the same quality, but the only cost is for blank tapes. Sometimes the station will make a copy.

Media coverage can be measured in terms of quantity, placement, and content.

Quantity and placement measures are relatively objective; content measures are more subjective.

- **Quantity.** How much space did the story get? For print, quantity is measure in column inches; for electronic media, in seconds or minutes of air time Try converting the amount of free publicity into dollars by calculating how much the among of space or time would cost. This could be important information if your organization has expenses associated with generating media coverage, such as those for setting up a news conference or bringing in a guest speaker.
- **Placement.** Where was the story placed? Certain placements - including the front page of a daily newspaper, above the fold, and the opening of the evening television news - reach the largest numbers. For specific audiences, other placements may be more effective. For example, the editorial and business pages of the local newspaper usually have high readership among local opinion leaders, but your people are more likely to read the comics.
- **Content.** Is the story positive, negative, or neutral? Consider the totality of the coverage in measuring content: Often the headline grabs attention, but the article itself is reasoned and more neutral. Or a fact or two may be wrong, but on balance the reporting is accurate and positive.

Monitoring and measuring helps you judge successes and failures and position your future efforts.

Your regular media monitoring and measuring processes should be stepped up whenever your organization actively seeks media coverage through news releases, news conferences, or media events, or when an ATOD problem prevention story with local implications is breaking nationally.

9. Readings

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