

## Section 3: Working with the Media

Effectively communicating with the media can help promote local health issues and change the way community members look at health issues. This change in perception can motivate community members and local officials to become more involved in the issues and work towards developing solutions.

### ***Framing your message***

Local officials and citizens often depend on the media to provide them with up-to-date information about major happenings in the community. The media have a direct responsibility to the public to communicate useful and important information. Since media is considered a modern-day watchdog over government, media can directly influence the agenda of local officials and citizens.

**KEY:** Media advocacy contributes to the development and implementation of social and policy initiatives that promote the health and well-being of your community while being told from a public health perspective.

Framing is the process by which you begin to package all the facts about your issue to create the story you want the public to hear. Framing your public health issue is the first step in influencing decision-makers in your community. To best frame your issue in the media, you should:

1. Present images, symbols or facts that reflect your public health issue.
2. Choose the conceptual language for discussing your public health issue, i.e. developing your message.
3. Define the actual problem within the community. Give your community information that can be interpreted on an individual level.
4. Determine who will be the voice representing and promoting your public health issue.

(Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan and Themba)

The overall goal of media advocacy is to promote a solution or policy decision that can address your public health issue. By effectively framing your issue to grab the attention of local officials and citizens, you are one step closer to gaining the media's attention and having your story appear in print or on the air.

### ***Building strategic relationships with media***

Do you know what news organizations are in your community, county, or region? Do you know who are the media movers and shakers in your community? Do you know who can persuade people in your community to support your public health issue?

If not, you need to work on building stronger relationships with media representatives in your area. Media lists can help you address the three questions mentioned above. Media lists should contain the names, addresses,

telephone numbers, fax numbers, email addresses, and other important information on news outlets and journalists in your area. Do not forget to include information on radio and television outlets. Media outlets often suffer from high employee turnover, so remember to frequently update your media list.

The four questions outlined below can help you work effectively with the media and build strategic alliances:

- 1. Do you know who covers public health issues?** Know the names of specific journalist who cover social, health or lifestyle topics. Try to gather as much information as possible about the journalist(s) you work closely with, including home telephone numbers and work day schedules. You want to be a source of information for this journalist(s), so make sure you give him or her a heads up before a major public health story is about to break.
- 2. Do you know his or her deadlines?** Always know the deadlines of media outlets you work with on a regular basis. If you do not know their deadlines, call editors or reporters and get their advice on when is the best time to call or email them with new information or to drop off documents. Do not assume that just because you gave a journalist or editor story information before his or deadline that this information will be published.
- 3. Do you know the chain of command at this media outlet?** Simply knowing the journalist(s) at a media outlet is not enough. It is important to make a good effort to know the names of newsroom editors, assignment editors, weekend editors, managing editors, editorial board members, and media owners for each news source you work with. These individuals have the most control over what information and stories are published or aired.
- 4. Do you know what the media outlet's target audience is?** Always know what market a media source is targeting. Looking at circulation figures is a good way to determine whether or not your target audience is reading or watching that specific news source.

### ***Building strategic relationships with individual journalists***

It is important to cultivate strong relationships with journalists who frequently cover your organization and its activities or initiatives. Stopping by media outlets in your area is a good way to gather information about specific media outlets and the individuals who work there simply by introducing yourself and reminding them what organization you represent.

Once you have become familiar with a few journalists, ask them what days and times are best to reach them. If you want to schedule a meeting to discuss a potential story, be aware of their deadlines. Never give journalists large amounts of information when they have a deadline looming and expect them to give you their full attention. Also, do not be afraid to contact freelance journalist who occasionally work for the news source you are interested in working with. Freelance writers are often easier to contact and very interested in pursuing new stories.

Be open and receptive to journalists. If a journalist requests a meeting to discuss a story with you, try to make time for them even if it is just for a quick coffee break. Also, you can make the most out of a journalist's time by supplying accurate and credible facts and figures about your public health issue. Never distort data or other information about your issue. Providing journalists with false information will immediately ruin your credibility as an accurate source of information and diminish your ability to spread your message through his or her media outlet.

Finally, never give reporters stories you have written with the assumption they will be published. Journalists are responsible for being as unbiased as possible when reporting to the community about important issues. They might see your story as an attempt to unfairly persuade audiences with false or hyped up information. Let journalist do their job of writing the stories; you keep doing yours by providing them with credible information about your public health issue.

### ***Preparing for interviews***

There is no way to guarantee your interactions with the media will always be proactive. More than likely, you will be working closely with the media when you are reacting to an event, policy decision or other important story that involves your organization.

Personal interviews with journalists will provide them with most of the information they need for the story. This is why it is important to understand what kind of story the journalist covering the story plans to report on, what section it will appear in and in what context. You want to be in control of the message you are giving journalists in order to frame the message in the best way to support your issue or position.

Before agreeing to an in-person or telephone interview, you should always know the following:

1. **Who is the journalist?** If you have worked with him or her in the past, you should know his or her style of reporting. If not, read, watch, or listen to their next stories to see how he or she presents stories. Also, you

- should already have a good understanding about whether or not the journalist working the story has a good relationship with other public health officials in your community.
2. **Who else is the journalist working with for this story?** Knowing who else the journalist is interviewing can help you prepare in advance for what types of questions he or she might ask.
  3. **What topic of information is the journalist interested in?** Do not be afraid to ask the journalist what he or she already knows about the subject. You can always offer to send background information before the scheduled interview. Also, knowing what information the journalist already has can help you identify what angle the journalist is most interested in pursuing.
  4. **When is the interview scheduled for?** Always set the guidelines for the interview ahead of time. Allow for 20 to 30 minutes to conduct the interview. Try to schedule the interview for a time when you will be most prepared, but remember you may have to concede to the journalist's deadlines.
  5. **When will the story appear in print, on radio, or on television?** There is no way to guarantee you will be able to see the story before it is printed or aired, but you should always ask the journalist when it will be available.
  6. **How will the journalist conduct the interview and how will the information they receive be used for the story?** You should always know beforehand whether the interview will be conducted in person or over the phone; if it will be live or pre-recorded; and the form of media it will appear in, i.e. print, radio or television.
  7. **Why is the journalist interested in interviewing you?** Knowing why the journalist is interested in a particular story or event will help you when answering his or her questions.

## ***Interview Do's and Don'ts***

### **Print and Television**

#### **1. Do**

- Practice your interview beforehand.
- Prepare short and concise statements to serve as sound bites.
- Make your statements quotable.
- Have materials on hand (fact sheets, news releases, etc) to give the journalist before he or she leaves the interview site.
- Record the interview with a video camera or tape recorder to ensure your statements were presented fairly and accurately.
- Make eye contact and speak with confidence and authority.

#### **2. Don't**

- Give the journalist more information than they need to know or have asked for.
- Let the journalist control the interview or get you side tracked on another important issue. Only answer questions that are relative to the topic initially agreed upon for the interview.
- Assume you know more than the journalist. If you think the journalist is withholding information, simply ask him or her questions about the topic being discussed.
- Say "no comment". It makes it appear as if you have something to hide.
- Get into an argument.

### **Telephone Interviews**

#### **1. Do**

- Take time to think about what you want to say and the context you want to frame it in.
- Have supporting data and other information in front of you.
- Make sure your voice is animated and energetic. Journalists will get the feel of a story from your conversation.
- Ask questions to make sure the journalist understands your message since he or she cannot visually see you during your responses.

#### **2. Don't**

- Immediately agree to an interview when a journalist first asks you. Find out why he or she is calling, when the deadline for the story is, and then call him or her back.
- Use jargon or other technical terms to describe your public health advocacy issue.

- Record a telephone interview without letting the journalist know and having his or her agreement.

## **Radio**

### **1. Do**

- Keep your voice animated and energetic as you would during a telephone interview.
- Sound confident and in control of your message.
- Use language that helps listeners visualize what you are talking about.
- Make your speech or interview memorable.
- Repeat the important parts of your issue before the end of the interview.

### **2. Don't**

- Speak too fast.
- Allow announcers to control the conversation.
- Answer personal questions or divulge confidential information.
- Become defensive or angry.

### ***General Tips for Working with the Media***

1. Be informed—Keep up-to-date on public health issues and initiatives in your area.
2. Know your local news sources—Pay attention to which media outlets report most often on issues affecting the public's health. Get to know which reporters cover community issues or health and wellness stories.
3. Make the most of your information—Tailor your story to fit with the media outlet's style and needs. Make one point, two at most, and state them clearly and within the first sentence of anything you send to the media. Using your information in a creative way will really get the attention of the news media and your community.
4. Deliver a consistent message—Get your message out to a variety of media outlets to reach more audiences. Make sure you find a unique way to deliver the message each time so that it does not get boring, but consistently repeats the same message. Most importantly, remember to keep your message brief!
5. Create a message the audience will understand—Do not use technical terms or jargon. Keep the language clear and concise. You want to make sure you are promoting a positive image, so choose your words wisely in order to create the ideal image for the message you are sending out.

Developing strong relationships with local officials provides valuable opportunities for getting your advocacy efforts on the public's agenda. Local officials want to know about issues affecting their community. It is up to you to effectively promote the importance of and the role played by your local health department. When you take the time to foster a positive working relationship with local officials, you are developing a base of support that is crucial for achieving your public health goals.

## ***Strategic Tips for Working with Local Media***

Local officials watch the media closely. Therefore, building strategic alliances with your local media will directly help you achieve your public health advocacy plan. Depending on what strategy you choose, your approach to working with the local media will vary. For example, feature stories and news releases depend on generating the interest of a reporter or the editorial board. For these to be successful, you need to have contacts already in place with your local media.

It is important to remember journalists operate on a short time frame. No matter what strategy you employ to get the media's attention, make sure you adhere to deadlines. This is vital to actually getting your story out into the community. Also, remember that positive stories affecting your local community are most likely to grab the media's attention. Use positive stories to effectively promote your public health advocacy plan, especially if local officials or your public health department is involved!

### **Feature Stories**

Feature stories are often reports on a human- or local-interest. They typically contain more background information than a traditional news story and are not considered straight news. Feature stories do not have to be created directly by journalists. Your health department or district may send its own articles to local newspapers.

#### **Tips**

- Think of a story that has not already been done in your community. If the story has already been reported on, try highlighting the issue or problem in a fresh perspective to grab the attention of the local media.
- Schedule interest events and/or visuals to be included with the story. Create the story based on how you want readers to see it in the newspaper!
- Give reporters in your area notice about the story you would like to see in the newspaper or one you are working on. Provide them with necessary background information and any other related articles.

#### **Advantages**

- A feature story can increase awareness in your community about the importance of your advocacy issue.
- Readers associate credible stories to newspapers. If your article is featured, it is more likely to be considered important and taken seriously by local officials and community members.

**Limitations**

- You do not have control over what or how the information you give the local media will be presented in print. Editors and/or reporters may edit the content of the feature story in order to increase public interest or due to space limitations.
- There is no guarantee you will be able to reach your intended audience and influence their perceptions of public health issues and concerns in your area.

## News Releases

News releases are used to convey a particular message to media outlets. News releases represent the perspective of the organization that is sending them out.

**Tips**

- Information in your news release should be factual, because media will use the information in it to help create story ideas and supplement stories that have already been published.
- Provide timely, accurate, and newsworthy information about your public health advocacy efforts or public health issues in your community.
- Make sure your news release has a good “hook” to engage the media and your target audience(s).
- Make sure you have permission to use any quotes or inside information before you send out the news release.

**Advantages**

- When news releases are properly planned and contain newsworthy information, media will incorporate the information into its own news articles.
- News releases can help your department or district gain news coverage and exposure for your public health advocacy efforts.
- News releases can establish a framework for discussion on public health issues.
- Using timely and accurate news releases throughout the course of your public health advocacy plan will position your department or district as a credible authority on public health issues concerning the community.

**Limitations**

- Media often see news releases as an attempt to obtain unwarranted media coverage.
- News releases should be released before articles are published in the media. Providing out-of-date information can harm a potentially positive story about your public health advocacy efforts.

- News releases are not directed to your target audience(s). They are written from a journalist's perspective.

## Opinion-Editorials

Opinion-editorials (or “op-eds”) are very good tools for influencing opinions and perceptions held by your target audience(s). Opinion-editorials address current issues and public policies in your area. Opinion-editorials in general are an essay that takes a stand or position on a particular issue and often provides solutions to the issue or problem in question.

### Tips

- Keep your opinion-editorial within the length requirement provided by newspapers. Opinion-editorials are typically 600 to 800 word pieces.
- Write on an important public health issue already in the news, otherwise newspapers may not run your opinion-editorial, because it lacks “newsworthiness”.
- Make sure the information in your opinion-editorial is credible. It is important not to use opinion-editorials to confuse and/or mislead your target audience(s).
- Be clear and concise when writing your opinion-editorial. State your opinion or main points at the very beginning of the piece, provide supporting facts and data, and suggest how local officials or the community can provide solutions. Remember you are trying to persuade individuals who have undecided opinions about your public health issue or concern.

### Advantages

- Opinion-editorials give you control over the message.
- Opinion-editorials are a great way to address public health issues and reach local officials and community leaders in your area.
- Opinion-editorials can help generate support from a larger audience, thus potentially influencing public opinion.

### Limitations

- It is often difficult to get your opinion-editorial published due to competing articles and/or editorial board selectivity.
- Opinion-editorials may be seen by some readers as an attempt for an individual or organization to persuade public opinion for person gains or other biased reasons.
- There is no guarantee your opinion-editorial will appear in the newspaper at a time that is important to your public health advocacy plan.

- You can damage your relationship with the media if you submit your opinion-editorial to competing publications.

## Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor offer you the opportunity to share your opinion about a recent newspaper article, educate the public about a public health issue, applaud the efforts of local officials and/or community members, or criticize current policies.

### Tips

- Editors prefer to publish letters responding to an article, editorials or other letter to the editor.
- Review newspapers' policies for length requirements.
- Submit letters by email whenever possible.
- Remember your letter must stand on its own. You need to remind readers about the original story.
- Your letter to the editor should begin with a strong statement about comments from an earlier article, editorial or other letter to the editor that recently appeared in the newspaper. Your beginning statement should add discussion to the issue at hand by point out additional information you feel readers ought to know. Don't be afraid to disagree with an editor or point out errors or misrepresentations in previous articles.

### Advantages

- A well-written letter to the editor placed in a timely manner can help persuade public opinion and catch the attention of local officials.

### Limitations

- Editors retain the right to edit your letter to the editor. If your letter is too long, it may be edited for clarity and have parts cut out that are viewed as too long or excessive. After editing, it may convey a different message than originally intended.
- Letters to the editor are not meant to be articles on your public health issue. They typically only focus on one or two major points.
- It is not effective to respond to every article in a newspaper that touches on a public health issue. Many newspapers have policies that limit how frequently they will publish the opinion of one individual or organization. Pick the issues that matter most to your public health advocacy plan!

## Printed Informational Materials

Printed informational materials include fact sheets, newsletters and brochures. For these materials to be successful, you need updated mailing lists of organizations, agencies, and individuals, such as local officials, you want to influence. It is good to have printed informational materials available in both hard copy and electronic format.

### Tips

- Keep these materials brief and simple.
- Make materials visually interesting but appropriate to your readership and/or target audiences.
- Always explain your department's or district's public role and its impact on your public health issue.
- Make the format easy to read, such as by using Question and Answer sections.

### Advantages

- Mailings can reach a large audience.
- Newsletters and fact sheets contain important technical and legal information.
- Your target audience(s) and the larger community are supplied with up-to-date information about your public health advocacy plan and its impact in the area.
- You build relationships with your target audience(s) by providing them with information over a long period of time.

### Limitations

- Mailing lists do not always include every member of your target audience(s).
- Printed informational materials are not the best sources to convey complicated issues or concepts.
- It is difficult to determine what your target audience(s) does with the information it receives.
- Printed informational materials only provide one-way communication.
- Printing and mailing costs can be expensive and restrictive.

## Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements are simply public communication messages that can be created by any organization that are placed in print, on television or on radio. They are designed to persuade, inform, or advocate for the public good.

### Tips

- Public service announcements should not contain a controversial or political angle, only information that is beneficial to your community. Good topics for public service announcements are health and fitness, mental health, safety, environmental issues, community events, etc.
- When writing public service announcements, remember to *inform, persuade, or advocate!*

### Advantages

- Public service announcements can help create awareness in the community about public health issues.
- They have the ability to reach a large audience through print, television and radio.
- The media runs public service announcements free of charge.

### Limitations

- Competition for this free advertising is high, so you must make sure your script is interesting, attention-getting, and directly addresses your target audience(s).
- Effective public service announcements can be costly to produce, because money will be spent on talent, production fees, editing and distribution costs.
- You have little control over when or where the public service announcement is aired or printed. Public service announcements are placed wherever there is available time and space, and this is usually not at the most desirable time or position within a broadcast to reach your target audience(s).

## Advertisements

Advertisements can be placed in papers, magazines, on billboards, television, radio and websites to create public awareness about your public health advocacy issue or promote your current activities.

### Tips

- Determine what days are the best to place your advertisement. For examples, Monday and Sundays may provide the largest audience.
- Avoid placing your advertisement in the newspaper's notice section. Look through your local newspaper and determine what section your advertisement will most likely to seen by your target audience.
- Keep the advertisement clean and simple.
- Make sure your department or district's contact information is accurate and visible.
- Make the advertisement eye-catching to grab attention, but appropriate for its purpose.

### Advantages

- Advertising has the potential to reach a large and diverse audience base.
- Advertising can create public awareness about your public health issue.

### Limitations

- Advertising can be expensive.
- Only a limited amount of information can be placed within advertisement's space or time limit.

## ***How to Develop a Media Advocacy Plan***

### ***A Brief Example***

#### Worksheet 1: Message Development and Media Plan

<b>Who is your target audience(s)?</b>		<u>Primary audience:</u> Teachers and School Board Members. <u>Secondary audience:</u> Parents and other community members.
<b>What action or change in behavior do you want to see from your target audience(s)?</b>		<u>Primary audience:</u> implement Take10! Program in classrooms. <u>Secondary audience:</u> Support/advocate for implementation of the program.
<b>Message Content</b>	<b>What do you want to achieve?</b>	Implementation of the Take10! Program to increase children's physical activity during regular classroom hours.
	<b>Why do you want to achieve it?</b>	To improve the health and wellness of elementary school children through diet and exercise while reducing childhood obesity.
	<b>How steps will you take to achieve it?</b>	Apply for grant funding for the Take10! Program.
<b>Message delivery format(s)</b>		In-person meetings with teachers and School Board. Presentation at PTSA meetings for all 4 schools. Letter to the editor about number of overweight children in your area.
<b>Who will develop this message?</b>		Health Department Nutritionist accompanied by a local physician. Physical Education teacher at local elementary school.
<b>When will the message be delivered to your target audience(s)?</b>		At the next school board meeting.
<b>What additional information should be included in your message that your target audience(s) might be interested in?</b>		Encourage parents, teachers, and school board members to write letters to be included in your grant proposal supporting the Take10! Program.

### ***How to Develop a Media Advocacy Plan***

#### Worksheet 1: Message Development and Media Plan

<b>Who is your target audience(s)?</b>		
<b>What action or change in behavior do you want to see from your target audience(s)?</b>		
<b>Message Content</b>	<b>What do you want to achieve?</b>	
	<b>Why do you want to achieve it?</b>	
	<b>How steps will you take to achieve it?</b>	
<b>Message delivery format(s)</b>		
<b>Who will develop this message?</b>		
<b>When will the message be delivered to your target audience(s)?</b>		
<b>What additional information should be included in your message that your target audience(s) might be interested in?</b>		

## Resources

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