

Working with the Media

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Everyone has seen organizations and agencies make a case for their cause on the television, newspaper and radio. We have all heard stories about how a media consultant has helped improve a political candidate's image by cleverly manipulating the press. There are many ways you can use the media to the benefit of your cause. This section introduces you to working with the media.

WHAT ARE THE MEDIA AND MEDIA ADVOCACY?

Media, which is the plural form of 'medium', are the forms of communication – television and radio; newspapers, magazines, and written materials (or "print media"), and, more often now, the Internet – used to spread or transmit information from a source (which can be a person, an organization, a business, an institution, a government agency, a policy maker, or another media outlet) to the general public.

Advocacy means openly supporting a certain viewpoint or group of people. If you are an advocate for a specific cause, you work to persuade local, state, or federal governments or other entities to grant specific rights, make policy changes, provide money, or create new laws for the good of your cause. For example, if you have a child with a disability, you might advocate for the increased availability of medical services for handicapped children in your city.

Media advocacy is the use of any form of media to help promote an organization's or a company's objectives or goals, which come from the group's vision and mission. For example, suppose you're a media advocate for a non-profit agency working to reduce gang violence in your neighborhood. You would try to present neighborhood issues related to gang violence and the changes you want to make in such a way that you:

- *Change* the way community members look at gang violence. You might want to make it clear who it affects and why, or why kids get involved in gangs in the first place.
- *Create* a reliable, consistent stream of publicity for your agency's issues and activities, including articles and news items about the causes and results of gang violence and about what your agency's work entails; personal interest stories; success stories; interviews with agency staff and current and former gang members, etc..
- *Motivate* community members and policy makers to get involved. You probably have ideas about what could be done with public funding, or with government policies that addressed gang violence. You might have volunteer opportunities, or want to publicize a city- or state-sponsored initiative that needs public input and support. Or perhaps you're trying to raise money for your work. The media can help with all of these...if you know how to work with them.

Media advocates, or the people who work to attract publicity for organizations and causes, know that the media can get a public or social policy message across to the largest audience possible in the least amount of time.

As a media advocate, you can use the media to:

- *Inform* the public about what really causes or contributes to public health and development issues, and educate them about the concept of a healthy community.
- *Recast* problems such as gang violence and drug abuse as public health concerns that affect everyone, not just individuals. If you asked most people whether they wanted to stop gang violence, they'd say yes. But they really don't consider it their problem unless someone they know or are close to is involved. The media can help frame it as everyone's problem, and gang members as everyone's children.
- *Encourage* other professionals and community members to find out more about public health and development issues in general, and to get involved.

A word needs to be said here about using the media in countries without a free press. In most Western democracies, the right of the media to publish or broadcast information (as long as it's not libelous) is protected by law. In many countries, however, the media are owned, directly controlled, or regulated by the government. In others, outlaw groups – rebel armies, organized crime – may wield enormous power. When either of those is the case, media people who report unfavorably on government activities (revealing government sponsorship of death squads, for example, or government collusion in the control of a supposedly independent industry) may be fired or arrested. Those that criticize or expose the activities of powerful criminal or rebel groups may be threatened, and the threats carried out if they don't stop. Every year, a number of editors and reporters around the world are jailed, kidnapped, tortured, assassinated, or executed for investigating suspicious incidents or publishing “treasonous” stories about official corruption. ([The Committee to Protect Journalists](#) documents both official and unofficial action against journalists on its website.)

If your organization is headquartered or operates in a country without a free press, you need to think very carefully about what you ask the media to do, and about what the consequences of a media campaign may be. Are you contradicting the government position on an issue? Are you antagonizing groups whose reaction to opposition is unbridled violence? Are you challenging people with power – those with great wealth or high-level connections? If any of these is the case, you may be putting yourself, your organization, and any media people that work with you in political difficulties, and perhaps in real danger.

There are, of course, situations where the injustice or the suffering involved is so great that there is essentially no choice but to forge ahead. If you do, make sure you understand what the possible results are, and take the appropriate precautions. For both you and the journalists you work with, that may mean changing your routines and lifestyle, and learning ways to protect yourself.

This may all sound overly dramatic, but it is the reality in many places around the world, and has been for at least the past century. Conditions change in particular countries, but there are always places where freedom of information is not valued, and where the powerful or the single-minded simply mow down anyone who gets in their way. When the situation demands it, you may have to stand up and spread the truth...but be aware that you put yourself at risk when you do it, and that any media people you involve will share that risk.

WHY SHOULD YOU ENGAGE IN MEDIA ADVOCACY?

The media have been shown to be a primary source of health information, but be careful! The media can be the best friend or worst enemy of health promotion and community development workers. Reporters' backgrounds vary, and, as much as journalists try to be objective, they have biases like everyone else. In addition, they have to be quick studies: you may have 20 years of experience working with street gangs, and

they may have none, but they have to try to learn everything you know in a day or two. They have to depend on the information they find or are given, and they're going to get some things wrong.

Journalists also try – rightly – to get all sides of the story. If you have opponents, they're likely to speak to them as well as to you, and your opponents may be very persuasive. If you get on the wrong side of media people – treat them with disrespect, don't tell them the truth, don't keep appointments or return phone calls – they'll probably be less sympathetic to you and your issue than if they like and respect you. Their stories will reflect that...or simply not appear at all.

Despite the pitfalls, getting involved with the media can yield great benefits. Newspapers, television, and radio have access to different kinds of people and audiences. Your voice, and the voices of those you're concerned with, can be made many times louder and more convincing through media attention.

Some specific reasons for media advocacy are:

- *To inform the media* – and through them the public – about who and what really contributes to health problems, community deterioration, and the choices that individuals make about the behaviors that affect their health and well-being.
- *To use the media* to pressure policy makers to change or institute policies that affect health and community development.
- *To influence the media* to give your organization or coalition extensive coverage, allowing your members to tell their stories in their own words.
- *To give communities more control* by letting residents who might not otherwise be heard have a stronger voice in the media. Shining the spotlight on a community can give its members the power and the desire to change the policies and situations that affect their lives.
- *To persuade the media* to cover the kinds of stories that will "light a fire" under other community members, so that they get involved and contribute to community-based solutions.

WHEN SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON THE MEDIA?

You should always focus on the media when you are ready. Media coverage can be a two-way street and while good coverage can help your organization, your group should be prepared if the coverage is not what you expected.

GOOD TIMES TO FOCUS EXTRA ENERGY ON THE MEDIA INCLUDE:

- **During the announcement of a new project.** For example, you may want to recruit more funders to your organization, and publicity given to your agency's new initiative to reduce the sale of cigarettes to teens is a good way to alert the public to your plans and needs.
- **When you have information that can be tied to community news.** Perhaps your community has had a rash of burglaries in a particular part of town. You can tie your efforts to increase public safety into the crime problems currently reported in your local paper.
- **When using an opportunity for publicity** could mean the difference between your meeting your goals and your opponents achieving theirs.
- **When your issue has reached crisis proportions,** but few people are aware of it. Elders may be going hungry or freezing to death in their apartments, but the situation can be invisible to most of the population unless the media reports it.

- **When a media opportunity makes the difference between the adoption or rejection of a law or regulation you support or disagree with.**
- **When you've achieved something important.** The media can help you let the community know about the great work you're doing and how it benefits everyone.

WHAT DOES MEDIA ADVOCACY INVOLVE?

There are two ways to answer this question: one is by considering how you work with the media; the other is by examining what you might aim to accomplish through media advocacy.

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Establish personal relationships

As we've mentioned, the first step in working with the media (the first step in working with anyone, in fact) is to establish personal contact with at least one of the people at any media outlet you'll need to deal with. Having a personal contact means that there's a specific person to talk to whenever you call or e-mail, and that you can develop a relationship with that person.

Developing a relationship doesn't necessarily mean starting a friendship – although that can happen – but rather establishing a working relationship that's friendly and comfortable. That implies mutual respect and a willingness to help the other person. It also implies both the comfort to say “no” when you're asked to do something that you can't or that wouldn't be appropriate for your organization, and the comfort to accept a “no” to your request without it damaging the relationship on either side. Having good working relationships with people in the media will make working with them easier and more pleasant for both of you.

Give and you shall receive

An important part of establishing and maintaining a relationship, and of working with the media in general, is giving media people what they need to do their jobs. That includes:

- *Be available when you're needed.* When your contacts in the media call, answer. If you can't respond immediately, get back to them as soon as you can.
- *Be open.* Be as open and generous as you can with information without getting yourself or your organization in trouble.
- *Be trustworthy.* Always tell the truth to the media. If you can't tell the truth – if it would cause a serious problem, or if the timing is wrong – then simply refuse to comment, but don't lie.
- *Be accurate.* Make sure you have the facts before you make a statement. If you don't have the answer to a question, promise to get it and get back to the reporter with it – and do. If you quote statistics, make sure they're from a reliable source, and unquestionable. If your information is consistently accurate, the media will turn to you as a source of information about your issue. You won't have to call them – they'll call you.
- *Alert the media to stories relating to your issue that they might be interested in.* These might include human interest stories, awards or funding given to your organization, information about the issue itself (a national initiative relating to it, for example, or new statistics issued about it), or local or national events (an open house or fundraising concert, a national day devoted to the issue.)

What sells newspapers? Journalists have an obligation to be objective and to report information that's important to us. Regardless of this role as "watchdog", the media must also pay attention to the economics of their private enterprise. Especially since the advent of the Internet – which is how more and more people get

their news – newspapers are struggling to remain in business, and have to take that into account when they consider what to print.

Like other businesses, the media are here today because they can sell something to a consumer population. The media can't survive without steady customers (i.e., advertisers and the general public). Therefore, they have to publish what pleases their paying customers. When you consider stories that they might want, remember that. General interest means bread on the table for the newspaper industry, and they won't be interested unless they can find an angle to your story that will engage readers.

ASK FOR WHAT YOU WANT, WITHIN REASON

If you have a good working relationship with the media, they'll cover your stories, give you good publicity, and highlight your issue. If there's a particular story you want written or aired, suggest it to your contacts and discuss it. Most media coverage is a win-win proposition: you and the media both gain. They're looking for stories to present to the public, and you're trying to get information out to the public. Your collaboration meets both your goals, and is good for the public as well, since it gives them information about an important community issue.

The media can help not only with stories. You might want to start a letter-to-the-editor campaign to draw attention to a particular aspect of your work, to pending legislation, or to the plight of your participants. You may be able to arrange with the local paper to publish a letter a day (written by participants, for the most part) for a certain period. That may be accompanied by a series of interviews on local TV, or by investigative reporting ("Families have to choose between staying warm and eating.").

Sometimes reporters, or even whole media outlets, may take up your cause as their own. In that (ideal) case, they may come up with ideas for stories, promotions, fundraising, and publicity. Working with the media in that situation may be complicated, however, if some of their ideas are inappropriate or off the mark. Having good relationships with media people is crucial here, so that you can be honest about what you think will work or takes the right tone. (You probably don't want to portray your participants as victims, for example, but rather as people struggling with difficult circumstances.)

If your media contacts turn down a request, be gracious. They may not be able or willing to do everything you ask, and that's reasonable. If you're really being ignored over a long period, however, it might be time to ask why, and to try to negotiate a way that you can both get what you need.

ALWAYS BE PLEASANT AND RESPECTFUL

You're much more likely to be treated well and to get what you want if you treat everyone you deal with – not only media people--with respect and good humor. That doesn't mean that you have to ignore abuse, but rather that you're far less likely to experience any if you don't offer any reason for it. It also means that people are much happier to hear from you and return your calls and messages if they know that they'll be talking to someone who won't be abusing them.

Remember that everyone has bad days. Even if someone's short with you, it may be because her back hurts or her dog just died...or worse. The chances are that if you're pleasant and sympathetic, she'll end up being pleasant as well.

On the other hand, there are people in the world who are simply bullies or completely self-centered, and who relate to others by trying to intimidate and control them. If you're dealing with someone like that, you may have to take a different, more assertive course. Even in that case, however, it's important to remain calm and as pleasant as possible. It often has surprising – and positive – results.

GOALS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Agenda setting

Agenda setting is what you accomplish when you influence what the media covers (media agenda), what people talk about (public agenda), and what policy makers do during legislative session or in committee (policy or political agenda).

To set an agenda:

- Let the media and public know what your concerns are
- Get the general public to acknowledge that your issues are important; that is, get them talking about what is important to you

This step may have several stages, depending on how much the public knows about your issue. You may have to start by persuading the media to cover the issue at all (that's setting the media agenda). If they're already doing so, the next stage is to draw the connection between the issue and what happens in your community. Often, people are aware of an issue, but assume that it only exists elsewhere. Once people understand that the issue is a local one that could affect themselves and their families and friends (setting the public agenda), it's time to steer the media toward reporting on how it's being addressed, and what kinds of solutions have worked elsewhere.

This whole process may take some time, but it will be worth it for several reasons: you will have educated the media about the issue (so they don't approach it in a simplistic way) and convinced them that it is truly important. They will have, in turn, raised the consciousness of the public to the point where the community is ready to act.

- Generate some sort of action. Create a policy change or new policy surrounding your issue or get more people involved.

The role of the media here is to both generate and reflect public opinion on the issue that will then influence policy makers to act appropriately. Government bodies, corporations, and other large entities are subject to inertia (the tendency of a body at rest to remain at rest--i.e. for things to stay the same.) They often need the push of a media campaign that tells them public opinion demands some action before they'll move. Such a campaign can set (or reset) the political agenda in your favor.

Agenda setting helps you make connections with the media and the people who pay attention to them. It also sets the stage for your next trick, shaping the debate.

Shaping the debate

Shaping the debate is trying to change the way people talk about public health problems. Traditionally, the media tell an audience, "This is what the problem is"—informing the public about a problem – and "This is the solution" – usually summed up in a quick health message such as, "Just say no".

The media's habit of giving tidbits of information about problems and then providing quick-fix solutions (e.g., "This is your brain... this is your brain on drugs... Any questions?") can reinforce the idea that if a person has a health problem or is poor, it's her own fault. This kind of simplistic media picture often influences the general public to believe that complex problems have quick and easy solutions.

Once you gain greater control over the way community health and development issues are reported by the media, then the community can work for improvements.

Advancing a policy

Advancing a policy is a way to use the media to put pressure on policy makers. But media coverage created by media advocates has to be built and backed up in such a way that decision makers feel or anticipate pressure from the people who elected them. This pressure, then, motivates policy makers to take action.

Like setting a public agenda, this can take time. Just as with the public, you have to make sure that policy makers know the issue exists and understand its implications for them and their constituents. You also have to realize that the media alone won't bring about policy change.

Media pressure has to be combined with messages from constituents – whether through direct contact (e-mail, phone calls, letters), or through demonstrations, petitions, and other public forms of direct action. The media can help to get those messages flowing, but it won't happen overnight. And even once legislators or other policy makers have heard the messages, change may take a while. You have to keep the pressure on until it can't be ignored, and then continue to keep it on even after policy change has occurred, to make sure there's no backsliding.

GETTING ATTENTION

The primary methods used to public eye include:

- *News media* - television, newspaper, and radio journalists - provide the broadest and most in-depth coverage of your organization. Placing interviews and stories is free, and the news media are reasonably credible – people take seriously what they read in the papers, or hear and see on radio and television. Disadvantages are that the attention span of the media is short, and you have to compete with a huge amount of other information just to get your stories told. That's why having good media connections is so important.
- *Public service announcements*, or PSAs are similar to paid ads. However, PSAs are free because broadcasting stations use them to fulfill a regulation requiring them to "serve in the public interest". While PSAs can help you keep your issue before the public, they give you very little control over when and how they will air, and the content is usually short (often 30 seconds) and bland. They also can't address immediate news or needs.
- *Press releases* are write-ups – usually one page – that inform the media about your organization's news. Press releases let you control what you want to say and when, but media outlets may or may not use them, or may edit them down or change them. They may not always look the same when they go out to the public as they did when you turned them in.
- *Press conferences* are media events in which you present a statement, usually about an achievement or newsworthy event relating to your organization or program, answer questions, or make announcements to a roomful of people who represent different media outlets. In Shakespeare's play, *Henry IV, Part I*, when Owen Glendower brags that he can call up spirits, his son-in-law, Harry Percy, replies that anyone can do that – the question is whether they will come when you call them. You can call a press conference, but the media may not come, or may not choose to report on it afterwards. In addition, they usually have to be organized quickly in order to be timely, and they take careful planning and a lot of legwork to make sure that media do come when you call.
- *Paid advertisements* – ads like the ones Chrysler, Procter & Gamble, and General Mills buy for their products. Paid ads give you a great deal of creative and other control – you can choose your media outlets, the times and places that the ads run, the wording and the style of them, etc. The major drawback, of course, is that they can be expensive, especially on TV. An ad campaign requires resources, and you have to decide whether those resources can be better used in running your program and organization than in advertising.

So there are a lot of different ways to get the attention of the media and the general public. Which one is right for you? What you choose to use in your media campaign depends on what you want to say, who you want to say it, and who you want them to say it to.

HOW DO YOU SET UP A MEDIA CAMPAIGN?

A media advocacy campaign is similar to a political campaign in that the people who run it need to plan it out; they need to have specific strategies, or plans and tools, in mind before they take any action. As you gear up for a media advocacy campaign, you'll need to prepare yourself to do business with the media. It's your job as a media advocate to understand your organization's goals and to know how you want the media to help you advance those goals.

PREPARE YOUR ORGANIZATION

Designate a media coordinator or coordinating group. This person or group develops and implements media strategy, and acts as the bridge between the media and your organization or coalition. They should approve anything that's destined for the media before it leaves the organization, to make sure that your message is consistent, and that no one is saying anything he (or the organization) will later regret.

The media coordinator or a member of the coordinating group should also act as spokesperson with the media for the organization. She should be articulate and politically savvy, able to think quickly, and equipped with all the facts, statistics, and other information available about your issue and your organization or coalition. She should have an open manner, come across well on radio and TV, and be able to establish friendly relationships with media people. (That's why press secretaries to politicians are often former media people themselves.) She'll also need to be prepared to speak with media representatives at any time, using extra caution with words and language that can be manipulated.

Be aware that the representatives of the media are human: they make mistakes, they have prejudices, and they want to present the best and most interesting story they can. In practice, that means that if you talk with the media regularly, your remarks will be misquoted and/or misinterpreted from time to time (usually unintentionally, but not always, depending on the character of the media outlet you're dealing with), and you'll have to learn how to repair the damage without sounding like a whining child.

You should also realize that there's no such thing as "off the record" (meaning "I'll tell you this if you promise not to print or broadcast it.") Assume that anything you say will turn up in a media report, probably with your name attached to it. Don't say anything to the media unless you're willing to see it made public. All politicians know this, and you should, too.

Make sure that everyone in the organization understands both your media strategy and your message, so that if someone is approached unexpectedly by the media, he can answer questions consistently, and will know what he should say and what he shouldn't.

IDENTIFY YOUR OBJECTIVES

Ask yourself why you need to set up a media campaign in the first place. What is your organization missing? Is an advocacy campaign the best way to get it? What are you going to use the media for? Do you only want to inform the public of important facts or do you want to get community members involved in your issues? Do you want to change policies or create new ones? Do you want to expose your opponents? Do you want to build support for your goals and objectives? Clarifying why you want to work with the media will clarify what they can do for you...and what you can do for them.

SELECT A TARGET AUDIENCE

Anyone who gets involved in public health and development issues can make a difference. But, because the people who live in one community can have many different opinions and preferences, you can't reach everyone with just one message. You will need to narrow your audience and decide whom you want to target. Whom do you want to reach? The general public? Policy makers? People who are undecided about your issues? People who don't know about your issues? People who are affected? Different populations respond to different kinds of messages – sometimes in subtle ways.

During a campaign to highlight the need for adult literacy education, co-sponsored by the U.S. government and several national media outlets, it became clear that different types of ads had different effects. Those that emphasized the problem and its results – the number of people with literacy problems, the fact that they were usually stuck in the lowest-paying jobs, the problems their kids had in school – inspired calls from people who wanted to volunteer. Ads that featured current or former learners talking about their success, and about how much better their lives were as a result of their participation in literacy programs, drew calls from people who wanted to sign up for classes.

MAKE A PLAN

Because media advocacy activities can be time and money-consuming, it's important to put your best foot forward when you begin a campaign. Carefully consider when you should start your campaign, who you will contact first, what issues you will tackle, how you will present them. What forms of media would you like to use? Television, print media (magazines, newspapers, newsletters, press releases, etc.), websites, blogs, podcasts, e-mail, radio, billboards, public service announcements, news stories, feature stories?

BE FLEXIBLE

Even though you put a lot of thought into your media advocacy plan, be prepared to change your plans and goals if necessary. Remember, the news in our world can change in the blink of an eye, and you need to be ready to react to an opportunity. When the political or financial climate shifts, are your goals still feasible for your organization? Do you want to continue to send the same media message, or will you reframe it? Should you use other media outlets, rather than those you've been using?

KEEP YOUR EAR TO THE GROUND

What do people talk about these days, in your community and nation-wide? What can polls and surveys tell you about the hot topics they talk about? How much do people know about your issues? What kinds of misconceptions or prejudices can you find in public opinion? Knowing the answers to questions like these can tell you what your media campaign should focus on, and how you should frame your message to get the greatest impact.

KEEP AT IT INDEFINITELY

Media campaigns never really end. Once you've achieved your immediate goals, you have to maintain them, and you'll have other goals to work toward as well. Sustaining your relationships with the media and continuing to get coverage of the issues you're concerned with are necessary if you're in this work for the long run.

Contributor

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Online Resources

[CDC Media Advocacy](#) is a comprehensive guide for media advocates provided by the Centers for Disease Control.

[Early Childhood Advocacy Toolkit](#) provides resources on framing your message and communicating with the media as well as policy makers and elected officials.

[Media Advocacy Manual](#). This manual provided by the American Public Health Association offers information on connecting with the media through newspapers, internet, radio, television, and magazines.

[Media Advocacy 101](#) is a website provided by the Berkley Media Studies Group that includes an hour-long keynote address by Lori Dorfman about the approach of media advocacy.

[Media Advocacy Guide](#) is a guide provided by the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists.

[Media Communication Tip Sheet](#) provides tips on contributing to the local news, tailoring language and style for the media, developing messages to reach the public, and evaluating media coverage.

[Media Advocacy Basics](#) is a mini-guide for hospice advocates and professionals.

[News Media: A Different Kind of Advocacy](#) is an excellent guide from the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors for working with the media.

[Using Print Media as Advocacy](#) is an article titled, "How to Write a Letter to the Editor," with tips on effective communication with the media.

Print Resources

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Wallack, L., Woodruff, K., Dorfman, L., Diaz, I. (1999). *News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*. SAGE Publications, 1st edition. This book provides step-by-step instructions for working with the media to promote social change.