

APHA

Media Advocacy Manual

● *Newspapers*

● *Television*

● *Radio*

● *Magazines*

● *Internet*

**Connecting with the media
Connecting with the media
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American Public
Health Association
800 I St. N.W.
Washington DC 20001-3710
(202) 777-APHA
Fax: (202) 777-2534
Web site: www.apha.org
E-mail: comments@apha.org

“If you don’t exist in the media, for all practical purposes, you don’t exist”

— Daniel Schorr, commentator, National Public Radio

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ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Advocacy is used to promote an issue in order to influence policy-makers and encourage social change. Advocacy in public health plays a role in educating the public, swaying public opinion or influencing policy-makers.

Media coverage is one of the best ways to gain the attention of decision-makers, from local elected officials to members of Congress. All monitor the media. Every congressional office has a staff person who monitors the news in the district or state and clips articles that mention the representative or senator by name. These articles are circulated to staff each week. Decisions to support legislative initiatives are frequently influenced by the media coverage.

Getting media coverage can be very easy. By taking a few minutes to write a letter to the editor, any APHA member or public health advocate can reach thousands of other citizens, including policy-makers and their staff. Investing just a little more time can lead to significant payoffs for public health.

You can also use the media to publicize community or state level public health events. Any meeting merits mention in the local newspaper's community calendar, and a workshop or a meeting with an outside speaker may warrant an article as well. Use each of these events to contact local reporters, editorial boards and radio and television talk show hosts. They may want to cover your event, and even if they do not, they will look to you as a resource person when they write about these issues in the future.

“Public health is what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.”
— The Institute of Medicine

PLANNING YOUR MESSAGE

Before you can begin your advocacy, you need to have a plan. You need to know what the message is that you are trying to get across and you need to know any actions you want to be taken by the public, by other organizations or by legislators.

First, you should establish what your overall goal is. Are you trying to motivate the community to take action on an issue? Are you advocating for a policy or law? Or are you just trying to bring attention to a certain issue? It is important that you have an overall goal before you start so that you can target your audience through the use of the media.

Here are some questions to ask yourself when developing your overall strategy.

- **What is the problem you are highlighting?** — This could be underage drinking, tobacco use, etc. But you should narrow your problem to a specific population. For example, if you start out trying to end all cigarette smoking, you will have a hard time developing a solution and gaining support. But if you narrow it down to underage smoking, you will have an easier time of coming up with a solution.
- **Is there a solution to it? If so, what is it?** — Again, try to narrow this down to a specific population. If you are trying to combat underage smoking, you could advocate for stricter laws for those who sell tobacco to minors.
- **Who can make the solution possible? Whose support do you need to gain in order to make the solution happen?** — In the example of stricter laws for those who sell tobacco to minors, you would need to target lawmakers. You could do this on a local level or on a national level, depending upon your organization.
- **What do you need to do or say to get the attention of those who can make the solution happen?** — Do you want to use the media to get your message out by holding a news conference or briefing? Or do you want to use advertising to get the attention of the public? Remember, not all advocacy requires the use of the media. Sometimes it is easier to get your message out through marketing and advertising than through news releases and conferences.

Once you have defined your overall goal, then you can design the message that you want to get out in the public. You want your message to be simple and clear. You should point out the problem you are addressing, why your intended audience should be concerned with this problem and what should be done about the problem. Make your message powerful – persuasive and compelling. You will need to say something compelling to capture the attention of the public. Try to create a message that is new and put a human face on it. By humanizing the issue, your issues will have a greater impact on the public than if you just state statistics. Finally, make sure your message targets your intended audience. If you're targeting lawmakers, you will use different language than if you're trying to target the general community.

CONTACTING THE MEDIA

Creating a Media List

Before you begin to contact the media in your area, you should familiarize yourself with the local media. Watch the evening broadcasts and read the paper daily to get a feeling for how different stations and papers cover public health issues. This will give you an idea of who would be most likely to cover your story. Find out which reporters cover public health and track them to see how they cover the issues and if this is the type of reporter you would want to cover your story.

It is also important to think about the audience that the station/paper reaches. You want to make sure that you use the best outlet to reach your intended audience. If you want to mobilize the community, look at a local paper whose readers are mainly in the community you are trying to reach. If you are trying to get the attention of legislators, you may want to find a paper that covers politics and reaches a broader audience. If you want to send a message to your peers, you may want to try a trade magazine (i.e. Non-Profit Times, Healthcare Business Magazine).

Once you know what papers or stations you want to reach, you should create a list of media contacts. This list is perhaps the most important tool for conducting media advocacy. Developing such a list takes time, and it should continuously evolve. You need to get contact information. You will need the names of reporters, editors or producers, their address, phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail addresses so that you will be able to send them your information in the format most appropriate for the type of story. (Also, some reporters read their e-mail – others do not. It pays to find out which type of format your key reporters prefer.) Keep all of this information for future reference.

To get this information, call the station or paper and ask. You can find out who covers a certain beat (a reporter's "beat" is the issue area he or she covers on a regular basis). If you are not sure with whom you need to talk, you can ask to speak to the news or assignment editor. This is the editor who assigns articles to the reporters and could help send you in the right direction.

Some Relevant Public Health Reporter Beats

Health	Environment	Children's Issues
Tobacco	Public Policy	Science
Medicine	AIDS	Fitness
Health Economics	Health Business	Healthcare

Phone numbers for newspapers, radio and television stations are usually listed in the phonebook. You will need the number of the news desk and once you have that, you can call and get the information you need. More information can be found in resource books such as *Bacon's Media Directories* (www.bacons.com), *Burrelle's Media Directories* (www.burrelles.com), *News Media Yellow Book* (leadershipdirectories.com) and *Gale*

Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media (www.gale.com). While expensive, these reference books can often be found in local libraries. Also, many stations and papers list contact information on their Web sites.

You could also ask other organizations in your area if they have a media list and share your information. Make sure the organization you are getting your list from focuses on the same type of issues as you do. If they do not, you may end up with a list of reporters who would not be interested in covering your story.

Once you have your list, keep it updated. Keep media sign-in sheets from any news events you hold and keep a log of all contacts you make with the media. Update your list with new contacts. This will keep you up-to-date on who covers which beat so that you will always have that information at your fingertips.

Finally, remember to create a good working relationship with the media. It will work to your advantage if you have a few “friends” in the media. That way, when you are contacting the media, you know that you have a few reporters you can rely on. This will make it easier than trying to contact everyone on your list. One well-placed, comprehensive story told from your organization’s point-of-view, has a greater impact than a smattering of brief stories that don’t adequately convey your message.

Before Making Contact With the Media

Once you have your message ready and know whom you want to contact in the media, take some time to prepare before you contact anyone. Divide up responsibility in your office, or have volunteers help out. You can divide up responsibility according to talent: designate one person to do any writing that needs to be done, have one person act as spokesperson, etc. This will make the workload lighter.

When choosing a spokesperson, make sure the person you choose is comfortable speaking with the media, answering questions, is knowledgeable on the issue and can stay calm in stressful situations. Dealing with the media can be very frustrating and fast-paced so it is important that your spokesperson be able to remain calm in these situations.

Also, designate certain people on your staff who will speak with the media. They should be the only people to communicate with the press. This way, the media will not get conflicting information from your staff, but the planned message you are trying to get across.

Remember, know the message you are trying to get across and know your information before you speak to the media. Reporters work on deadline and need to get accurate information from you in a timely manner. If a reporter makes contact with you, you do not have to speak to them right away, but may want to take a message and call them back once you are prepared to speak to them. But remember to ask when their deadline is and call back promptly. If you call back after deadline, you may have missed your chance to get your story out.

WAYS OF USING THE MEDIA

There are many different ways you can use the media in advocacy. You can hold news conferences, write letters to the editor, give interviews or arrange editorial board meetings. The method you choose should be the best one to promote your issue.

News Release

Many reporters gather information for upcoming stories from news releases. The news release tells the reporter the who, what, when, where and why of a news story. This information helps the reporter determine whether to write an article or otherwise cover your “news.” But remember, reporters receive many news releases over the week, so in order to get yours noticed, your release should quickly grab the reporter or editor’s attention and the rest should convince him or her of the issue’s news value.

News releases generally follow a standard format. The format is designed to give the reporter or editor all the information he or she needs quickly. By following the same format, all pertinent information, such as contact information, is in the same place and easy for the reporter to find.

The following is the standard format for a news release:

- **Organization’s name.** The name of your organization should run across the top of the release. The release should be run on organizational letterhead if possible.
- **Contact information.** Below the name of your organization, you need to put the name and phone/fax number and/or e-mail address of the staff person the press should contact to get more information. This is usually located on the top right-hand corner.
- **Release date.** This tells the reporter when the information in the release can be published or broadcast. The release can be for immediate release to the public, in which you can put “For immediate release” on the top. The reporters can also hold the information until a certain date. For this, you would need to put “Embargoed until (release date and/or time).” The release date is usually located on the top left-hand corner.
- **Headline.** The headline is important. It is a short phrase summing up the essence of the release. This will run under the contact information and above the body of the release.
- **Body.** This is where you will tell the reporter/editor the who, what, where, when and why of your story.

Your release should follow the inverted pyramid style of writing, in which the conclusion or most important information goes first, followed by supporting information. This style

of writing is necessary for any news materials because your readers are busy and bombarded with many different pieces of news. You can't count on the reader to get through the entire page so you must give the most important information – the essentials of the story – at the start.

- **The first paragraph, the lead, should be the most powerful.** This is where you should tell the most important information of the release, in order to get the interest of the person reading it.
- **Keep your sentences and paragraphs short and use plain language.** Don't use acronyms or jargon. Also, you should try to keep your release short, one or two pages double-spaced should suffice.
- **Use quotes if possible.** This puts a human face on the news you write. The quote should substantiate the lead, be from a significant person and add a piece of information. Try to put a quote high in the release, within the first three or four paragraphs.
- **Finish your release with a “tag.”** This is usually one paragraph of “boiler plate” information to fill in information holes such as a paragraph description of APHA, your organization or the goals of the work you've highlighted in the release.
- **End.** Reporters/editors look for a symbol at the end of the release to tell them there is no more information. If your release is more than one page, at the end of the first page, type —more— to signal the release continues on the next page. At the end of the release, type —30—, END, or ###. This will be centered on the bottom of the page below the tag.

News releases can be mailed, faxed or e-mailed to reporters. You may want to call the reporter to make sure that he or she has received your release or that the right reporter has it. Remember, reporters are often busy meeting deadlines so make your call brief and to the point.

Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor is the simplest way to communicate an opinion to the general public. The chances of having the letter printed greatly increases at smaller or less prominent newspapers or magazines. On average, many local papers publish up to 80 percent of the letters they receive. Of course, if you hope to have the letter published in *The New York Times*, then it will compete against hundreds or thousands of other letters.

The most important caveat is to write a letter no longer than what the target newspaper tends to publish. A much longer letter is more likely to be discarded, and if it is not discarded, it is the editor who will decide what information will be cut in order to fit the length requirements. Short, pithy pieces are best.

Before you begin writing your letter, look at the editorial pages of different newspapers. Often, specifications on writing letters to the editor will be on this page. If not, follow these general tips for writing your letter.

- **Be brief and concise.** Focus your letter on just one concept or idea. Limit yourself to 250-300 words.
- **Refer to other stories.** If possible, refer to other articles, editorials or letters the newspaper has recently published. This should be done as soon as possible after the article was published. This will increase its chances of being printed.
- **Include contact information.** Include your name, address and daytime and home phone number so the paper can contact you with any questions. Also, include any titles and degrees that are relevant to help the media know you have expertise. And make sure to refer to your organization in your letter.

Op-ed

Another way of contacting the media is by writing an opinion piece to be run on a newspaper's opinion-editorial page. Writing an opinion article offers an opportunity to present an extended argument. They run on the page opposite the newspaper's editorials and are typically local and timely. Unlike editorials, op-eds are written by members of the community rather than by journalists. But like editorials, an op-ed often carries more weight than a letter to the editor; it presents a point of view with much greater detail and persuasion than a short letter allows.

Careful planning will increase your chances of placing an op-ed. In addition to submitting an article, mount a campaign to get it published. Be sure to follow up within a week after submitting an article to ensure that it was received and to answer questions the editor might have.

Before you submit your op-ed, you will want to:

- **Obtain guidelines.** Call and ask the editorial page editor or op-ed editor for the newspaper's op-ed policies, i.e., submission guidelines such as length (usually 700-800 words).
- **Talk to the editor.** Try to arrange an appointment with the editorial staff to discuss your unique qualifications for writing an op-ed and the issue's urgency. Use the meeting to sell your issue, your organization and yourself. Some newspapers will not take time to meet with you; they will make a decision based solely on the article. At the very least, the editor might have useful suggestions on how to write your article and improve its chances of being published.

- **Localize it.** Adopt a local angle in your op-ed, even on a national issue. Since you're probably competing for space with nationally syndicated columnists, a local angle can make your article more appealing.

Most papers require exclusivity; you may only submit your op-ed to their publication. If they decline to print it, you are free to submit the piece to another publication.

Editorial Board Meeting

The most powerful way to win support for your issue or reach your member of Congress or local official through the media is to gain the editorial support of your newspaper. Arranging an editorial board meeting will take more time than writing a letter to the editor, but the results are worth the effort. This will give you the chance to persuade the editor why the newspaper's readers would be interested in your story and this could increase the likelihood of more coverage by the newspaper of your issue.

Here are some tips on arranging a meeting:

- **Call the editorial page editor.** Briefly explain the issue and request a meeting. It is best if the issue is tied to a particular news event or local concern.
- **Prepare for the meeting.** Study the issue, write down key facts and list your main points. Think through the local angle. Why should your community or the newspaper's readers – and the editor – care about the issue? It might also help to familiarize yourself with the kinds of editorials and columns that appear in the paper. This will give you insight into the paper's position on certain issues.
- **Present your issue.** You might meet with one editor, or perhaps several editorial writers and reporters will decide to join your meeting. You will have five or 10 minutes to state your case as persuasively as possible, after which you will be asked questions. If you do not know the answers, offer to find out and get back to the editor later.
- **Follow up.** Leave behind some printed material reinforcing the points you have made. After the meeting, send a note of thanks to the editor. If you do not see an editorial within a few days, make a follow-up phone call to the editor. If the editor has decided not to write on your issue, ask if the paper would print an op-ed or at least a letter to the editor submitted by you. Whatever you achieve, you have established yourself and APHA as a source of information on public health issues in your community.

Interview

Another way of working with the media is to give interviews. There are more than 10,000 television and radio stations nationwide, each with producers constantly on the lookout for story ideas and guests to have on their shows. Local talk shows have also become a significant force in national politics. As a member of APHA, you know more about public health issues than most people in your community and can credibly share your concern and knowledge on a local talk show.

Following are some tips to help you arrange and prepare for an interview.

- **Arrange an appearance.** Call or write the talk show host or producer. Explain your interest and experience in a particular aspect of public health, and outline why people in your community should care. Again, it is best to have an upcoming event or a local angle as a “news peg” to make your pitch more attractive.
- **Familiarize yourself with the program.** Learn the name of the host, the show, the station and names of other guests appearing on your program. Find out whether the interview will be live or taped, if there will be call-in questions and the length of the interview. Listen to the program to become familiar with the style and positions of the host and the format of the show.
- **Prepare for the interview.** Write out the most important points you hope to make, including anecdotes and personal stories you want to share, questions you might anticipate and answers to those questions. Role-play answering those questions with a partner. Also, you may want to think out some counter-arguments to your issue and prepare responses to them. Remember that the media usually presents both sides of a story so you want to be able to counter your opponents’ viewpoints.

When being interviewed, there are several things to keep in mind to help make the interview go smoothly.

- **Speak in a natural, audible tone.** Remember to remain calm during the interview, even during stressful moments. Do not get defensive or angry. Keep in mind that the reporter decides what goes in the story or what doesn’t, so *you don’t want to say anything that you would not want to see on the evening news.*
- **Avoid jargon and acronyms.** Remember, not everyone is an expert on your issue. You should use language that will be easily understood by someone outside of your field of expertise.
- **State your message.** Answer interview questions by stating your main message first, followed by supporting points. Use the questions as springboards into developing your message. Present your arguments as concisely as possible while showing enthusiasm for your subject. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. Also, don’t be afraid to speak up if the reporter misstates something or has a wrong fact.

- **Be concise.** It is important to keep your answers short, especially in broadcast interviews. Soundbites in broadcast interviews usually run around eight seconds long, so you want to get your message out quickly. Print reporters also look for concise quotes for their stories. Say what you have to say then wait for the next question. Don't feel compelled to fill "dead air" while waiting for the next question. Some reporters may wait a beat before asking another question, hoping you will jump in and fill the silence. This often results in remarks being made that you wouldn't normally want on the record.
- **Tape yourself.** You may want to bring along a tape recorder to make your own record of what was said in the interview. This way, if there is an error or misquote in the story, you will have your own record of what was actually said. Make sure that everyone involved in the interview knows you are taping it.

When being interviewed for television, there are several additional things to remember.

- **Clothing.** Avoid solid white or black clothing and anything with tight stripes. Solid designs in gray, blue and brown look best. Avoid large, flashy jewelry. Large jewelry will create a reflection off the TV lights. Dress professionally. If you wear a uniform to work (lab coat, military, etc.) consider wearing that for your interview.
- **Look at the interviewer.** Unless otherwise instructed, look directly at the host. Do not look at the camera. Relax and avoid nervous gestures or mannerisms. Use, but do not overuse, your smile and hand gestures.
- **Sit straight.** You want to sit up straight, but not stiff, and lean slightly forward in your chair. Do not lean into the microphone. Avoid swiveling in your chair. If standing, stand up straight. Do not place feet side to side, but plant more weight on one foot. This will keep you from swaying.
- **You're always "on."** Remember, even if you are not speaking, you may still be on camera. And any comments you make prior to or after the formal interview may be caught on camera or tape, so mind your actions.

After the interview, follow up with a note of thanks to the reporter, host or producer of the program. You can often request a taped copy or written transcript of the program for your files. If you provide a videocassette or audiocassette prior to the program, they may make a tape for you. Listen and learn for your next on-air experience. If there is an error in the story, contact the reporter and point out the error and ask for a correction. But remember to remain calm. Also, try to go directly to the reporter to fix the error instead of going over his or her head to the editor or producer. Doing this should only be done if there is a major mistake and the reporter will not acknowledge it. By going over the reporter's head, you may ruin any working relationship you had developed, so this step should only be done in extreme circumstances.

Media Event

In some cases, you may want to consider holding a media event to disseminate your information. The two most common media events are the press briefing and news conference.

A press briefing is held to provide journalists with background information on an issue. A briefing is a good way to provide journalists with an update of key developments and issues, as well as your organization's work and policy, on a certain topic. These meetings can be informal and are a good way to make contacts with the media.

A news conference is held to announce a major story — such as the release of a report, a new policy that has been developed or your organization is taking a new major initiative on an issue.

Press briefings and news conferences are major undertakings and require a lot of work and preparation. But they can be very valuable when you have important information to release, a critical situation has developed, an important speaker has become available or you have a dramatic point of presentation to make on an important issue. Most often, contacting reporters individually or holding a briefing for a small group is a better use of time and resources. But on occasion, you may need to hold a news conference to draw attention to a particular public health issue.

While such an event takes preparation and a lot of legwork, one committed person or a small group sharing the work can undertake it. Consider dividing up the work among your staff to make it easier. Following are a few suggestions for planning and holding a media event.

- **Location.** You will want to find a well-known location that is convenient for journalists to get to. Make sure the room is not too large. This way there won't be a lot of empty seats, giving the impression that few journalists showed up. Also, make sure there is a podium and a table long enough for all of the speakers to sit at. There should also be adequate open space for television cameras, lights and microphones. Usually, television cameras will be placed in the back of the room so there should be plenty of open space in the back. The room should also have plenty of electrical outlets. Popular sites for media events include hotels, local press clubs or public buildings near media offices. Also appropriate is using a location that highlights public health as a backdrop for your issue, i.e., a local health department, a children's hospital, a school or a community park.
- **Timing.** Journalists have very busy schedules so timing is important. The best time to hold an event is around 10 a.m. or 11 a.m. on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Plan around competing events, holidays or other activities that may impede journalists from attending your event.
- **Contacting the media.** Send a media advisory several days to a week in advance if you have the luxury of time. If not, e-mail and fax the advisory. Include in the media

advisory the location, time and date of the event, with brief directions if necessary, the names of speakers and an eye-catching summary of the presentation. Follow up with phone calls to the journalists several days later. Call a day or two before the news conference to draw their attention to the release and ask if they or someone from their office plan to attend. This is critical. Newsrooms are swamped with releases, faxes and invitations to events. A follow-up phone call will ensure that your contacts know about the event and remember to put it on their calendars.

- **Materials.** You will want to have material at your press event to give out to the media. The easiest way to hand out material is to put together a press kit. A press kit usually contains news releases, fact sheets and biographies of speakers as well as copies of any reports, case studies, etc., that are being released at the event. Make sure you have plenty of copies of all material with you in case more people attend than planned for. Also, have a sign-in sheet for any journalists attending. Remember to use this sheet to add to and update your media contact list.
- **Prepare.** Set up the room for the number of people that you invited. Don't be disappointed if fewer people showed up than expected. Attendance is hard to predict. Your event may be competing against another news event. Select a moderator for the event. Determine beforehand who will make opening remarks, introduce each speaker and direct questions following the presentation.
- **Resource people.** Have extra people from your staff available to assist at the event. You will need someone to assist journalists before and during the conference. Have some help in handing out media kits, managing the sign-in sheet, directing journalists to phones or handle any other last minute details.
- **Presenting.** Make your formal statement as brief as possible – 15 or 20 minutes – while still getting in all the pertinent information and allow time for questions. A general rule of thumb is to limit the number of speakers to no more than five and limit each speaker to three to five minutes. Remember, a news conference is for the media to ask questions, not attend a lecture. Also, start your event on time. Journalists work on deadlines and will need plenty of time to get your story in before deadline.
- **Interviews.** Allow time at the conclusion of the event to take personal interviews, arrange photos or answer more detailed questions.
- **Follow up.** After the event, thank reporters for attending and ask if they need any further information. You may also want to fax or e-mail material to those journalists who were unable to attend. Also, make sure your staff knows who to direct phone calls to from journalists calling for follow-up.
- **Feedback.** Respond in writing to any news stories your event or media outreach garners. Reporters pay attention to response letters – both positive and negative – and will often integrate the comments into future stories.

END NOTES

Cultivating good relationships with reporters will benefit your organization and the public health issues that you work to further. Showing reporters that you value their work – by following the news, finding the appropriate reporter to pitch, expressing your news concisely and giving reporters feedback – will help them value yours.

Some sources for information on media advocacy:

- *News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*; by Lawrence Wallack, Iris Diaz, Lori Dorfman, and Katie Woodruff; Sage Publications, Inc., 1999.
- *Media Advocacy and Public Health: Power for Prevention*; by Lawrence Wallack, Lori Dorfman and Makani Themba, Sage Publications, Inc., 1993.