

# **Top 10 Tips for Effective Media Advocacy (developed with input from area journalists!)**

## **1. Know your audience and Sell your story – why is it ‘news’?**

Don't pitch a story to a newspaper that you never read or a television station that you never watch – you won't know how they cover stories, what they have covered recently, and how your issue can fit their needs. Especially if you are trying to pitch an in-depth article, an editorial, or a television news profile, pay special attention to coverage for a few weeks before approaching the outlet. Use the archives to see how that entity has covered your issue in the past. Understanding this audience is key to figuring out how to sell your particular story – how can you frame your issue in such a way that it is likely to resonate with this particular media outlet (for example, if your issue is HIV/AIDS, would they be more interested in a scientific angle, discussing the latest treatment developments, a sociological discussion about public attitudes towards those infected, or a human interest story about someone living with the disease?)

## **2. Make a personal connection**

Do *you* respond to 'to whom it may concern' messages? Find out the people who cover your 'beat' at major news outlets, and, at the least, use their names when sending press releases or other information. If possible, get to know them so that you have a sense of what interests them about the issues, what 'hooks' would best attract them, and how they prefer to communicate. Remember, too, that reporters can sometimes be sources of information for you, if you have cultivated a good relationship – sometimes they will know things that you don't, and if they are willing to share this information, it can help you.

## **3. Tell the truth**

Any lies you tell (including exaggerations and 'misstatements') will reflect poorly on the reporter's/anchor's reputation and will pretty much guarantee that he/she will never want to use you as a source for a story ever again. That information travels, too, and will likely ruin your chances of getting good coverage anywhere.

## **4. Never say anything you wouldn't want to see as a headline**

Remember that, even when speaking with a reporter with whom you have a good working (or even friendly) relationship, his/her job is still to get a good story, and that will include quoting any outrageous thing you say. There's really no such thing as 'off the record' and, as a rule, you should never say anything to a reporter (even in 'confidence') that you wouldn't want your mom, your opponent, and your boss to see!

## **5. Be responsive**

This means ALWAYS returning reporters' calls, sending out advisories in a timely way (NOT the morning of the event), honoring reporters' deadlines, understanding their need for documented facts, being honest about whether you are giving the same story to their competitors or whether it is a 'scoop' for them, and respecting their process and professional obligations.

## **6. Use all available media options**

A front-page newspaper story is not the only way to get your message across. In addition to 'hard news' stories, think about human interest stories (profiling an individual, something seasonal...), letters to the editor and op-editorials, paid advertising, talk radio, electronic media (blogs, online-only news outlets), and other forms of communication, which are rapidly outpacing traditional formats as sources of news. For organizing and membership recruitment, think about social networking sites and how they can be a part of your overall exposure strategy.

### **7. Don't forget news services**

The Associated Press is the major one, but there are several regional/local news services too, with reporters and photographers assigned to specific areas whose work is often picked up by newspapers, television stations, and other outlets. When you're sending out a press advisory, don't forget them – they can sometimes help you get national coverage, too, particularly if there is a larger regional/national angle to your story.

### **8. Make your information very user-friendly**

While you should never expect media to reprint/reuse your prepared statement or information exactly as it was prepared, you should be ready to do as much of the work for them as possible, by preparing solid press advisories, providing radio stations with audio clips, keeping a file of photos that can illustrate specific stories, having a list of 'affected individuals' who are trained and willing (and reachable) and who can be sources, and following journalistic guidelines and realities in structuring events and materials. This means that, if you want television coverage, don't hold an event at 5:30PM.

### **9. Use the coverage you get – make it echo!**

The goal of getting media coverage, remember, is not just to get media coverage – it's to influence public opinion, get your message to key targets, and change the nature of the debate about a particular issue. Good coverage alone does not guarantee this. You need to make your news coverage work for you – share copies of the supportive editorials you get with targeted legislators, include copies of feature stories in grant applications (where permitted) or annual reports, and use clips from television coverage at fundraisers or public meetings to celebrate accomplishments. You should make sure that you are using any good media coverage (that tells your message in a compelling way) at least twice, and preferably many, many times within 6-12 months (while it is still current).

### **10. Get your message across, no matter what**

Midwesterners, in particular, think that we always have to politely answer questions we are asked. With media, this is absolutely NOT true. Your job, with every question you are asked, is to figure out how to use it to communicate your message. When you learn to do this skillfully, many reporters won't even notice, but you will when you read/see the story – your message, not what the reporter wanted to talk about, is what will come through. This, of course, means knowing your message cold, but it also means having the interpersonal skills and inner courage to navigate interactions with media in such a way as to remain in control of the conversation, and the themes being discussed, at all times.