

Working with the Media on Advocacy Issues



Step 1 – Decide What is Newsworthy

You should consider releasing information to the media if this information is:

- a new development or a change in a situation that was previously covered.
- a reaction to another organization's statement, position or development.
- the results of a study, research or a program conducted by you or one of your affiliated organizations.
- a statement of your organization's thoughts on a timely issue (for example, your organization's reaction to a new government policy).
- an important human interest story that sheds light on broader issues.
- an important event, meeting or occasion.

Choose your stories carefully and strategically. If you send too much to journalists, they will get overwhelmed with all the information and stop paying attention to you. If you concentrate on the big news, they will be sure to listen.

Step 2 – Develop a Media Relations Strategy

To deal effectively with the media, you have to develop a strategic approach, especially in the development of key messages. Make sure you can answer the following questions:

- What do you hope to achieve by releasing this information?
- Which audience are you trying to reach?
- Which media representatives are you going to target (national or regional, print or electronic)?
- What is your main message?
- What are the secondary messages (your main message could be that the Government needs to put more money into fighting HIV/AIDS, but your secondary message is that organizations must use the funding more efficiently)?
- How should you deliver the messages (news conference, news release, editorial piece, interview)?
- Can you guess questions or criticisms that the media might bring up and prepare responses?

The media is one resource you may wish to use to influence policy. The more people you make aware of your issue, the better your chances are of getting the governments' attention, and the more likely you will influence policy.

“Working with the media is like a passionate affair. Don't hesitate to go to bed with them, but stay on top, don't fall asleep and always wear a condom.”

Step 3 – Establish Contacts with the Media

Having an up-to-date media contact list is critical to media relations. When developing your media lists, make sure that you have contacts that are national and regional reporters, and people in different mediums (newspapers, television news, radio). Try to include columnists and commentators as well as reporters. Newswire services, such as CP (Canadian Press) are also excellent contacts because they distribute their stories to newsrooms across the country.

There are a variety of ways to collect media contacts. For national reporters, try contacting a national agency such as Bowden's <www.bowdens.ca> or Canada NewsWire <www.newswire.ca>. There is a fee for contact lists from these agencies. Frequently, contacts can also be found online. Newspapers often have their editors' names on their website. For HIV/AIDS-related stories, health editors are good contacts.

Read newspapers, watch television news and listen to the radio. Keep an eye out for reporters that cover HIV/AIDS issues, health-related stories or other issues related to HIV/AIDS. Remember that a sympathetic reporter can help you get your story covered, but you must always approach their editor, assignment director/editor and news directors, who make final decisions on what gets covered.

If you do not have specific contacts at a media outlet, here are some key people to target your information to:

Broadcast: assignment desk (rotational editors), news directors (especially in radio), producers, and researchers.

Print: assignment editors (always contact these people in addition to reporters as they assign reporters to stories), editors (particularly national, city or health), and columnists.

Newswires: assignment and news editors.

Work to develop good relationships with your contacts by responding to their requests honestly, promptly and reliably. If you are not the most appropriate person to respond to a request for interview or quote, refer the journalist to that person. He or she will appreciate the contact and recognize you as a useful source for information in the future.

Step 4 - Timing is Important

Getting media coverage is not easy, nor is it guaranteed. But you can boost your chances by trying to choose a day and time that works best for your media contacts. Here are some general guidelines:

- Mondays are often busy news days with weekend stories, new issues and follow-up from last week's stories. Generally a day to avoid.
- Fridays are wind-down days for journalists who have put in a busy week. (You will probably find them relaxing at the bar!)
- Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are usually the best days to release information.
- Although it's obviously impossible to predict some stories, avoid scheduling your release to conflict with 'big stories,' unless your story is directly related (for example, your organization's reaction to an election or budget).
- Journalists must meet daily deadlines of generally 4:00pm for television and 7:00pm for newspapers. Radio reporters can usually do interviews in the early evening.
- News conferences are best scheduled between 9:00am and 2:00pm. Never schedule news conferences after 4:00pm if at all possible.
- Special events held in the evening should be communicated to the media well in advance.

Step 5 – Prepare your Pitch

It is up to you to convince the media that you have an important story to tell. It is a good idea to phone your contacts to pitch the story in person. A personal note covering your advisory or release is also a good idea. The pitch should also try to convince the media that there is something in it for them and for the public – there is information they need, or a situation that affects them.

Step 6 - Release Your Story

Once you have determined that your story is newsworthy, you have media contacts to communicate it to, and you have decided when to release your information, the next step is to decide how to communicate it. A news conference – an event attended by several media representatives where people speak on a single issue for three-four minutes each - is the most organized format to communicate a consistent message to a broad spectrum of media. However, the story must be very strong; if it is not, you run the risk of having no media attend. To warrant a news conference, your story should involve an event, a crisis, a change or a reaction to a high-profile situation.

Another option is a news release and background information distributed to your media contacts. You should include a personalized 'pitch' to the reporter or assignment editor explaining why this story is important.

The News Conference

If you decide your story is worthy of a news conference, distribute a media advisory (described below) at least three days in advance of the news conference or event and follow up the distribution with phone calls to the media to confirm they received the advisory. Also use this opportunity to pitch the event.

For the news conference, ensure you have excellent speakers that they speak for no more than three minutes, and that they have good catchy phrases in their presentations. Have one person to introduce all the speakers and moderate any questions from the media. If you are contacting national media or if there is local media from both official languages in your community, try to use both official languages represented. Allow for at least fifteen minutes of questions from the media. If the questions go longer than 25 minutes, the moderator should wrap up the news conference and suggest that reporters can book individual interviews with a speaker if they wish. News conference should not last longer than 45 minutes.

You must book a sound system through an audio-visual presentation group. The sound system should include a table microphone for each speaker, speakers, a mixing board and a media feed box, which allow journalists to record in broadcast quality. If possible, a technician should be present to ensure sound quality. The cost for all these items can run up to \$600, but prices vary.

Remember to try to incorporate visuals at your conference or event. For example, signs or banners at a rally or demonstration, or a backdrop (such as a poster with your organization's logo) at a press conference are ways to create an interesting visual.

Key Documents for Releasing Information

- **An advisory** is an invitation to media to tell them about an event you want them to attend. Use for a news conference or special event only. A media advisory should include the subject of the story, the date, time and location of the news conference or event, and the names and titles of the speakers. It should be distributed no later than three days in advance of a news conference or one week in advance of an event. (See Appendix 1 for an example of a media advisory)
- **A news release** is something you write for the media to give them information on a story you want them to cover. It is the most important document in all cases. News releases must be written carefully, clearly and concisely with maximum impact. It should have an eloquent introduction of the main message, a second paragraph with supporting evidence and information, quotes from the main spokesperson with passionate language, specific details (who, what, why, when and how), and a final, dramatic quote from your spokesperson. (See Appendix 2 for an example of a news release)
- **A backgrounder.** This document provides background information not covered in the news release. It should be no longer than a page in length with bullet points and clear, concise language. More than one backgrounder can be included, depending on the number or complexity of issues you are dealing with. A backgrounder can also be done in a 'Q & A' format.
- If you are having a news conference, also include a **list of the speakers**, including a brief biography and contact information for follow-up interviews.

The format of advisories and releases is very important. It is vital to have your advisory and release dated. If the release is for immediate public distribution, put For Immediate Release above the date. If you are providing it to certain reporters in advance to give them time to cover it thoroughly, put Embargoed for release until (Date) and (Time) EST above the date. Underneath the text of the release or advisory always put the following: --- **30** -. This tells the journalist that the text is complete. Below that, always ensure that there is a contact name and number for follow-up questions, requests for information and interviews.

The Interview

When journalists want more detailed information, they might ask for a one-on-one interview. To prepare for an interview, take some time to focus and concentrate your thoughts. Prepare no more than three 'messages' - the information you want to communicate to the reporter. Make sure they are clear and concise. If you get a request to do an interview over the phone, feel free to tell the journalist you would prefer to make an appointment for later that day so that you can prepare. Be prompt when phoning back, but allow yourself some time to determine exactly what you want to say. Also, feel free to ask the journalist who else they have interviewed or plan to interview so that you get an idea of what kind of story they are doing. Try to get a sense of how much the journalist already knows about the issue. Always offer to provide background information (for example, statistics or position statements by your organization) to help get your position across.

During the interview, make sure that your messages come across. Feel comfortable directing the interview towards those messages by saying things such as "That's an interesting point, but the more important issue is". Listen carefully to the questions. There could be misconceptions or assumptions in the question that you do not agree with. If there

are, do not hesitate to challenge them, but make sure you support your position.

Journalists often stay silent to try to keep you talking. Keep your answers concise and when you have made your point, stop talking. Let the journalist worry about the silence. Avoid answering questions on issues that are the responsibility of others and do not discuss matters that your organization hasn't made a decision on.

Part of working with the media is responding to their specific requests for contacts to interview, such as a youth living with HIV/AIDS. Of course, for youth living with HIV/AIDS, stigma is a very important issue. Before you give any contact information to reporters, check with the person first to make sure they are comfortable speaking with the media. If he or she has any restrictions (for example, if they do not wish to appear on camera or have their real name used), communicate those restrictions to the journalist. It could provide an opportunity to raise issues with the reporter about the stigma and discrimination that people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly youth, encounter.

For television and radio interviews, know the format of the show, how long the interview will be and if there will be anyone else being interviewed on the issue. For television interviews and news conferences, wear solid colours. Try to avoid white or black. Beige and navy are good options. Wear a red ribbon and not much jewelry. Bright colours or too much jewelry can distract from the most important thing - your message. If they offer makeup, say yes. Of course, remember to sit still but gesture with your hands as you usually do. Watch your body language, gestures and mannerisms - make sure they do not distract from what you are saying. Do not nod your head as the interviewer is speaking to indicate you understand - if he or she was asking a damaging or negative question, the viewer might think you were agreeing! Only nod if you agree or have a positive response.

Step 7 - Track your Coverage

It is important to evaluate your results. Read the articles and watch the news. Was your story picked up? Did your message come across? If not, what could you have done differently? What had the most impact? What had the least? Over time, you will develop a sense of what works and what doesn't in terms of getting media coverage and communicating your intended message. Keep a file of stories, and tape television coverage when possible.

Conclusion

There are some general things to remember whenever you work with the media. Use your own words, not the reporter's. Ensure you are using compelling language, facts and figures to support your argument. Use statistics effectively; make sure you are comparing apples to apples. For interviews for print media, statistics can be used more frequently than for broadcast. Do not use jargon, specialized terminology or acronyms unless they are commonly used by everyone.

If your topic is controversial, expect that the journalist will also present the opposite viewpoint. Try to anticipate that viewpoint and respond to it in your interview or news release.

Remember that you are the expert; most journalists are 'generalists' and unlikely to know a great deal about HIV/AIDS. Do not assume that they know anything about the topic. If you encounter attitudes that disturb or offend you, respond by raising awareness, instead of becoming angry. Remember that there are still many misconceptions about HIV/AIDS, in the media and in the general public, and you have an opportunity to challenge these misconceptions. Never be sarcastic or lose your temper. If you do not agree with the journalist, do not hesitate to challenge them, but be polite.

Most importantly, do not sit and wait for the media to come to you. Plan your approach, go out there, grab the media's attention and stick to your message!

Advocacy in Action! Canadian Association of Food Banks Media Alert

MEDIA ALERT

Toronto, 13 October 2004

Attention: News, Public Policy Editors

Poverty in a Land of Plenty: Towards a Hunger-Free Canada

Canadian Association of Food Banks survey shows unprecedented increase in food bank use.

What: The Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) invites media to attend the release of the 2004 HungerCount survey – a detailed survey of the use of food banks and emergency food programs in Canada.

Why: Representatives from the Canadian Association of Food Banks will issue a call to action to the federal government to live up to its election platform to strengthen social foundations to improve Canada's quality of life.

A record number of Canadians, including children, depend on food banks today, as HungerCount 2004 will reveal. CAFB will outline a seven point plan with recommendations for necessary policy measures ensuring a hunger free Canada.

Who:

- Charles Seiden, Executive Director, Canadian Association of Food Banks
- Marjorie Bencz, Chair, Canadian Association of Food Banks
- Clients of Winnipeg Harvest

When: October 15, 2004 - One day before World Food Day 12:15 p.m.

Where: Winnipeg Harvest, 1085 Winnipeg Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 18, 2006

**Democracy is not a Spectator Sport:
Canadians need to put HIV back on the Government's Agenda**

OTTAWA – Every vote counts, and more than ever, Canadians need to get to the polls this Monday. This is one of two messages that the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) has been pushing in the weeks leading up to the January 23rd election.

Too many barriers keep Canada's marginalised individuals from going to the polls and telling our potential leaders what kind of Canada they want. Language barriers, a lack of transportation, a lack of childcare, poor understanding of the voting system, and a lack of ID are just some of the reasons that keep thousands of potential voters from polling stations.

While some communities have developed resources to overcome these challenges, more often than not, people who are stigmatized by poverty, homelessness or substance use are overlooked. "If all eligible voters could make it to the polls to make an informed vote, I think many of our government's policies and programs would look much different," said Gail Flintoft, Chair of the Board of Directors.

The second message being pushed by CAS during this election is that public healthcare and social programs need to be on the election agenda. "The sheer lack of debate on these issues during this election could be a warning sign that the elected government will not have the commitment that is needed to reduce HIV infections and improve the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS," said Paul Lapierre, Executive Director of the Canadian AIDS Society. Across Canada, candidates have been making promises that could permanently change our health system and social programs.

Over the next few days, the Canadian AIDS Society urges Canadians to contact their local candidates and find out where they stand. "It's not too late to tell candidates what we want from our government. But we have to push them, and we have to vote. Democracy is not a spectator sport." said Lapierre.

CAS has developed an Election 2006 website that features information, tools and resources that communities can use to mobilise and support new voters. Visit the website at www.cdnaids.ca/election2006.

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The Canadian AIDS Society is a coalition of over 128 community-based AIDS organizations across Canada. The CAS mandate is to speak as a national voice and act as a forum for a community-based response to HIV infection, as well as to advocate for persons so affected.

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