

Working with the Media

The media is a critical partner in any effort to prevent sexual assault. Your media efforts can reach victims, possible victims, offenders, families, friends, and jurors. Media attention not only raises awareness and educates, it also helps influence decision makers, funders, and potential supporters.

Publicity

In publicity, which is space and exposure you cannot directly buy, the story is controlled by the media outlet. Although you determine what you say (your message), the reporter and her or his editor decide how, or if, your comment is used, as well as who else is interviewed.

Publicity can have more credibility than advertising. Consumers are much more likely to believe a news story or feature article prepared by a “neutral” third party. Despite the fact that there are no guarantees when working with print or broadcast media, establishing relationships and communicating with the media on a regular basis can make or break your publicity plans.

Understanding and Identifying Outlets for Publicity

Publicity is obtained in three ways. First, the media may call you directly. Second, they may be referred to you by a third party. Third, you may contact the media yourself. The most common type of media you will encounter while creating publicity is the news media. The objective of most news media outlets is to make “news.” Media typically define “news” as controversy or change. In addition, compelling human interest stories are often run as “news.”

Which Publicity Outlet is Right for You?

Guest Columns or Opinion/Editorials - Op-eds are opinion pieces that appear opposite the editorial page of newspapers. Written by local citizens, experts, academics, and organization leaders, they are a simple and cost-effective way to educate citizens, influence government officials, and increase your organization’s visibility and credibility. To express your position in your own words or respond to recent events, write an opinion/editorial.

Letters to the Editor - Letters to the editor are a simple and effective way of voicing your opinions, educating people in your community, and informing policy makers of your views on issues of importance to you. Whether responding to a previously published letter or article or raising community awareness on a particular issue, your letter will help editorial journalists gauge the interest in certain topics. Elected officials also closely monitor letters to the editor. To express your position in your own words or respond to an article or editorial in a paragraph or two, write a letter to the editor.

Press Releases - A well-written press release makes your organization visible and can greatly enhance its image. It is a great way to advertise news related to your organization. By distributing news releases at meetings or events, your organization can improve public awareness efforts and reinforce the message that you are sending to policy makers. Reporters may use information from your news releases to supplement stories they are already writing or may be inspired to write stories based on the content of the release.

Advertising

Advertising is paid access to the media. Generally, the larger the potential audience, the higher the cost. Because you pay for advertising, you have more control over how your message is presented. You choose and write the message; you select when, where, and how often the message appears.

Keep in mind that the public regards a paid message as biased in favor of whoever pays for it; in some cases, advertising may also inspire more controversy than education.

Understanding and Identifying Outlets for Advertising

Advertising your initiative or program is an important step in making sure that your services or message reach the widest number of people whom you can help, or who can help you. Many free or less expensive methods of doing this exist, but sometimes you may find you simply have to resort to using paid advertising in order to get the word out. With proper planning and timing, paid advertising can be a vital method of promoting what you stand for. The primary benefit to using paid advertising is that you retain ultimate control over the distribution of your message. In addition, there is a much wider variety of outlets targeting diverse and often specific audiences.

Which Advertising Outlet is Right for You?

Public Service Announcements

Print and Broadcast Ads

Bumper Stickers

Fliers or Brochures

Newsletters

Billboards and Signs

Sponsorship of Events or Initiatives

Promotional Items

Internet Sites

Ads in Elevators, Public Restrooms, Automated Teller Machines, etc.

Developing an Outreach / Media Plan

Without a media plan, many agencies find themselves merely reacting to events that have already happened. As a result, media efforts tend to be sporadic, and agencies are often unable to take full advantage of potential media opportunities. By developing a strategic media plan, executed over the long-term, agencies can take a pro-active stance, which advances their mission and takes full advantage of all opportunities.

Developing a plan consists of the following steps:

1. Define your goal or desired outcome
2. Identify your target audience(s)
3. Develop key messages
4. Determine a means of evaluating how effective your outreach is
5. Select the most effective advertising outlet(s) for your target audience
6. Create the advertising product

Developing Your Relationship with the Media: Tips and Taboos

Working with the media can be a very intimidating process. Hurried reporters working on a deadline can be unnerving as you balance helping that reporter with her/his story and making sure you're saying the right thing and delivering your message. These tips should help you learn the "rules" of the media and keep you calm during even the most stressful media interaction.

Using Your Core Message(s)

Because the journalistic trend is to present news in shorter and shorter bits, it is important to have well crafted "soundbites" that reflect your core messages and are repeated throughout your public awareness efforts. Sticking with your core messages and reiterating them at every possible juncture can help you control an interview situation and can also give your community a recognizable connection to your agency. You will need to repeat your core message frequently to get it across.

Developing Relationships with Reporters

Reaching out to the right reporter can make all the difference. Agency representatives can develop a rapport with local journalists by taking a few steps and following a few important rules (see below). Developing a current media list is crucial to getting your message broadcast or published. Health/medical and science writers, city editors, policy/government writers, and even the photo editor are all good targets for your messages.

Understanding the Newsroom

Knowing who to call in the newsroom is important information for finding the reporter most likely to cover your story. If you are unfamiliar with your local reporters / news staff, don't be afraid to call and ask "who's the best person to talk to?" Also, most news outlets now have websites which list reporters names with their assigned "beat." When pitching stories or presenting press releases related to sexual assault, reporters for the following "beats" can make key contacts: Metro (city), Government, Courts/Crime, Health and Lifestyles.

The Rules of Engagement

1. **Be a Resource** - Be known as someone who has accurate information and can be counted on for a newsworthy soundbite.
2. **Be Available** - Make an effort to call reporters back ASAP. Also, if they request information, don't put off sending it out.
3. **Be Prepared** - Know your core messages and soundbites. You'll always be ready with something to say!
4. **Be Honest** - Never stretch the truth or give inaccurate information. You will likely never get called back. Saying "I don't know" or referring the reporter to a different source will earn you more points than trying to come up with an answer you really don't have.
5. **Be Exclusive** - News media love exclusives. Every so often, offer an exclusive story to a reporter with whom you're familiar.

General Tips for Working with the News Media

Do:

View every interview as an opportunity to speak your message.
Speak in easy to understand terms. Avoid jargon.
Be engaging and enthusiastic.
Be yourself. Don't try to reinvent yourself for an interview– it undermines your credibility.
Refer reporters to other sources when you can't find the answer.

Don't:

Overly fixate on the questions and forget your message.
Over-answer – when you're satisfied with your reply, stop.
Be afraid to pause.
Fake an answer.

Make Your Story Newsworthy

To help make sure your story is newsworthy try these “news hooks”

- Controversy sells! Refuting, disagreeing or criticizing makes the news.
- Human interest stories are extremely popular with all news media. Personalize your story by presenting someone who is affected personally.
- Trends. Can you spot a trend or shift in your community?
- “Brand-New” services, events, or policies that are “groundbreaking.”
- Historical events such as your agency's 25th anniversary have broad appeal.
- Bring a national story home by relating it to something local.
- Events create good photo-ops. Let reporters know why it's important.

