MAKING THE MOST OF MEDIA RELATIONS

ESTABLISHING MEDIA RELATIONS

Convincing the media to cover your National Hospice Month activities takes advance planning as well as understanding media professionals’ needs when covering news. Search for clever angles, or “news hooks,” that can reel in reporters and convince them to deliver your message. Following the steps listed below will make the process easier.

STEP 1: SELECT A MEDIA LIAISON
Assign one person in your organization to serve as your media relations liaison. This person will be responsible for disseminating information, handling media inquiries, and coordinating interviews and appearances. All materials distributed to the media should include the name of your media liaison with his or her daytime and evening telephone numbers so reporters can get answers to their questions at any time.

STEP 2: DEVELOPING A MEDIA CONTACTS LIST
Before contacting the media with your ideas, you will need to develop a list of all broadcast and print media in your area. To obtain a media list, contact your local Chamber of Commerce or look in the yellow pages.

When you have decided which stations and newspapers to include on your media list, call and confirm contact names. Those interested in covering your agency and National Hospice Month activities range from health policy and business reporters to feature writers and TV news producers. Your complete media list should include the name, title, address, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address of every applicable contact at local newspapers, magazines, and television and radio stations. Turnover is high, so it is important to keep your media list up to date.

STEP 3: DEVELOPING YOUR MESSAGE
This online kit includes examples of a news release, media advisory, and media talking points. When writing your own materials, identify your key points early in your message by answering “the five Ws:” who, what, where, when, and why. Your information should be listed in descending order, with the most important facts listed first. Be concise, but also try to have your words form a compelling picture in the readers’ minds.

Personalize your media materials by using information about your own organization and the services you provide the community. Local media focus heavily on hometown and regional developments, so the more localized your information is, the more likely they are to use it. Reporters and producers all seek similar story elements: audience appeal with compelling images; issues that stimulate controversy and debate; stories that generate high ratings and increased readership; and fresh perspectives on topics sustaining public interest.

STEP 4: GETTING YOUR MESSAGE OUT
Whether you're planning an open house, seminars, a health fair or wish to generate coverage of end-of-life issues, you should contact the media at least two weeks in advance. If the media representative accepts your pitch, he or she then will focus on conducting background research and constructing an appealing format before your story runs. Ask reporters up front what their deadlines are and when they are planning to run the story. In the case of TV or radio, if it is an event you want covered, they will not provide you with a commitment until that day.

MEDIA HIT #1
Your first contact with the media should be by email or regular mail. In some cases, a news release may provide sufficient information for your first contact. See Sample Materials to Get Your Started for a sample news release.

At other times, you may wish to use a media pitch letter. Media pitch letters propose story ideas and reasons why an editor or reporter should cover a story or event. Craft your pitch letter to stand out from the crowd. A dramatic and concise first line that pulls them in to read more is important. Next, explain why the pitch would benefit their audience. Finally, address your proposal to a particular person, not just “editor,” in the form of a standard, one-page professional letter.
MEDIA HIT #2

The second contact should be by telephone, timed to when you think they’ve received your communication. Review stories recently produced by your media contact and identify how your story might relate to the coverage. When you call to follow up with the reporter, speak in terms of headlines, providing the key information quickly. Reiterate why your story will help educate their audience. Ask for his or her impression of your story ideas. Ask if the reporter has any questions or would like additional information. If he or she is interested, they will indicate so and may ask to speak with particular people in your organization to flesh the piece out further. If they rush you off the phone, don’t give up. Be persistent. Ask if there is another person at the media outlet that might be interested in your story because it is so important.

If you get voicemail, leave a concise pitch. This, as well as the “live” follow-up call you make should be scripted so you get your key points in quickly.

MEDIA HIT #3

The third contact should be made by mail. A media kit is an effective tool that reinforces your original news release and provides additional information to educate the reporter on the issues surrounding hospice. Media kits generally consist of the initial news release and/or media pitch letter, fact sheets, backgrounders, and related statistics enclosed in a sturdy and attractive folder.

The kit also may include public service advertisements and announcements, brochures, biographical summaries, and photographs with captions. However, try not to bog the reporter down with too much information.

Reporters will cover only those topics they deem newsworthy for their target audiences. To enhance the likelihood of receiving coverage, supplement your kit with an expanded pitch letter that supplies a few story angles and again, why they should be covering your organization. You also may wish to include a media fact sheet. Fact sheets are concise reference documents containing the essential information of an industry, organization, event, outcome, or discovery. Their short outline format enables the media to quickly identify the key elements of a story. As demonstrated in this kit’s sample, an industry fact sheet would provide answers to the basic questions about hospice.

STEP 5: FOLLOWING

Besides phoning your contacts, another follow-up tactic particularly, when hosting an event, is to send a media advisory a few days prior to and the day of the event. Media advisories are concise who, what, where, when, and why updates that include information about interview opportunities. See the sample materials for an example.

STEP 6: TRACKING AND EVALUATING YOUR COVERAGE

Tracking your news coverage serves two useful purposes: it enables you to evaluate the effectiveness of your media relations, and you may utilize copies of the coverage as direct mail pieces to market your organization. Assign one person from your staff to read the local newspapers you targeted and tape the TV and radio programs where you have secured coverage. Review which of your tactics generated good media pick up and which did not. What was more successful-your news releases, media pitch letters, or op-ed piece?

PITCHING YOUR OPINION

Another way to capture media coverage during National Hospice Month is to present your views through letters to the editor, opinion-editorial (op-ed) columns, and radio and television editorials. These offer unique opportunities to get ideas circulated in your own words at no cost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor allow you to express your point of view on a particular story or op-ed that ran earlier. If you are responding to a previously published piece, provide the name of the article you are referring to, the section in which it appeared, and the date that it ran.

Letters to the editor should be succinct and approximately 100 - 350 words. Provide your name, address, and telephone number at the end of the response as well as your signature.
OP-ED COLUMNS

Op-ed columns are opinion pieces usually published opposite the editorial page in newspapers. Typically 600 - 800 words, these columns allow the newspaper’s readers to present a particular concept in more depth than is possible with a letter to the editor.

When drafting an op-ed column, concentrate on one idea. Use the first two paragraphs to capture the reader’s attention by stating the central idea and establishing your credibility on hospice. The rest of the column should support the idea with pertinent facts and statistics. State your opinions and do not quote other people. It is important to make sure that a reader unfamiliar with your subject will be able to understand your article. The conclusion of your op-ed should reinforce your thesis and leave your reader with a fresh perspective on hospice.

PUBLISHING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND OP-EDS

To get a letter to the editor or an op-ed published call the editorial page editor of the newspaper and briefly describe the topic you wish to introduce and its relation to National Hospice Month. Double-check the word count length and any other guidelines specific to that paper. When sending a letter or by email to the editor to your contact, type the copy single-spaced on company letterhead. Remember to make a follow-up call to verify that your contact received the letter or op-ed.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS WITH THE PRESS

In addition to proactively contacting the media, you may receive requests for interviews from a print, radio, or television reporter during National Hospice Month. This is a golden opportunity to send key messages to an influential group of audiences. In addition to plugging your organization’s local celebration, it can allow you to discuss issues and offer a provider’s perspective.

Before agreeing to participate in an interview, ask the following questions, as you see appropriate:

- Are you calling in response to a news release that I sent?
- What is the overall focus and tone of your story?
- What are some of the questions you’d like answered?
- How long have you been working on this story? Is anyone assisting you?
- Have you interviewed or received background information from any other organizations or individuals? With whom else do you plan to speak?
- Do you know how long will the article/segment be? Is it part of a special series?
- Do you need any photographs, graphic data, or video footage?
- When is your deadline? Do you know when the story will run?
- In what section of the newspaper/part of the program will the story appear?
- Have you ever covered hospice before?

If a reporter refuses to answer any of these questions, be suspicious and wary. Don’t commit to an interview until you’ve obtained more information. If you’re comfortable with the answers you’ve received, tell the reporter you’ll check to determine who on staff is available for an interview and that you’ll be back in touch before their deadline.

Your spokesperson should keep in mind the following suggestions during the interview:

- Relax. The reporter is just a person like you who is trying to do a good job.
- Keep your message simple. Answer questions briefly, directly, and to the point. Begin by saying “Yes,” “No,” “I agree,” or “That’s a good point.”
- Speak in personal terms, with concern for the patient and family. Present yourself as an individual concerned about the welfare of society and of your patients and their families.
- Avoid industry jargon and stay away from long-winded statements. Reporters like quotes that can explain a difficult issue or concept with an interesting metaphor or analogy.
- Support general statements with reliable facts and figures.
- Stay focused. Remember to concentrate on the three main points your organization wants you to make. If questions start to stray away from your three points, politely transition them back to your key message.
- Be assertive, never argue or fight, but correct any misstatements made by the reporter immediately.
- Never lie. Journalists are very perceptive and can detect when someone is trying to stonewall or evade the truth.
- If you can't answer a question, admit it. If someone else in your organization is more knowledgeable about a particular issue, point this out and promise to get the answer.
- Do not restate a negative question. Always try to convert a negative question into a positive answer.
- Do not ask for a statement to be off-the-record. If you don't want to hear a particular comment on the evening news or see it in the morning paper, don't say it. Likewise, don't assume that an interview is over just because a recorder is turned off, a note pad is tucked away, or a cameraperson appears distracted.
- Avoid saying, “no comment.” On occasion, you may need to decline from answering a question, but always explain why.

If you've promised a reporter additional information, get it quickly. Failing to fulfill a request may come back to haunt you when the story runs.

REFERRING MEDIA TO PATIENTS, FAMILIES, AND OTHER RESOURCES

The heart of the Hospice story isn't just the provider. It is also the patients and their family members whose lives are touched by the caring and compassionate services provided. On occasion a reporter may ask you for assistance in locating people outside of your organization who will consent to an interview and who can provide insight into their experiences with home care or hospice.

In addition to patients and their families, you may be asked to connect reporters to providers from other home care or hospice organizations, representatives of other related health associations, social service agencies and community programs, and experts on key issues affecting hospice. In these instances, it is helpful to have an up-to-date list of people you can refer to.

If you don't already have such a list, start developing one by identifying individuals who are articulate and well versed in delivering positive messages. Ask them if they would be willing to share their perspectives with the media, and add their names to your list, along with their titles, work and home addresses, telephone and fax numbers, and a brief description of their association with hospice. Before referring a reporter to any individual on your list, it's a good idea to verify that the individual is still receptive to conducting media interviews.

- Following are some general rules when selecting patients and their families for a media interview:
  - Select a patient who wants to speak about their hospice experience. If there will be a television crew present, make sure the patient and family members are comfortable with being in front of a camera.
  - Choose a case based on the appropriateness of its diagnosis. Reporters should see caregivers actually providing care, but may not want to see a seriously compromised patient.
  - Look for patients and family members who are highly supportive of hospice and can articulate the importance of hospice to the media. Make sure the individuals realize that just because they participate in an interview, there is no guarantee that the story will run or that their interview will be included. It is not uncommon for stories to be postponed or for some interviews to end up “on the cutting room floor.”
  - Obtain copies of transcripts, videotapes, or news clippings of the story and provide them to the individual. Thank them for assisting with the interview by sending a note or small gift.

ASSISTING MEDIA AT SPECIAL EVENTS

If you are holding a special event in celebration of National Hospice Month; increase your chances of receiving media coverage by providing reporters with additional information at the event. One way to do this is to create a media kit for the event that is available onsite.

In addition to including relevant news releases, fact sheets, backgrounders, brochures, a media lead sheet, and statistical information, your specialized media kit should include an agenda for the event and information about its sponsors. If you are honoring employees, volunteers, or public officials, include a biographical sketch of each person, detailing their contributions to the field. Be sure to include copies of any reports being released, statements being given, and the like.

A table where media can sign in and press kits disseminated should be set up in a high visibility area, knowing who attended your event will guide you to forthcoming coverage and help maintain an updated media list for your next event.
RESPONDING TO CONTROVERSIAL COVERAGE

It is important to keep in mind that the opinions of consumers and elected officials are often influenced by what they see in the media. Therefore, when a story is negative, inaccurate, or unbalanced, the community must be ready to counteract damaging coverage.

If you encounter a harmfully unbalanced or misleading story, it is critical for you to develop and issue an immediate written response. It is usually best to email your reaction to the news organization in the form of a letter to the editor or an op-ed. When drafting your response, consider the following:

- Develop your arguments in a constructive, factual tone, without appearing hostile or overly demanding.
- Applaud the editors or producers for their interest in the hospice community.
- Express disappointment over any major errors of omission or facts in the report.
- Refer to the millions of people who are extremely satisfied with and dependent upon quality home and hospice care.
- Cite the community’s long-standing history of providing competent and compassionate care. Emphasize how the vast majority of providers are reputable and fulfill their duties with honesty and integrity.
- Develop a list of talking points and include them in your response.
- Offer a knowledgeable and prepared spokesperson from your agency as a source to address any questions the producer or editor may have.
- Volunteer to coordinate interviews with patients and their families who have had positive experiences.
- Inform other providers in your area about the faulty news coverage and work together to develop a collective response. The media are more likely to listen to a response from a group than from an individual.

CAPTURING ATTENTION THROUGH ADVERTISING

Advertising is another highly effective approach to promoting the National Hospice celebration. In addition to giving your organization the freedom to create its own message, advertising gives it control in deciding when, where, and to whom the message will be disseminated. Public service announcements and advertisements, as well as paid advertising, can help you call attention to the major highlights of your campaign. Tips for using these tools follow:

Public Service Announcements and Advertisement: If your agency is a tax-exempt 501(c) (3) charitable organization, you can call widespread attention to NHM free of charge by tapping into the community, public service, or public affairs departments of your local broadcast stations, which run public service announcements (PSAs), and similar departments of your local print media, which run public service advertisements (also referred to as PSAs).

Public Service Announcements: PSAs are radio or television commercials, usually from 10 to 60 seconds long that are broadcast at no cost to the sponsor. PSAs always include a “call to action” statement, which asks the audience to do something such as participate, call, write, or contribute. Broadcasters use three primary criteria for determining which PSAs make the air: (1) the sponsor must be held in high esteem; (2) the message must have a strong relevance to the community (announcements aiming to market a specific agency’s services or recruit hospice patients would not be accepted); and (3) the message design must be original and thought provoking.

Three formats are used for broadcast PSAs: pre-produced CDs for radio, pre-produced videotapes for television (in beta format, NOT vhs), and “live-read” (scripted) PSAs to be delivered by a station personality. Sample “live-read” PSAs for radio and television are provided in the Sample Materials to Get You Started section.

Creating Your Own Live-read PSA: PSAs usually are written in advertising-copy style-punchy and sharp. The challenge in writing PSAs is to develop a short message persuading the listener or viewer to take the desired action.

The following are some basic steps to follow when creating your own live-read radio or television PSA:

- In your company’s letterhead, type your copy in capital letters and double-spaced with wide margins to ensure easy readability.
- List the date with the name and telephone number of your media liaison in the top right-hand corner, along with the dates the station is to start and stop the broadcast in the top left-hand corner.
- Write your message as you would speak, without using abbreviations.
Placing Audio and Video PSAs: Target stations to run your PSA based on the audiences you wish to reach. Contact the stations’ community development or public service departments to find out whether they prefer taped or live-read PSAs and the procedures you should follow for submission.

Send your PSA with a cover letter explaining the value of your message. Call your contact(s) shortly after sending the information to confirm that it was received.

Public Service Advertisements: Published in newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, public service advertisements (PSAs) resemble the format of paid advertisements, but they are published at no cost.

In Sample Materials to Get You Started, you will find a downloadable PSA and a downloadable column that are sized to fit the standard newspaper format (two columns by 8”). The advertisement leaves space for you to add your organization’s identification and message, including a call to action statement, such as, “For more information, contact...” (The publication should be able to place the message in the ad for you).

Placing Print PSAs: Competition for free space is fierce, so start working with your local print media as soon as you can. When attempting to place a PSA in a newspaper or magazine, get in touch with the publication’s community development and/or public service departments. Larger publications may have several departments that cater to specific advertisements, so you may need to contact the advertising division responsible for the health section.

When speaking with your contact, explain the dimensions of your PSA and how its message will benefit readers. If they agree to place the clip ad or camera-ready column, they can download the images from the sample materials section of this kit.

Paid Advertisements: To guarantee that special attention is focused on your organization during National Hospice Month, you can purchase and place several types of pre-produced advertising within your local media market. Unlike public service announcements, paid advertisement ensures the placement of your ad on a specific date and at a predetermined time and location to reach a particular audience.

Billboard Advertising: Billboard advertising is another effective and inexpensive form of paid promotion. Billboards offer the lowest cost per-thousand impressions, high frequency and reach, and select demographics. Billboards work all day, every day, for as long as your ad is posted.