GETTING PRESS COVERAGE

While paid advertising on billboards and buses (especially for hotline numbers) can be an effective way to promote your services, it can be expensive. Fortunately, you can take advantage of free media – from news articles and op-ed pieces to public service announcements – to not only promote your services, but also debunk myths and educate the public.

Because the news media has power to help or hinder you in promoting your message, it’s to your benefit to create a positive relationship with the press. The good news is, most journalists do strive to be fair and responsible. But they have extremely tight deadlines and space restrictions, and some may be relatively inexperienced. The easier you make their job, the more you help them get a clear and accurate message to the public.

Working with the press

Here are some tips on the care and feeding of journalists:

• Suggest ideas yourself, especially for feature stories. On any given day, many feature stories will have originated from tips provided to editors by the public. Feature material could include new or highly successful programs, agency anniversaries, significant grant awards, staff promotions or new staff profiles (especially a new director, or a new staff position made possible by grant funding).

• Get to know the players. If certain reporters regularly cover social service issues, learn who they are and provide them with a regular supply of information. If you don’t know who in a specific organization would cover your kind of story, contact the city editor (print), assignment editor or news director (broadcast).

• Designate a press area. At public events such as rallies, forums or educational programs, have reserved seating or a press area large enough to accommodate camera crews. Provide information packets to reporters in advance of the event so they can have a better understanding of topics to be discussed. Also spend a few minutes after the event answering press questions.

• Return phone calls. Always return reporters’ calls as promptly as possible. Deadlines do not wait for you or the reporter. Two hours late is too late.

• Think in terms of sound bites. When speaking with a reporter, keep interview answers simple and short, especially with radio and television reporters. Ten to 15 seconds is best for broadcast “sound bites.” Long, complicated answers put the burden on the reporter to determine which information is most important. State your conclusion, then your substantiating data. Hit your bottom line first.
Press releases

Press releases are an effective way to relay information of interest to several media outlets at once. They are appropriate for announcements of public events, fund-raisers or staffing decisions such as hiring a new director. A press release can also be an effective way to present your response to a controversial issue, such as a new television show that promotes negative messages. Following are a few tips for effective press releases:

• Give the press release a professional look. Use agency letterhead stationery or a letterhead specifically designed for news releases. Type all copy double-spaced or even triple-spaced to leave room for a reporter’s editing, and use only one side of the paper. If sending the press release online, use only standard typefaces such as Times New Roman or Helvetica, or use the PDF format, to ensure that messages don’t become garbled in transmission.

• Give complete information. For each person mentioned in the story, use first and last names and identify the person by title, position, or reason for being included in the story. Date your story and indicate the date it may be printed. (You’ll generally use the words FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.)

• Include graphic elements. Mention opportunities for photos, or include good quality photos with the release. Identification of people in photos should be on a separate piece of paper pasted to the back of the photo, not written directly on the photo. Charts and graphs can also add visual impact to a story, especially when confidentiality concerns restrict the use of photos. If photos are used, make sure everyone in the photo has signed a photo release.

• Keep it short. Write concise sentences and keep paragraphs no longer than about four sentences. The entire press release should be two pages or less.

• Use what journalists call the “inverted pyramid” style. Who, what, when, where, why and how are the essentials – and as many of them as possible should be in your lead paragraph or two. If you save important information for the end of the story, you may never see it in print or on the air.

• Pay attention to deadlines. Some sections of daily papers are printed in advance (the community calendar, for example) and weeklies may work one or two weeks in advance. For television and radio, find out when news directors are planning their stories.

• Be available for more information. Be available to assist the reporter who wants to follow up on a press release. For example, a reporter may want to interview additional people, or want photos or graphs to go with the story.

• Always include contact information. Include contact persons and phone numbers on everything, even short press releases, in case a reporter has questions or wants to follow up with a feature story. Better yet, provide two contact people in case one of them is not available at the time a reporter calls, and include a home phone number or cell phone number for at least one person.
Press conferences

A press conference allows you to reach all media simultaneously, and to have all your own experts in one room for statements and interviews. Press conferences need not be intimidating, and are an excellent way to obtain the kind of coverage you need to get your message to the public. When giving a press conference:

- Be “newsworthy.” A news conference is appropriate for the announcement of important new programs or services, as well as for major grant awards. (Here is an opportunity to publicly recognize your funders.) Join together with other social service providers for a press conference about the impact on your programs of government legislative or budget decisions. Events such as “Violence Prevention Month” can also provide occasions for news coverage.

- Observe deadlines. Know and respect the reporters’ deadlines, so you know when – and when not – to schedule a press conference. Schedule the event several hours before that day’s deadline for both print and broadcast media.

- Think outside the box. Don’t limit your idea of “media” to the large newspapers and TV stations. Small, regional weekly or monthly publications, student newspapers, and newsletters put out by your local chamber of commerce or other community organizations also qualify as media. Their staff should be sent press releases and invited to news conferences.

- Be prepared. Have experts on hand who can be called on by reporters with questions. All those who will speak or who may be called on should be briefed beforehand on anticipated questions and the parameters of their responses.

- Provide refreshments. Coffee, soft drinks and doughnuts or cookies add a nice touch.

Other external communications

Fortunately, you don’t have to depend totally on the news media. Several creative ways exist to take your message directly to the public. You have two options: take your agency into the community, and bring the community into your agency. Here are some ideas:

- **Newsletter.** Create an agency newsletter that goes out to potential donors, elected officials, business and community leaders, churches, doctors’ offices and public events.

- **Tours.** Conduct agency tours for legislators, business and community leaders, members of the clergy and other interested parties.

- **Speaker’s bureau.** Establish a speaker’s bureau to give presentations for religious or civic groups. Include both staff and board members or volunteers. Develop a presentation kit with handouts and PowerPoint slides about your agency for anyone who will be doing the community presentations. Suggest programs to community groups that could be furnished by your staff or volunteers.

- **Luncheons.** Have informal sessions (luncheons, coffees) where staff can meet with small groups of business people, legislators and other community leaders.