

Tip Sheet: Strategies for Working with the Media

In 2013, an estimated 17.3 million people reported being dependent on or abusing alcohol,ⁱ and approximately 7 million said they had been dependent on or abused illicit drugsⁱⁱ within the previous year. Interest in how we prevent substance use, misuse, and overdoses is growing, with media outlets paying attention, and devoting more column inches and airtime to discussing these topics.

For their part in the substance abuse prevention effort, the media wants to understand why these issues are occurring in their communities, and they want to offer readers, listeners, and viewers solutions for resolving these growing problems. To obtain the information they need—on emerging trends, troubling consequences, and/or current prevention efforts—media representatives frequently turn to recognized prevention leaders and practitioners.

As a prevention provider, understanding how to handle the media effectively is essential. Media outlets can be important partners in your prevention efforts, so you will want to nurture these relationships at every opportunity. Good media engagement helps to ensure that prevention efforts are represented accurately and communicated broadly. Poor engagement can lead to confusion and misinformation, and potentially a lack of faith in the prevention process.

This tip sheet offers key steps to consider before the media calls, when they call, and during the interview.

Before the Media Callsⁱⁱⁱ

- ✓ **Identify your spokesperson.** Know the person in your organization—usually a leader or expert in a specific area—who will be the person to answer the media’s questions in person, by phone, by email, or even on camera. Then make sure that everyone knows who this person is.
- ✓ **Be prepared.** Preparation is important for managing media questions. Well before the media calls, determine the five easiest, harder, and toughest questions you are likely to be asked, then determine in advance how you would answer them, and practice delivering your answers.

Easy, Harder, and Tough Question

- **Easy:** What kind of prevention services do you provide the community?
- **Harder:** What more could parents be doing to prevent their children from abusing substances?
- **Tough:** Why are more people using—and dying from—opioids?

- ✓ **Build relationships with the media now.** Get to know the media outlets and reporters in your community who cover stories related to health and substance use issues. Introduce your organization as a story resource *before* a problem occurs and reporters want answers *now*. Develop and submit letters to the editor and op-eds as a way to position your organization as an expert in those areas; this will help you proactively gain media exposure for your prevention work.
- ✓ **Develop a media policy.** Create a play-by-play guidebook for how your organization will respond to and manage media requests—and let people know it exists! As part of your media policy, indicate which staff member should receive and assess media inquiries (i.e., your spokesperson). Also specify the types of questions and/or interview situations in which your organization might refuse to engage with media (e.g., film crews recording client activities that could compromise client confidentiality; not interviewing youth or young adults). Having a clear and transparent policy in place will help staff know how to respond, and let the media know what to expect. If your prevention agency has a fiscal agent, or is part of a larger organization, make sure that your own policies are consistent with those of the parent organization.

When the Media Calls^{iv}

- ✓ **Research the media outlet and reporter before granting an interview.** When your organization receives a media inquiry, try to learn as much about the media outlet and the reporter’s background, interest, and story angle before connecting the media with your spokesperson for an interview. Here are some questions to consider:
 - What prompted the media to call your organization?
 - What is the media interested in knowing?
 - What specific subject areas will the interview cover?
 - Is the media willing to share the interview questions in advance?
 - With whom do the media want to speak? Leadership? Other stakeholders?
 - Where will the story appear?
 - When will the story run or be posted?
 - When is the reporter’s story deadline?
 - How will the interview be conducted—by phone, email, or in person?
 - Will the interview be recorded?
 - How long will the interview last?

- ✓ **Assess the media inquiry.** While it's important to be responsive when the media calls, it's also important to take a moment when you receive the inquiry to assess what you know about the request and determine how best to respond. Doing so will allow you to respond in a thoughtful way and help you avoid falling back on "no comment."
- ✓ **Prepare your spokesperson.** Before your spokesperson sits down with a reporter, share with him or her everything you know about the media outlet, the media request, key talking points, and potential questions and answers. Depending on the type of interview, this prep session can take anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour.

During the Media Interview^v

- ✓ **Stay on message.** Regardless of what the reporter asks or how forceful he or she may be, control the interview by reiterating your key messages. Use transitions such as "The real issue is," "And just as important is," or "Let me explain" to bring you back to your talking points.
- ✓ **Reference the best resources for the story.** Your organization may be the best source for the story—or it may not. If your organization does not know an answer to a question, or is not the best resource, let the reporter know. Correct any misinformation quickly during or immediately after the interview.
- ✓ **Recommend additional interview subjects.** They may be able to provide additional context or a different perspective on the story. But before handing over their contact information, make sure to get their permission to do so, and share any information you've collected on the outlet, reporter, and request. This will help to ensure that your expert is both willing and prepared for the interview.
- ✓ **Frame your responses as "sound bites."** Anything you say or write could show up in an article, so keep your responses in "sound bite" format: be brief, clear, and only respond to what is asked. Sound bites are a product that originated with TV and radio news media, where the

Interview Transition Ideas

Transitions are easy-to-use phrases to bring you back to your talking points:

- The real issue is ...
- And just as important is ...
- Let me explain ...
- And equally important ...
- It's important to tell your viewers (readers, listeners) ...
- You know, I think it's equally important to know ...
- I'm also frequently asked ...
- Let me add ...
- Another question I'm asked is ...
- We might be overlooking ...
- A common concern is ...
- You can go a step further ...
- For instance ...
- I'm proud to be able to tell you ...
- For example ...
- Let me give you the facts ...
- You should also know that ...

day's news had to be compressed into short segments that were strung together to provide a brief overview of the day's events. Today, sound bites are expected everywhere, from articles to tweets, and the spokesperson who can convey a message in a lively sentence or two is more likely to be quoted than someone who rambles. Here are some tips for providing sound bites:

- *Avoid exaggerations.* Give specific examples of success stories or relevant case studies.
- *Use analogies.* The more relatable the better, especially on such complex issues as substance abuse prevention.
- *Use absolutes when you are sure of them.* Reporters and editors love “the best,” “the first,” “the only,” and “the greatest,” but only if you can back up the claim with facts.
- *Where appropriate, use proportions or approximations (e.g., about one-quarter, nearly a thousand).* If a reporter needs the exact number, he or she will ask. Be familiar with—and mention—your data sources, too.
- *Quote your opposition, especially if they agree with you.* Your supporters will always be on your side. If your enemy agrees with you, you've got a story.
- *Include a second-person perspective.* Let the reader or viewer know what will happen to her or him. Explain how the prevention issue or message touches the reader or viewer personally.^{vi}

ⁱ SAMHSA, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Excerpted from a spokesperson training developed by Vanguard Communications, 2015.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Excerpted from a persuasive storytelling training developed by Vanguard Communications, 2013.

