

NATIONAL CONSUMER SUPPORTER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

How to Work with the Media

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Funded by the Federal
Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration

Acknowledgements

The National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center of the National Mental Health Association would like to thank Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Center for Mental Health Services for their support of NCSTAC. In addition, we thank Heather Cobb, Suzanne Koebler and the NCSTAC Advisory Council for assistance in revising this document.



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1. Introduction

Publicity is a key element in helping your organization fulfill its mission. At times, in fact, media and communication activities will be the most effective tools that an advocacy organization can use. Well thought-out publicity campaigns can help others to relate to an issue, can reach both broad and narrowly defined audiences, and can build support for advocacy efforts.

This manual takes you through the basic steps of communicating your message by working with the media. Part one of this manual offers a series of exercises to help you to define your organization's public relations goals. Part two teaches you such basic tools for communicating with the media as writing news releases or preparing a media conference.

The Main Steps to Working with the Media

Define your goals.	Determine your audience.	Refine your message. (Develop slogans.)	Target opportunities. (Take advantage of current events. Develop contacts with reporters.)	Present your story. (Use press releases, interviews, advertisements and media conferences.)
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Part I: Developing the Message

1. Defining Your Goals

The first step in successfully planning publicity is to state your intended goals. The more specific you are in defining your goals, the easier it will be to design your publicity and, ultimately, to further your organization's success.

The easiest, most effective way to define your goals is to prepare a list of the various reasons why your organization wishes to seek publicity. You will find that as your publicity needs change over time, you may have to tailor this list—adding and deleting reasons as necessary.

In thinking about these ideas it is useful to look to a concrete example. For our purposes, let us consider the following hypothetical example: a statewide consumer advocacy organization located in California. Over the course of six months, they sought publicity for the following reasons:

- To publicize an event: *2005 Annual Conference on Mental Health System Reform*
- To publicize a new product: *Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Guide Published*
- To challenge a misconception: *Recovery from Mental Illness is Possible, Despite Public Perception*

List below your organization's publicity goals over the next six months:

Goal 1:

Goal 2:

Goal 3:

Goal 4:

Goal 5:

2. Targeting Your Audience

In order to determine the most effective media outlets, you must identify your audience. For each of the sample eating disorder organization's stated publicity goals, the organization wishes to reach the following target audiences:

Goal: to promote the Conference on Mental Health System Reform.

Audience: those individuals affected by mental illness, mental health professionals and state policy-makers.

Goal: to publicize a Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Guide.

Audience: individuals with mental illness, their friends and family members

Goal: to challenge a misconception that people with mental illness will never get better and lead productive, meaningful lives.

Audience: the general public, those individuals affected by mental illness, mental health professionals and state policy-makers.

Clearly, each of these publicity goals can best be served by communicating to different audiences. In some cases, the broad general public should be targeted. In other cases, the audience is much more specific, e.g., individuals with mental illness. For your own organization's publicity goals, write down the audiences you intend to reach:

1. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

2. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

3. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

4. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

5. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

3. Identifying Media Outlets

Defining the audience, in turn, helps to determine what media outlet is most suitable for helping to obtain your publicity goals. For each of their publicity goals, the eating disorder organization decided to attempt to utilize the following media outlets:

Except for paid advertisements, no publicity is ever guaranteed. Although there is no way to assure that news editors will ever cover your organization's stories, the more carefully you have considered whether your news is appropriate for a particular media outlet, the more likely you are to receive coverage. Below, write down a few possible media outlets for each of your organization's publicity goals:

Goal: to promote the Conference on Mental Health System Reform.

Audience: those individuals affected by mental illness, mental health professionals and state policy-makers.

Media outlet: news releases to all mental health consumer and professional organization newsletters, and local papers.

Goal: to publicize a Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Guide.

Audience: individuals with by mental illness, their friends and family members.

Media outlet: news releases to all community treatment centers, mental health consumer and professional organization publications and local papers.

Goal: to challenge a misconception that people with mental illness will never get better and lead productive, meaningful lives.

Audience: the general public, those individuals affected by mental illness, mental health professionals and state policy-makers.

Media outlet: news releases to the health section of the local paper, local health magazine, radio stations and television channels, and an interview on an early morning news/chat or local cable show.

Except for paid advertisements, no publicity is ever guaranteed. Although there is no way to assure that news editors will ever cover your organization's stories, the more carefully you have considered whether your news is appropriate for a particular media outlet, the more likely you are to receive coverage. Below, write down a few possible media outlets for each of your organization's publicity goals:

1. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Media outlets: _____

2. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Media outlets: _____

3. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Media outlets: _____

4. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Media outlets: _____

5. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Media outlets: _____



4. Refining Your Message

One way to maximize your chances of receiving media coverage is to have thought-provoking, memorable campaign slogans. Slogans such as “be all you can be” or “reach out and touch someone” can immediately communicate succinct, evocative messages. Below are examples of slogans that various mental health organizations have developed to communicate their publicity goals.

Goal: To promote and support the community care model.

Audience: The local community.

Slogan: We all deserve a home.

Goal: To teach that schizophrenia is a common, treatable illness deserving of public concern and funding.

Audience: Those individuals uneducated about mental illness.

Slogan: Open your mind.

Goal: To strengthen consumer/patient rights.

Audience: The mental health care community, the general public.

Slogan: Nothing about us without us.

Goal: To prevent substance abuse in school-age children.

Audience: School-age children.

Slogan: Just say no.

Effective slogans must communicate the publicity goal to the target audience in a memorable way. For each of your organization’s publicity goals, invent a slogan:

1. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Slogan: _____

2. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Slogan: _____

3. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Slogan: _____

4. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Slogan: _____

5. Goal: _____

Audience: _____

Slogan: _____

Effective slogans:

- Show the importance of an issue
- Show the relevance of an issue
- Put a “face” on the issue
- Address each specific audience
- Reflect an understanding of what would motivate change
- Are culturally relevant and sensitive
- Are memorable



Part II: The Tools of the Trade

1. Keeping abreast of Current Events

Just as important as developing refined publicity goals is seeking out special opportunities to communicate with the media. A good media director should read the newspaper regularly, should be aware of current events, and should constantly be on the look-out for opportunities to communicate the organization's mission and values to the press.

Special Opportunities to Communicate with the Media

1. Broadly recognized mental health events, i.e., May Is Mental Health Month; World Mental Health Day
2. Planned campaign events, i.e., dinner for the homeless
3. Unfortunate events in the community, i.e., natural disaster.

Publicly-recognized events

Throughout the year, there are a variety of publicly-recognized, mental health observances that you can link to your organization's activities. Examples of such broadly-recognized events include National Mental Health Month, Childhood Depression Awareness Day, National Mental Illness Awareness Week, and World Mental Health Day.

Mark all of these events on your office calendar and plan to distribute news releases two weeks in advance of these dates. Be sure to include mention of the events in your news releases' headlines.

At the same time, always be cautious about not inundating reporters with too many news releases. Refer to the criteria for "What is Newsworthy" to make sure your carefully-crafted release is not immediately disposed of without being read.

What is Newsworthy?

- Something new that no one has heard or said before.
- Something timely - yesterday's news is old news.
- Something involving a public figure, celebrity or well-known organization.
- Something unusual or ironic.
- Something with a human interest angle.
- Something visual (for television and print journalism).
- Something that centers around an event or happening.
- Something that affects a large number of people.
- Something that is a variation on a theme already receiving media attention.
- Something interesting on an otherwise slow news day.
- Something that benefits a large number of readers, viewers or listeners.
- Something that is a threat or danger to the community.
- Something that pulls at people's "heart strings."
- Something that impacts a specific audience.

List below any newsworthy events you anticipate in the coming year:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Taking advantage of unplanned events

From time to time, you may have the opportunity to identify a mental health angle in a breaking news story. For example:

- The release of “A Beautiful Mind,” a film featuring an individual with schizophrenia
- The planned execution of a man with a serious mental illness
- The FDA releases a warning about a common antidepressant drug
- Hurricanes Frances and Isabel devastate communities, resulting in physical and mental trauma

Keep abreast of such current events, and whenever a notable event with a tie to mental health surfaces try to produce a news release.

2. Making Connections with Journalists

An important part of your research and record-keeping should be the development of a database of journalists sympathetic to your cause. If you read an article or see a report with a sympathetic portrayal of mental illness, be sure to contact the reporter and express your appreciation for the good coverage of your cause.

You may also choose to call reporters after sending out news releases to ask them if they are interested in further information for a story. You can suggest meeting briefly in order to discuss your organization and pitch story ideas. (The worst they can do is say no.)

The best time to contact reporters is usually early in the morning. In the afternoon, they are typically pressed for time to meet their deadlines. Do keep in mind that you must strike a balance between keeping reporters informed and not inundating them with too many calls.

3. Writing News Releases

News releases will probably be your primary means of communication with journalists. Typically, you may send a news release and then follow up with a phone call offering an interview or further comment on the issue.

Length

As a rule of thumb, news releases should be short. Generally, limit yourself to one page. Many reporters will never even look at a second page.

Content

Start with your “lead,” a sentence or brief paragraph capturing the essence of what you wish to say. Include as much essential information as possible - the who, what, when and where - in this lead. For example:

Several hundred people are expected to gather in Lincoln Park for the yearly candlelight vigil to launch Mental Illness Awareness Week.

Follow-up with one or two quotes from relevant people:

“Tens of thousands of people in this city suffer from a severe mental illness,” says Jennifer Ramirez, president of the D.C. Mental Health Consumers’ League. “We want to make sure that their plight is recognized.”

Add a few more short paragraphs, writing that which is most important first and adding that which is less important later. The lower down in your news release material is, the less likely it will be included in a journalist’s report.

Format

Center the title of your news release at the top of your organization’s letterhead. The headline should be active and should explain the essence of your release:

Hundreds Gather to Celebrate Mental Health Month

Include contact information and the date at the top of the news release.

Contact: *Media Department (703) 757-2788*
mediainfo@nmha.org

Consumer-Run Mental Health Organizations Receive Boost

NMHA's Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center Awards Grants

ALEXANDRIA, VA. (March 14, 2005) - The National Consumer Supporter Technical Assistance Center, a federally-funded resource center within the National Mental Health Association, has awarded three-year grants to eight consumer-run organizations. The grants will either help consumer groups establish new independent nonprofit organizations or help existing ones engage in recovery-oriented systems transformation.

“Establishing consumer- and family-driven mental health services was a key recommendation of the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health,” says Sara Thompson, Director of NCSTAC. “We can only realize this when consumer groups are an integral part of the mental health service planning and delivery process. NCSTAC provides these grants to ensure this participation.”

The following organizations will receive grants:

- **Brevard Drop-In Center** in Brevard County, Florida
- **Meaningful Minds of Louisiana** in Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- **New Partnerships for Women** in Dane County, Wisconsin
- **The Phoenix Place** in Amelia, Ohio
- **The Recovery Group** in Washington, D.C.
- **Albuquerque Drop-In** in Bernalillo County, New Mexico
- **Virginia Organization of Consumers Asserting Leadership**
- **West Virginia Mental Health Consumers' Association**

NCSTAC is funded by a grant from the Center for Mental Health Services of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Through its ongoing support, NCSTAC ensures that consumer groups have the necessary resources to fully participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of recovery-oriented, consumer driven mental health services.

The National Mental Health Association is the country's oldest and largest nonprofit organization addressing all aspects of mental health and mental illness. With more than 340 affiliates nationwide, NMHA works to improve the mental health of all Americans through advocacy, education, research and service.

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Correcting misperceptions

From time to time, your organization will probably have to respond to inaccurate and prejudicial portrayals of mental illness. There are three simple rules for writing a news release intended to correct public misperceptions:

- 1) State your concerns or objections clearly in the first paragraph of the news release.
- 2) Follow-up with a justification for your concerns or objections.
- 3) Use strong but polite language.

February 15, 2002

Contact: *John Smith*
1-800-555-1212; jsmith@nmha.org

NMHA Warns Public, Scientologists Not Qualified to Provide Mental Healthcare

Statement by Michael M. Faenza, President and CEO of the National Mental Health Association

ALEXANDRIA, Va. Today NMHA warns people in need of mental health support to beware of Church of Scientology representatives claiming to provide mental healthcare. Almost six months after the Sept. 11 tragedy, with the economy in recession and the war on terrorism continuing, the Church of Scientology is using this time of uncertainty to recruit new members.

The Church of Scientology has announced a campaign to offer free assistance to those still troubled by the attacks of Sept. 11, with billboards publicizing their toll-free number and the message "Something Can Be Done About It," in New York, Washington D.C., and other select cities across the country. For a Church of Scientology volunteer to be certified as a minister, he or she is required only to read *The Scientology Handbook* and pass a short examination in a Scientology church or mission.

A qualified mental health provider has years of education and post-education training, a degree from an accredited program, and is usually required to be licensed by the state in which they work. NMHA advises people seeking mental health treatment to check their providers' credentials and affiliations.

This isn't the first time we at NMHA have urged the Church of Scientology to stay out of mental health. In the wake of September's attacks, *Fox News* broadcast a toll-free help-line for "National Mental Health Assistance," unaware that the number connected callers to the Scientologist's headquarters in Los Angeles. Scientologists also sent 450 counselors to ground zero under the guise of providing mental health assistance.

Claiming to provide quality mental health support to people in emotional crisis for dubious reasons is unethical and can be harmful to those needing real assistance.

The National Mental Health Association is the country's oldest and largest nonprofit organization addressing all aspects of mental health and mental illness. With more than 340 affiliates nationwide, NMHA works to improve the mental health of all Americans through advocacy, education, research and service. NMHA provides mental health assistance to American communities through its local affiliates. For mental health information and referrals contact us at 800-969-NMHA (6642) or www.nmha.org.

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4. Preparing a Media Kit

A media kit is simply a package of information on a particular topic that you provide to journalists. A media kit should contain a lead news release identifying the immediate newsworthiness of the kit. It should also contain some additional background information on your organization and your campaign. As a general rule of thumb, all of the information in the kit should not exceed 10 pages. This information should be packaged neatly in a folder bearing your organization's logo.

Contents of a Sample Media Kit

- News releases - "Consumer Network Opens Drop-In Center"
- "Introducing Consumer Network" brochure
- "Consumer Network Mission, Vision and Values" brochure
- "What Is Mental Illness?" fact sheet
- Roster of board members
- Glossy black and white photos of Consumer Network spokespeople
- Camera-ready public service print ads
- Business card or rolodex card

5. Giving Interviews

Interviews are another important means of communicating with the media. Unlike with news releases, however, you exercise much less control in an interview. You must therefore prepare yourself.

It is a wise idea, if possible, to practice with a co-worker in advance. Before giving any interview, you should have in your mind the answers to the following four questions:

- 1) What is my message?
- 2) How can I prove/justify this message?
- 3) How might someone disagree with me?
- 4) How can I rebut this criticism?

Most interviews these days take place by phone, which is actually to your advantage. You are free to fill your desk with reference materials and use these cues to help you in answering questions. One useful tip is to make a list of the main points you wish to cover during the phone conversation. You can then mark off each item on the list as you make your points. (It is also considered perfectly legitimate when giving an off-camera interview to consult with notes.)

Tips for Effective Media Interviews

1) Do your homework.

Have a notebook on each of the important subjects that you will typically be asked questions about. Include the important facts—names, dates statistics, sources, etc.—so that you can access this information quickly.

2) Put together media kits for reporters.

Have standard kits ready on the most important subjects that you typically discuss with the media.

3) Ask about the nature of an interview in advance.

This is a legitimate way to prepare yourself. It is not okay, however, to ask what the precise questions will be; instead, ask what types of questions will be asked.

4) It is okay to call reporters back or have them wait.

Tell them that you need to check on the details, expeditiously look up the information you need, and then get back to them promptly.

5) Take interviews seriously.

Never joke. Never say something off the record. Be polite.

6) Answer all questions truthfully.

If you are not at liberty to answer a question, explain why this is so. Never say “no comment.”

7) Answer questions briefly and simply.

If you don't formulate your own sound bites, they will be formulated for you.

8) Look good for television interviews.

Dress neatly. Don't wear loud patterns or dangly earrings. Men and women both should wear facial powder; visible perspiration will make you look nervous and you will lose credibility with viewers. Try to be interviewed outdoors in natural light, which is the most flattering.

9) Never criticize a reporter's idea for a story.

If you think the questions miss the mark, then try to work in the relevant information anyway.

10) Note the reporter's name, media outlet and phone number.

If you need to follow-up later, you know exactly whom to contact.

6. Organizing a News Conference

If you have a truly newsworthy story, you can call a news conference. At a news conference, reporters all meet, at your invitation, to learn at the same time about one story. Following the rules below will help you to organize a successful news conference:

- **Make sure your event is newsworthy and can only be communicated via conference.**

A news conference should have enough speeches to last at least one-half hour but never more than an hour. Refer to the tips on what is newsworthy on page 13xx.

- **Choose the right location.**

Your location should be safe, easy to reach and convenient for parking. If you wish to use an on-site location, such as a hospital or a drop-in center, then you must consider issues of confidentiality.

- **Choose the right time.**

Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday are the best days: reporters may forget about a Monday event, and on Friday they will be preoccupied with preparing weekend stories. News conferences should take place between 9:30 and 1:00. Any earlier, and the reporters may come late. Any later, and they may miss their filing deadlines.

- **Notify reporters well in advance, and follow-up the day before.**

Mail or fax out “advisories” at least a week before the event. (An advisory is an invitation with a limited amount of information about the news conference; limited, because you do not want reporters writing a story before your conference.)

- **List the event on the “daybooks.”**

All assignment editors regularly consult a computerized calendar of media events called the “daybook” that is compiled by the local wire service. Be sure to submit your news advisory to the local newswire service (i.e., Associated Press or United Press International) up to two weeks in advance.

- **Follow-up by telephone.**

Call reporters to make sure they have received your news advisory. For those reporters who do not plan to attend, try to set up an individual interview or deliver media kits and statements to their office.

- **Prepare a media kit for the conference.**

Follow the instructions in Part II, Section 4. Your kit should also include verbatim

statements of what your various speakers will say and brief biographical profiles of each speaker.

- **Prepare yourself for tough questions.**

Practice answering difficult questions in advance. Come up with short, quotable answers.

- **Think visually.**

The more attractive your presentation, the greater the likelihood of television coverage or articles with pictures. Try to use appealing charts, graphs and other visual aids to accompany speeches and prepare camera-ready copies for distribution. Take pictures of the event yourself to provide to small, weekly papers and to include in your own materials such as newsletters and annual reports.

- **Prepare the room.**

Pick the right sized room: A room that is too large will make your event seem like a flop; a room that is too small will be uncomfortable and annoying to reporters. Equip the room with your visual aids, prepare a podium with a banner, use a mount box to allow reporters to record directly from the speakers' microphones, set up risers at the back of the room for television cameras, and position a table in the front of the room for the reporters' use.

- **Set up a sign-in table.**

Register reporters and hand out media kits at a sign-in table. You can then send media kits to the reporters who did not show up, and you can introduce yourself at this time to those who do.

- **Get started on time.**

Don't begin the conference later than five minutes after the designated time. Introduce yourself, welcome all those in the room and thank them for attending, and begin the statements.

- **Let a limited number of people speak on your behalf.**

Reporters do not want to hear one person after another deliver a speech. Organize the key points you need to present and divide them among no more than four people. Speeches should be no more than five minutes and should be laden with sound-bites.

- **Get personal.**

Have an "ordinary person," such as a consumer or a family member who has been personally affected by the issue, tell their own story.

- **Set aside a fixed amount of time to answer questions.**

After all the statements have been made, the floor should be open to reporters and other conference attendees to ask questions of the various speakers. Speakers should answer all questions into the microphone, repeating the question before answering it.

- **Close the news conference.**

Try to limit the conference to no more than an hour. Thank the reporters for attending, and offer to answer additional questions or provide more information as needed.

- **Follow-up again.**

Mail, deliver or e-mail press kits to those key reporters who did not attend. Be prepared to receive follow-up phone calls from reporters.

- **Collect clips of stories.**

Monitor the media for stories based on your conference, and collect these articles. You can use them for future promotional materials, and you will also glean some sense of which reporters and publications are particularly interested in your organization's work.