

ImPRESSive

A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

April 2002

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS

Building and maintaining relationships with reporters are essential to getting your message out to the press. Having strong relationships with reporters helps position your organization on the front line and allows you to get your message into health care stories seamlessly. If you want reporters to contact you for comments, or if you would like to draw reporters' attention to neglected health care issues, a well-developed rapport will enable you to do so. An equally important part of this equation is maintaining your relationships with these reporters over time; building and maintaining these relationships are essential to press outreach.

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

1. SEND A PACKET OF INFORMATION

The first step in building relationships with reporters is sending them an information packet. This keeps you from having to “cold call” reporters and also allows them to have your contact information handy. This packet should include a brief one-page write-up about your organization, some articles mentioning your organization, and your contact information. In addition, if your organization has resources such as reports, include these as well. This packet should demonstrate how your organization could be a resource to these reporters.

To whom do you send the information packet? If your organization has a press list, this is a good place to start. Otherwise, if you are starting from scratch, you may want to take the time to create a working press list or a list of reporters who cover

health care stories in your local papers. For more information on how to create a solid press list, please see our past *ImPRESSive* entitled “Creating Working Media Lists.”

2. INTRODUCE YOURSELF

After you have sent the packet of information, give each reporter a follow-up call. The information packet serves as a good excuse for making this call. You can start off the conversations by introducing yourself and asking if they received your information packet.

Because reporters never have very much time, make this call short. Briefly explain who you are and what your organization does. This should all be explained in the context of how your organization can be a resource to them. Let them know that they can call you at any time if they have any health-related questions and that you would be happy to talk to them about health care issues. In addition, let them know about any upcoming press events you may be having. End the conversations

ImPRESSive

Writer:

Kati Anderson

Layout:

Anita Watts

Editor:

Ingrid VanTuinen

Readers are encouraged to reprint **ImPRESSive** materials, giving credit as follows:

“Reprinted from **ImPRESSive**, Families USA, 1334 G Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-3169.”

Please send us a copy.

Tell us what you think...

ImPRESSive is a series of tip sheets providing media guidance to advocates. Please contact us with your comments and questions.

Phone: 202-628-3030

Fax: 202-347-2417
info@familiesusa.org

For additional copies, write to:

ImPRESSive
c/o Families USA
1334 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005.

by asking them if it would be okay for you to call them once a month to check in and tell them what is going on in the health care world. A simple, short call is all you need to start a relationship with a reporter.

To prepare for the calls, organize your information ahead of time: Have helpful documents such as talking points in front of you during the call. A reporter’s first impression of you should be that you are knowledgeable and that you will be a good resource.

At the end of the conversations, make sure to collect their contact information. E-mail is a great way to communicate directly with reporters, since faxes often get lost or are delivered to the wrong person. In addition, make sure you have their correct fax and phone numbers.

Another great way to meet reporters is to make a point of introducing yourself to them at press events. This not only is a good way to add new people to your existing press list, but it also allows them to put a face to your name. Introduce yourself, give them a *brief* description of what your organization does, give them your card, and let them know that you can answer any health care related questions they may have.

3. MEET FOR LUNCH OR COFFEE

There are some key reporters with whom you may want to foster a closer relationship. If you live in a small media market, this may mean all your health beat reporters. If you have a long list of reporters on your press list, you may want to single out a couple of key reporters. Research news clips to find out which reporters are writing regularly on your issue. Identify reporters with whom you would like to have a closer relationship, and, during your follow-up call, ask them if they would like to go out to lunch or to coffee with you. Explain that you would like to talk to them about upcoming events, legislative actions, and the latest trends in health care. Take a press kit, even if you have already sent one to them. If you

Sample Introduction Call to A Reporter:

Hi, may I speak to Sally Quinn.



Hi, Sally, my name is Joanne Peters, from Health Care Today. I sent you a packet of information on our organization last week and I wanted to call and make sure you received it and to see if you had any questions.

I also wanted to let you know about our upcoming press event on the uninsured.

Our organization focuses on... So please call me if you have any questions regarding these issues. I would be happy to add you to our e-mail list.

WHAT TO SAY AND BRING TO YOUR LUNCH OR COFFEE WITH REPORTERS:

- DO** bring a press packet with information on your organization and current reports, issue briefs, press releases, and fact sheets.
- DO** bring your business card and/or include contact information in your press packet.
- DON'T** take over the conversation. This is a time for you to build relationships with these reporters—not to impress them with your knowledge of the issues.
- DO** allow the reporters to ask questions. This is their time to explore the issues and sometimes pose the dumb questions they have always wanted to ask.

have any new news articles, add those to the existing press kit. Be prepared to talk briefly about how your organization can be a resource to that reporter. Make sure you keep your conversation professional, and remember that nothing you are saying is off the record. Keep the conversation away from anything controversial that you would not want the reporter to print the next day. In addition, don't take over the conversation. This is also a good time for reporters to ask any health care questions they may have and to share what issues they have a particular interest in.

Most reporters are not allowed to accept "gifts"; therefore, they will most likely pay for lunch. However, be prepared in case they split the tab or in the unlikely event that they let you pay the bill.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR PRESS KIT:

- Fact sheet on the issue
- Clips of previous articles about your organization (2-5 articles)
- Business card or contact information for your organization's main press contact
- Information on your organization (1 page)

MAINTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

Maintaining strong relationships with reporters requires a great deal of follow-up, but the long-term benefits are unlimited. As soon as you establish yourself as an accurate, timely, and informative resource, you will have no trouble maintaining these relationships.

ESTABLISH YOURSELF AND YOUR ORGANIZATION AS A RESOURCE FOR THE REPORTER

In order to establish your organization as a credible resource, the most important thing to remember is to get the right information to them as quickly as possible.

Whenever a reporter calls you, take the request, ask about the deadline, and get the request answered in that time frame. Reporters often call at the last minute, and if you are able to get the information to them quickly, they will keep your name in their Rolodex for life. Your organization may want to create a Media Call Sheet where you record all the important information, such as the reporter's name, affiliation, contact information, request, and deadline. Through these tracking sheets, you can make sure to collect the right information and to answer the reporter's request in an appropriate and timely fashion.

In addition, it is always a good idea to keep a database of these reporter requests. This will allow your organization to track what specific reporters are writing about and how often your organization works with them.

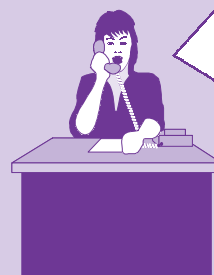
Sometimes reporters will call and ask you things that don't fit into your organization's framework. Whenever possible, try to get them the information they need—even if that information is a referral to another organization or another organization's phone number. For example, if a reporter calls and says she is writing a story on

senior citizens and the high cost of prescription drugs, but your organization deals only with children's health, refer her to a couple of local senior organizations and get her their numbers and contact information. As soon as reporters can establish that you can get them information quickly and accurately—no matter what the information is—they will continue to call you back.

KEEP REPORTERS IN THE LOOP WITH ANY NEW INFORMATION

Make a point of keeping reporters in the loop with what is going on. This may mean that you call them to give them a heads-up on upcoming events your organization is planning, send them any new information you may have, or call them with story ideas. Make sure to keep conversations short but informative. If you make a point of calling them regularly with updates, they will not think that every call you make is a pitch call. Make sure the news you are passing along is also timely and newsworthy. You don't want to waste their time with irrelevant information.

Sample Non-Pitch Call to a Reporter:



Hi Pam, this is Pat Smith from Health Care Today, I am calling to let you know that in February we are going to be releasing some new data that show a change in the number of uninsured. I will keep you updated on when and where we will be holding the press event.

Keep the conversation brief, giving them just enough information to keep them hooked and interested in your event.

UNDERSTANDING REPORTERS

DON'T BE INTIMIDATED BY REPORTERS

Reporters work on tight deadlines and usually don't have much time to find the information they need. For this reason, many people are intimidated by reporters and think that they come across as rude and pushy. Remember that they are only looking for the right information to plug into their stories and usually have little or no time to find it. Once you understand this dynamic and play an important role in helping them get the information they need, you will be on your way to developing solid relationships.

DON'T CALL REPORTERS ON DEADLINE

The number one rule to keep in mind when talking to reporters is never to call them after 3:00 p.m. unless you are giving them information they need for the article being filed that evening. The last three hours of reporters' days are a frenzied time when they are attempting to get last-minute facts and quotations for their articles. The best time to make a pitch or follow-up call is usually before noon.

DON'T CALL REPORTERS WITHOUT A REASON OR EXCUSE

The number two rule to keep in mind when talking to reporters is not to waste their time. Make sure you have a reason to call. The reason can be to make an introduction, to provide information, to give them a heads-up on an upcoming event, etc. Reporters do not have a lot of time, and for this reason it is important to establish yourself as a useful contact.

DON'T CONFUSE A WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH A FRIENDSHIP

As you develop relationships with reporters, don't tell them anything that you wouldn't want them to print in their newspapers. Never forget that their

number one goal, no matter how much they might like you on a personal level, is to get a good story. Don't let a warm relationship with a reporter lead you to say things about Administration officials, colleagues, legislators, or candidates you don't want seen in print. Reporters take their jobs seriously, and they will print anything you say that seems newsworthy.

DO ESTABLISH YOURSELF AS A HELPFUL RESOURCE

When reporters call you for information, be as helpful as possible—even if you cannot answer their questions directly. If their request is not applicable to your organization, refer them to other Web sites, telephone numbers, or organizations. If you establish your organization as a one-stop shop where reporters can get background information, referrals, and an interview from your spokesperson, they will keep calling you back.

CONCLUSION

Successful relationships with reporters are relationships in which the organization is able to get its message out through the media because it supplies accurate and timely information to reporters. Reporters need information in order to write good stories. Therefore, once you position yourself as a resource and always help them get the correct information, you can even get your message into health care stories without a press event.

SAMPLE MEDIA CALL SHEET

MEDIA CALL SHEET

Name: Matthew Collins, Health Beat Writer

Media Outlet: The Daily Herald (Print)

Contact Number: (657) 222-2222 ext. 158

E-mail: matthew.collins@dh.com

Fax: (657) 222-2221

Date: Monday, Feb. 25th

Requests: Comment from organization and information on its local effects.

Story Topic: High cost of RX

Deadline: 1:00 p.m. Today!

Action Taken: Jane spoke with him. We also sent along our new report.

Call Received By: PSS



Next **ImPRESSive**: Coming in July 2002

❑ **On The Record & Off the Record:** Controlling the Story


Are you intimidated to talk to reporters because you don't know **WHAT** they will write? In the next **ImPRESSive**, learn the difference between on the record, off the record, and background. More importantly, learn how to control what information gets into the story.

ImPRESSive

Back Issues:

- * Tips for Interviews - Part III: Television, January 2001
- * Tips for Interviews - Part II: Radio, December 2000
- * Tips for Interviews - Part I: Newspaper, October 2000
- * Getting Your Message Into National Stories, June 2000
- * How to Shift Focus on a Story, April 2000
- * The Art of Story Banking, July 1999
- * Getting in the Editorial/Opinion Pages, March 1999
- * Creating Working Media Lists, December 1998
- * Drafting a News Release, October 1998

All issues of **ImPRESSive** are available on our Web site at www.familiesusa.org/html/advocates/impress.


The Voice for Health Care Consumers
1334 G Street, NW, 3rd Fl., Washington, DC 20005