

ImPRESSive

A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

June 2000

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE INTO NATIONAL STORIES

You have a golden opportunity. A major national news organization is running a story on one of your issues. Your local media will likely carry the story in the next day or so, but you're not sure how you can get your group into that story.

Mention of your group in the national story would benefit your work in many ways. First, the story is going to raise awareness of the issue on a national level. This will lend credibility to the importance of the issue and may help to speed you toward your goals.

Second, the story gives you an opportunity to raise your organization's profile and increase name recognition.

Third, the story could help coalesce local efforts and focus the goals you and your coalition are seeking.

The Issue

Your group, Citizens for Affordable Prescriptions (CAP), has been working to raise awareness of the high cost of prescription drugs. You've done the background work. You've talked to senior and disability groups and collected information about how much they pay for prescription drugs. You've collected stories from them illustrating the magnitude of the problem. You have the names and phone numbers of at least seven seniors and three young to middle-aged people with disabilities who are juggling prescription drug costs and necessities like food and rent. They're willing to talk to the media and are knowledgeable about the overall issue.

You've already laid the groundwork for a successful media campaign. In the past, you've made efforts to talk to the media, but have been rebuffed. You've talked to reporters at the major newspaper, radio, and television stations. They've been interested in the story, but have been unable to get the go-ahead from their news directors or editors.

You've written and submitted op-ed pieces and pursued editorial boards. While you've been given a hearing, there wasn't much enthusiasm from any of the people you met.

You have an up-to-date media list of reporters' e-mail, fax and phone numbers and their organizations, just itching to be used.

But before you can use your resources and connections, you have to know the story is coming.

How Do You Find Out About the Story?

Keep in Touch with Other Organizations

A national group might notify you that they are planning a major press event on your issue. It could be they are releasing new data or they are reacting to newly-introduced legislation that affects your state.

The national group could also know that an important reporter is working on a story about the issue. The national group would know this either because the reporter has contacted the organization for quotes or information, or because the national group provided the reporter with newsworthy data and got a solid commitment to run a story.

Follow the News

Another way to keep tabs on current stories is by following the “newswire”. The newswire is breaking news. Do you remember in old movies how people used to watch the “ticker”? Well, that’s the newswire, the front line of the news business. It’s now computerized, but its function is still the same. The newswire is a round-the-clock operation. Reporters for the newswire can get stories out almost immediately; they don’t have to wait for the next day’s edition of the newspaper or the morning news. Nearly every news organization subscribes to one or more newswires. The newswire is fast and easy and the lifeblood of small newspapers and radio and television

stations.

The most important such service is the AP newswire. The websites of most large papers offer a link to the AP wire, as does the website www.commondreams.org. While the AP does have its own website, it is not very user-friendly.

The AP newswire is updated constantly throughout the day and night and is a great resource. Other major news services are Reuters, Knight-Ridder, Bloomberg, and the New York Times.

Why is the newswire so important? Well, most local media don’t have the resources to keep large staffs. They need a tool that will help them keep on top of breaking news without having a reporter in every corner of the world. They will have a staffer watch the wire and notify the news director when important news hits. Stories can also be lifted, with attribution, directly from the newswire and put in the newspaper. It’s the cheapest, easiest way for local media with small budgets to maintain their newsworthiness.

At the same time, media can lift essential, national information from the newswire, then tailor the story to their readership by including local information in the story—for example, how the high cost of prescription drugs is affecting area residents. Your group could get a quote about how seniors are being price gouged by the pharmaceutical industry. Or, if you’re really lucky, you can get an entirely separate story—called a sidebar—uniquely addressing local people (remember your seven seniors and three disabled spokespeople?) and their situations. This story will hopefully include your group’s suggestions for how to resolve the problem.

If you have internet access and an intern to spare, you can watch the wire for relevant news. Watching the AP wire by logging onto a

What Is A “Sidebar”?

A sidebar is a related story that provides additional information augmenting a larger story. You can help get a sidebar by providing:

- * Local data supporting the national story
- * Quotes from local health care consumers and organizations
- * An event or photo opportunity

website a few times a day can be a simple way of monitoring media coverage of health care issues. On the Yahoo or AOL websites, for example, you can set up a default homepage that tracks the AP and Reuters. Everytime you log on, you can be monitoring the newswire. Still, not all organizations have the resources to do this.

If monitoring the newswire doesn't seem feasible, your group will have to rely on your personal relationships with reporters and editors. As advocates, these relationships should always be a high priority. Good relationships with the media are instrumental to good press coverage of your group and your issues.

It's a good idea to put together a press kit about what your organization does and what its goals are and then meet with reporters, news editors, and editorial page editors. Familiarize them with your organization and make sure they have your contact information. Let them know that you have real people they can interview. If you have a good relationship with your local reporters and they're familiar

with you and your group's issues, they may tip you off to a breaking story and ask for your comments. This is the best situation to be in because it means your group already has a relatively high-profile in your community. If you're not at this stage yet, there are still plenty of things you can offer reporters.

What Should You Do?

Now that you know the story is coming and you've got some connections at your local media outlets, you have to start working the phones and e-mail. Knowing the story will be on the wire gives you an advantage. Make your calls to friendly reporters and tell them you've heard there's a story about prescription drugs coming out over the wire. Offer them your resources and expert information to localize their story, and offer to provide them with one or more people to interview. This is called "putting a face on the story."

What Are Your Resources?

Tell reporters you know real people who would be willing to talk about their prescription drug costs. Real people help humanize the issue and make it more interesting to readers and reporters. You need to have sympathetic examples, too. Be sure to stop and carefully think about who is the most likely person to generate support for your issue.

In addition to providing reporters with health care consumers, consider asking sympathetic health care providers to speak out on the issue. If you have a relationship with a local pharmacist, ask if he or she would be willing to talk to reporters. Doctors and nurses are also respected sources for reporters.

Provide reporters with any local data you might have. The national story addresses the big picture, but what people reading their newspapers over a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee want to know is: how does this affect me? If you can prove that it has an impact on their parents, their neighbors, friends, and possibly themselves one day, then you will have done 80 percent of the work. Readers and reporters need to see the issue in terms of their own backyards before they'll really sit up and pay attention.

Think about organizing a media event. If you've gotten your information off the wire, this is probably too ambitious considering your time constraints. Depending upon when the story appeared or how you got the information (from the national group or the newswire) you might have a couple of days in which to schedule a small event at a senior center where seniors can show off the quantity of prescription drugs they consume and provide testimonials.

You could also organize an event at the local pharmacy and have consumers and a pharmacist available for pictures and interviews. If the national group informed you a few days or even a week ahead of time, then you've got enough time to throw together a good visual for the evening news or a nice picture for the morning edition. Some examples of good visuals would be a senior citizen holding up the prescriptions he or she has been unable to fill due to cost, or surrounded by his or her prescription drug vials, or a senior standing at the cash register at his or her local pharmacy.

The best thing you can do, after making your all-important phone calls, is to provide reporters with a press release about the issue. You should have bullets detailing the information you've accumulated on prescription drugs in your area and a soundbite—which is a short, attention-grabbing quote—that may be included in a story.

Detail the three or four most important things that reporters should include. Make them newsworthy. For example, the bullets could look like this:

- * From January 1998-January 1999, prescription drugs in Generic County rose 2.5%
- * From January 1998-January 1999, Social Security and Disability payments in Generic County rose 1.9%
- * Three out of four Generic County seniors have admitted not filling necessary prescriptions due to cost.
- * 4,000 Generic County seniors are taking three or more prescription drugs a day.

Include a quote from your spokesperson in the release. "Generic County seniors are bearing the burden of the highest prescription drug costs in the industrialized world. They're paying more than Canadians, Vets, and pets!"

Make sure to provide contact information and be available to reporters **at all times**. If you're serious about getting some mileage out of a national story, you need to be reachable. (For more information on how to write a good press release see the October 1998 *ImPRESSive*).

Make sure you have the names and phone numbers of the seniors and disabled people who would be willing to talk to reporters.

What Can You Expect?

Okay, you've done a lot of work. You've talked the ear off every reporter in your area with an interest in the national story. You were pressed for time, so you couldn't manage an event, but you did put out a readable, newsworthy press release with clear contact information.

In a perfect world, a story profiling your group and the work it does to promote the interests of seniors with high prescription drug costs would hit the front-page of the newspaper the next day.

In an imperfect world, the newswire story runs and there's a sidebar on your most likable senior spokesperson, Mrs. Amelia Armstrong.

In a really imperfect world, the newswire story runs with no mention of you, your group, or Mrs. Armstrong.

Don't Throw in the Towel

If you didn't get any media attention for your group even after all your efforts, be comforted. Taking time to familiarize the media with your group and your issues is never wasted. At the very least, you're laying the groundwork for future stories. You've got to regroup and remember your assets. A national story on prescription drugs ran in your local newspaper; that still puts you two steps ahead of where you were. Now it's time to exploit that window of opportunity.

Invite the folks at the neighborhood senior center to write letters to the editor about the prescription drug story. Encourage them to describe their own experiences and congratulate the paper for running the story.

Write an op-ed piece with all that great, specific, local data. Keep it short (under 700 words) and encourage another group working in your issue area to co-sign it with you. Doctor, nurse, and pharmacist groups would be credible allies and help attract more media interest. Given the recent national story, you are much more likely to get your op-ed published.

Set up the round of editorial boards and go over it again. Be persuasive and persistent. Use your data, your anecdotal information and

be sure to remind them of the national story their own newspaper recently ran. (For more hints on op-eds and letters to the editor, see the March 1999 *ImPRESSive*).

NOTE: Newspaper strategy is emphasized because plenty of small to mid-sized radio and television stations still look to newspapers to help them develop the news. An editorial or a front-page story in the newspaper will almost certainly get some attention from radio and television reporters.

Conclusion

It's unrealistic to expect consistently good reporting on your issue without a lot of legwork reaching out to the media. While it's not unheard-of for groups to luck out once or twice, nothing can replace a friendly, mutually beneficial relationship with reporters.

A national story can give you a strong bump onto center stage, but it's not going to last unless you have a mapped-out media strategy, clearly-defined long-term goals, and a commitment to earning the media attention you seek.

Back Issues:

- * 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 website at www.familiesusa.org.

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

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