

SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PREVENTION FIRST
Building community capacity to prevent substance abuse

TIP SHEET

WORKING WITH THE LOCAL MEDIA IN PREVENTION

Overview

Working with the media and developing positive relationships with them is important for any substance abuse prevention provider. In the past, a news story that aired on a local station reached hundreds, maybe thousands of households. Today, using social media, a news story or feature can reach an untold number of households around the world. Now more than ever, it is important to cultivate relationships with both local print and digital media outlets. Successful interaction with the news media requires an understanding of the benefits: You gain a profile-enhancing forum while they gain a quotable expert to help tell a story. (Pincus, 2007)

Helpful Hints and Considerations

1. Develop relationships. Watch local newscasts to gauge topics of interest for particular reporters and read local publications with the same goal in mind. Send a brief email complimenting them when a particular article or story “hits home” for your organization. Also email a thank you after a successful interview/story with your organization. Meet local media face-to-face. Particularly if you’re trying to build a relationship, meeting face-to-face and getting to know one another is crucial. (McCartney, 2016)

Television reporters in particular move from station to station and from state to state, so it is important to stay on top of their comings and goings so you’ll know when you need to start a new relationship with a new reporter.

2. Nothing is “off the record.” It has been said that 10 different journalists will have 10 different definitions of what “off the record” really means. Although most reporters keep their word, some break their agreements with sources. Even well-intentioned reporters can get overruled by their editors. (Phillips, 2011) It is safest and best to avoid this phrase and steer clear of topics you don’t want to discuss.
3. Respect their deadlines and always call/email them back. When a reporter calls or emails you, it’s because they consider you an expert or they think you can contribute to their story. It’s a huge compliment! Sometimes reporters have multiple deadlines throughout their day and even if you aren’t the best person/organization to respond to their inquiry, do your best to provide them with the contact information of the person/organization that IS the best for their story. That way, even though you aren’t part of this particular story, you helped them and they will remember that.
4. Tips to remember during the interview. Lose the jargon. Reporters don’t have time to Google your responses to learn what a SPF is. Make two or three main points and repeat them (your “elevator

pitch”). The “elevator pitch” is not only useful for quickly describing your story to media personnel, but it’s also a way to share the most important information about your group or organization to potential partners. (SAMHSA, 2015) This is a great opportunity to educate them on the importance of substance abuse prevention.

There’s no need to volunteer additional information. More is not better; answer questions briefly. When you give long-winded answers, you give the journalist the power to choose which parts of your answer to use and omit. (Siegel, 2013)

There is also nothing wrong with saying “I don’t know.” No matter how prepared you are, there might be a question that stumps you. Rather than guess or speculate, it’s much better to say, “I don’t know, but I will find out and get back to you.” Then DO get back to them.

References

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