

# CHAPTER 6

## TIPS FOR MEDIA RELATIONS

### OVERVIEW

Issues handled by local boards of health and health departments are a natural source of interest to reporters and the press - people generally have a basic concern about disease, health hazards, and environmental conditions that may impact the health of local residents.

Local public health policies, programs, and services are designed to prevent illness, injury, or death and safeguard the health of local residents. Knowing how to work with the press - whether newspaper, radio, or television - is important, especially when communication to the public about a potential health risk is involved.

Local health officials can do a lot to maximize the impact of their health messages by knowing how to assist reporters in getting the correct facts and minimizing the possibility of errors in communicating health information to the public. By using some simple tools, health officials can assist local and regional media outlets in getting information out to the public and gaining support for local health initiatives.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer suggestions to local health officials for successfully working with the press, primarily in response to inquiries from reporters but also when the board of health or health department itself wants to communicate broadly with the public. The suggestions contained in this chapter are intended to complement any public relations or media relations guidelines or policies that may already be in place in any given community.

### RESPONDING TO THE PRESS - WHEN A REPORTER CALLS...

- Before responding to any questions from the press, ask the reporter some questions. Ask what he or she has in mind for the story. Find out what the story is about, to whom the reporter has already spoken or has plans to contact, what documents, if any, he or she is relying on for information currently, what specific information is expected from the health department, when the story will be published or broadcast, and what the reporter's deadline is. If possible, find out how the reporter feels about the story.
- If possible, don't do an interview until you are prepared for it. Offer to call the contact back at a time that will allow reasonable preparation time while taking into consideration the reporter's deadline. Offer to FAX over materials in advance of the interview which may help the reporter or producer more fully understand the subject matter as well as the health department's point of view. Keep in mind many reporters may not be well versed in either science, medicine, or technology or in public health issues.
- Know in advance who is the appropriate person to respond to questions from the press. Some boards of health and health departments have staff designated specifically either to respond to

inquiries from the press themselves or to coordinate the board's response. Anyone responding to the press should be fully briefed on the story, know the position of the board or department on the issue, and be fully conversant with the subject matter. Whenever possible, staff designated to respond to press inquiries should develop professional relationships with reporters.

- Sometimes a state or federal agency should be contacted. If a story involves legislative, programmatic, or regulatory matters under the jurisdiction of a state or federal agency it may be advisable either to consult with that agency before responding to questions or to refer the media contact directly to the agency itself. State and federal agency personnel may be able to provide helpful supporting documentation or interpretation of state or federal law or policy. Questions pertaining to local ordinances or the implementation of local policy are, of course, best addressed by local health officials themselves.
- Gather your thoughts and construct the message. If you are going to return a reporter's call yourself, think about what you want to say, how best to say it, and how to confidently communicate a simple and straightforward health message while responding to questions. Anticipate any additional questions that may be prompted by your responses and formulate your response to these as well. It is a good idea to prepare a written outline of all the points you want to make. If there's time, rehearse your interview and assemble and FAX any pertinent materials to the reporter in advance.

#### DOING THE INTERVIEW - TIPS FOR ALL MEDIA

Listen before responding. Listen carefully to the entire question, pause to collect your thoughts, and then respond. Avoid interrupting a question.

Be short, simple, and quotable. All responses should be short, direct, and in simple language. Avoid jargon, technical terms, and acronyms. Reporters appreciate colorful, pithy quotes that are no more than one or two short sentences long.

Weave a public health message into every response. Even if a reporter asks an unrelated question, briefly answer the question and make a transition to the main public health message.

When you don't know... Speculating, guessing, or offering an opinion when you either don't have the authority or the information required to provide an accurate and full response to a reporter's questions can lead to erroneous information being provided to the public through the media. Offer to try to get back to the reporter or suggest someone who might be more appropriate or more able to respond.

When confronted with negative criticism... If a question posed is negative, avoid getting defensive and repeating the negative criticism. Avoid trying to hypothesize how or why the negative criticism has occurred - let the critics speak for themselves. Respond with the facts as usual. Remember that the mission of the board of health or health department is the protection of the public's health and safety, and communicate this in a simple, sincere, and straightforward manner.

Be calm and friendly. Even in the face of a scathing attack, stay cool and upbeat. Both reporters and the public are more likely to trust and respect interview subjects who are calm and friendly rather than angry or confrontational.

Avoid saying "no comment." If there are legitimate reasons why the question cannot be answered (such

as questions about matters involving litigation, personnel issues, patient confidentiality, etc.) simply state that this is the case and don't answer the question.

Don't expect to speak "off the record." If you don't want it to appear in print or on the air, simply don't say it or write it.

Correct misinformation immediately. If a reporter or producer asks a question by rephrasing one of your responses, listen carefully to make sure that the content is accurate before responding. If it is not, correct it immediately.

## SPECIAL INTERVIEW ISSUES

**Newspapers:** Newspapers tend to be able to cover stories more thoroughly than other news media. When speaking with a newspaper reporter, be prepared to be asked to respond to more detailed questions and to provide more documentation.

**Radio:** Radio stories typically are short and immediate. Because of typically short deadlines, radio reporters may expect you to respond "on-the-spot" or run the risk of being characterized as "unavailable for comment." If you are comfortable with the subject matter, know the angle of the story, have your thoughts together, and have the authority to speak, proceed with the interview using short, simple answers. Radio quotes are seconds long; keeping it short and simple will permit you to both respond to the question and get the public health message in. Radio reporters will likely be taping the interview for editing and broadcasting later, so speak at a relaxed pace and in a normal tone of voice. Enunciate clearly and speak directly into the telephone receiver or microphone.

**Radio and Television Talk Shows:** Longer programs typically provide more opportunity for preparation and for more in-depth discussion of an issue. Before participating in a talk show forum, find out what the host's agenda is, what issues are expected to be discussed, who else has been invited to speak, who the audience is expected to be, and what specifically you will be asked. Arrive early and prepared, and engage the host in friendly conversation to break the ice. Remember that a host, audience member, or caller may ask unrelated or unfriendly questions in the middle of the show - be prepared to respond to such questions by firmly and politely making your point in a calm and friendly manner.

**Television:** Because television is a visual medium, manner and appearance are vital to the effectiveness of the message.

- **Make eye contact.** When speaking with a reporter or a panel host on camera, look into his or her eyes and maintain that contact throughout. Avoid shifting or rolling the eyes - this behavior is distracting and does not inspire confidence. When sitting on a panel, look at other panelists when they are speaking, and return your eyes immediately to the host when they have completed their statements.
- **Smile (appropriately).** Smiling reduces nervousness and typically communicates confidence to the audience. Remember, however, that there may be some circumstances where a broad smile on camera could be perceived as inappropriate by the viewing public.

*Dress/use makeup conservatively.* Clothing with vivid patterns or bright colors, jangly jewelry, or distinctive makeup may distract audience attention. Cool blues, pastels, beiges, and grays are good color choices for on-camera interview wear. Lipstick should be muted, and both men and women are advised to accept TV crew offers of makeup in order to avoid looking shiny from perspiration generated from sitting under hot lights. Shaving just prior to an appearance will help avoid facial shadowing.

*Avoid wearing eyeglasses if possible.* The reflection of bright lights off glasses (or shiny frames) tends to hide the eyes, which play a key role in conveying sincerity and confidence to the audience. If you have contact lenses and are comfortable with them, wear them. If not, wear your regular glasses - it is far more important to be comfortable and confident about your vision. Avoid dark or tinted glasses.

*Posture.* When standing up for an interview, avoid rocking back and forth by putting one foot in front of the other. When sitting down, sit in the front of the chair and lean slightly forward. Use moderate and natural hand gestures when speaking, and avoid fidgeting on camera. When not speaking, hands should remain in your lap or on the arms of the chair. Sit with your legs together (crossed at the knees or ankles if that is more natural for you).

*Be conscious of the backdrop.* If the interview is about a public health incident at a particular location, make an effort to be interviewed at the site. "On location" interviews can be an effective method of visually communicating the significance of the issue and avoid the appearance of remoteness on the part of local health officials.

## APPROACHING THE MEDIA - SELLING THE STORY

**Local and Regional Media Lists:** Compile an up-to-date list of daily and weekly newspapers, "pennysavers" and "shoppers," as well as other publications, and radio, cable, and television shows aimed at specific audiences such as business, ethnic groups, seniors, etc. Get a viable contact for each outlet who is interested in or responsible for health related issues.

**Press Releases:** If you have news, prepare and distribute a written press release that is up to three pages long (typed, double spaced) and starts with a headline and a strong lead sentence. Within the first two paragraphs include key information about WHO is involved, WHAT is happening, WHERE it's happening, WHEN it's happening, and WHY it's news. Include the name and phone number of a contact person at the top right hand side of the first page. If there is no response, it is appropriate to call media outlets to find out if they are interested in the story or need additional information.

**Publicity For Events:** Health fairs, educational seminars, or other public events can be publicized by providing an announcement for local news outlets that have "community listings" such as local newspapers and community access cable TV stations. Briefly describe the event, its date, time, and location, and who is invited, and mention the availability of refreshments, and whether or not it is free and open to the public. Be sure to include a contact name and telephone number for questions.

**Newspaper or Newsletter Columns:** Organizations that publish newsletters such as health centers, civic and religious organizations, professional associations, social clubs, schools and colleges, etc. may be receptive to publishing a regular column on public health issues. Inquire about editorial policy, publication deadlines, and the appropriate length of columns, and make sure to include the name and number of a contact for more information on the subject of the column.

**Public Service Announcements (PSAs):** Public interest "commercials" are typically developed by non-

profit groups interested in promoting access to information or services. They are broadcast on radio and television stations as a free public service - there are no charges for "air time." However, typically, the text and format of announcements are expected to be short (10-30 seconds with a message no longer than three type-written lines) and to conform to certain broadcast standards in terms of quality and content.

**Editors and Editorial Boards:** Whether or not an issue or subject is covered and how it is covered (whether by television or radio stations, or by newspapers or journals) is determined by editors and editorial boards. By meeting regularly with these individuals and providing accurate, up-to-date, and timely information about public health issues, the likelihood of reliable reporting on public health issues is increased.