WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Introduction

One of the most important elements in a community anti-tobacco effort is communicating with and through the media. This may mean anything from holding a news conference, to publicly recognizing smokefree restaurants, to preparing staff members to answer calls from reporters about tobacco related news.

Tobacco control advocates must have media relations skills to successfully compete with the hundreds of other groups seeking media coverage of their equally important issues. Media advocacy skills are also required, especially in highly competitive media markets and in communities where the local media have a bias against tobacco control efforts.

Media Advocacy vs. Media Relations

In working with the media, there are two separate but equally important concepts. ‘Media relations’ involves proactive and positive interaction with the media to obtain meaningful coverage of a story. ‘Media advocacy’ is a tool used by advocates and community organizers to advance a specific policy goal. Successful tobacco policy initiatives require the use of both media advocacy and media relations skills. A number of organizations offer comprehensive media advocacy trainings for tobacco control coalitions. There are also many resource publications available which focus specifically on media advocacy for tobacco control.

De-Mystifying the Media

Many people who haven’t interacted with the media are intimidated by its complex technology, vast reach and power. Others are self conscious about speaking out in front of a camera or microphone. It is important for such individuals to keep in mind that reporters count on ‘ordinary people’ to notify them of important stories or issues. Remember, journalists need your input just as much as you want good media coverage. Reporters and assignment editors depend on your calls, news releases and media alerts. It’s your job to make sure that your story is compelling, your facts are reliable, and your sound bites pithy.

Media Basics

By far, the best way to learn about media work is by actually doing it. Get to know the local media by watching different television news programs, listening to news radio and reading different newspapers. When you have a story to pitch you will know where you want it to run in order to reach your target audience.

Make sure your coalition has a committee responsible for developing and implementing a media strategy for each major coalition campaign and event. Your plan should answer the following questions:

- What are your goals?
- Who is the target audience?
What is your message?
How will you evaluate your success?

It is essential to develop good working relationships with reporters. Here are some other tips for cultivating positive working relationships with reporters:

- Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff: Let small errors go by; for critical errors ask for a correction or write a letter to the editor.
- Respect Journalists’ Objectivity: Do not invite a journalist to be part of your coalition. Congratulate journalists for doing a good story, not taking your side.
- Respect Journalists’ Time: Ensure that staff understands the need to respond to journalist’s call immediately; provide information as quickly as possible.
- Be Truthful: If you don’t know an answer to a question say so and refer the reporter to someone who does.
- Be a Valuable Resource: Supplying accurate, authoritative and timely background materials, and promptly responding to media calls go a long way in getting coverage which corresponds to your position on an issue.
- Be Assertive: Don’t wait for a reporter to contact you if you have an important story; write, call or arrange a meeting face-to-face, but don’t be shy about getting in touch.

While it’s difficult to always get good media coverage, you can increase the odds by taking the following steps:

- Be Creative: Bring in others to brainstorm ideas in developing media events and materials.
- Be Confident: You are the expert.
- Know Your Topic: Information is currency in the media world. Know your issue and make it interesting.
- Ask Questions: Get the following information from reporters you don’t know: the name of their newspaper or station, what kind of story is being developing and if there’s a deadline. Don’t offer unsolicited information; simply answer the questions asked.
- Be Cautious: Even if you know the reporter, always be cautious. Anything you say during an interview may be broadcasted or show up in print. Remember, you always have the option of speaking ‘off the record.’
- Be Thorough: When holding a media event, always put together a media kit. Keep it simple; include a brief news release, a fact sheet, press clippings and/or supporting documentation, an organizational brochure, a list of media spokespersons or participating organizations, and a business card.

**Gaining Access: Paid vs. Earned Media**

It’s important to know the different uses of both paid and earned, or free, media. Paid media usually means advertising and can be very effective if you have the money to pay for it. Earned or free media involves creating news or piggy-backing onto related stories. You can create news in a number of ways including but not limited to: sending out a news release announcing an important situation, decision or organizational position; holding an event that provides a compelling story and visuals; and, holding a news conference.
Smokefree Ordinance Campaigns

Because clean indoor air ordinance campaigns are usually controversial they receive quite a bit of free media coverage. Coalitions planning smokefree policy initiatives can give themselves a strategic advantage by cultivating relationships with print, television and radio journalists before the ordinance is formally announced. Establishing yourself as a credible source on tobacco control issues early on will make your work with the media much easier and effective during the actual ordinance campaign.

There are many other media opportunities during the course of the smokefree campaign. Once the ordinance is introduced make a presentation to the editorial staff of your local newspaper, sharing the facts about secondhand smoke, smokefree ordinances in general, the provisions of the proposed ordinance and your position. Make news by holding a rally before a city council hearing or exposing the efforts of an out-of-town tobacco industry front group to organize business owners and lobby elected officials.

Many coalitions use paid media at critical junctures, such as placing a full page newspaper ad the day before a public hearing, urging the elected officials to vote yes on the ordinance. With some additional media advocacy efforts, you can maximize the effectiveness paid media coverage. Using the same example, a coalition might hold a news conference or send out a media alert to provide journalists with the story behind the ad.

Framing the Issue

An essential skill for successfully working with the media is knowing how to "frame the issue" of tobacco control in ways which help the media and public to see the issue accurately. Framing is the process by which your coalition packages a group of facts to create a story.

How a story is framed for the media will determine whether access is gained and your message conveyed effectively. Through framing, your coalition is able to make a story compelling and out of the ordinary, giving it a competitive advantage over the others stories under consideration that day. Effective framing requires creativity, taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities and the ability to turn negatives into positives.

Framing to Neutralize the Opposition

The tobacco industry and their allies will attempt to create smokescreens to cloud or confuse the issue. Often their arguments are illogical, but they are strategically developed to build on existing fears held by the public. It is important to be proactive in framing the issue to stay ahead of the game. Simply coming up with arguments that react to the tobacco industry’s rhetoric puts you at a disadvantage.

Here are some examples of negative ways the issue has been framed by the tobacco industry:

**Smokers vs. nonsmokers’ rights**

If this is the topic of a debate or discussion, you may very well lose. The reality is that the tobacco industry is the enemy of both smokers and nonsmokers. The industry is after
smokers’ money for a product that will eventually kill them, and is dangerous to nonsmokers as well. Not surprisingly, most smokers actually support nonsmokers’ rights. The tobacco industry spends a lot of money to identify and organize the minority of smokers who object to smoking restrictions.

**Individual Freedom or Liberties**
We’re talking about the most addictive drug there is--nicotine. The majority of smokers have tried to quit and can’t. Addicts don’t often have a lot of “choice.” With respect to smokefree ordinances, these policies don’t regulate people, they regulate behavior. The American understanding of liberty has always taken into account the impact of one person’s actions on another. Our democratic society has always condoned laws to prohibit public acts that injure others.

**Government interference with private business**
Is it government interference when the health department demands that restaurant employees wash their hands and wear hair nets before preparing food? Is it government intrusion on our personal habits when we make littering a misdemeanor? Tobacco control ordinances are public health ordinances, and cities not only have the right but the responsibility to enact them.

The following are some ways we can frame the issue to get our message across:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEALTH ADVOCATES</th>
<th>TOBACCO INDUSTRY</th>
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<tr>
<td>The right to breath smokefree air</td>
<td>The right to smoke anyplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public health</td>
<td>Needless regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting children</td>
<td>Inconveniencing adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>Helping business</td>
<td>Hurting business</td>
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In the media and politics, framing is everything. If the tobacco industry succeeds in characterizing a campaign for a local smoking ordinance as zealots opposed to local business, then they will succeed in defeating it. If, on the other hand, you succeed in portraying it accurately--as a public health campaign of local citizens opposed by out-of-state tobacco merchants--then the ordinance has a better chance of passing.

Although tobacco control ordinances are public health laws, it is important to know more about the issue than just the health effects of tobacco. It is crucial to counter the tobacco industry’s false assertions about economic disaster.

**Other Tobacco Control Issues**

While framing the issue well is a fundamental skill, gaining access to the media at all is often the greatest challenge. When passing a local ordinance, getting media won’t be the problem.

Getting a story about other tobacco control issues may be more challenging. In general, the media likes to report on events such as:
• Release of an opinion poll or survey
• Passage of a federal, state, or local law
• Publication of a new study on tobacco
• Implementation of a voluntary smokefree policy in a school, restaurant, mall or stadium
• Exposing tobacco industry “dirty tricks”

When an important event occurs, it is by definition newsworthy. Therefore, the challenge for tobacco control advocates is to ensure that the issue is covered well. For example, a story about the passage of a local ordinance eliminating smoking in restaurants could be reported from two dramatically different angles:

Smokers Lose another Round: City Cracks Down on Restaurant Smoking

OR

Fresh Air Victory: City to Clear Smoke From Restaurants

In order to obtain media coverage that both furthers the goals of the local tobacco control coalition and raises public awareness, advocates must educate the journalists about tobacco issues.

One of the greatest challenges is getting media coverage when your story is important, but not breaking "hard news." This, too, is not as mysterious a process as one might think. Here are some tips for getting your tobacco control story into the media:

Creative Epidemiology

One way to get media attention is through the use of ‘creative epidemiology.’ This involves putting statistics about tobacco into understandable, human terms. Here are some examples:

Death and disease caused by smoking. We now know that tobacco kills at least 420,000 Americans a year. While this number is dramatic, it becomes even more compelling when compared to other figures. For example:

• Tobacco related deaths number more than those resulting from two Boeing 747’s colliding every day each year.
• The number of deaths resulting from tobacco are greater than all the deaths from cocaine, heroin, AIDS, accidents, fire, alcohol, homicide and suicide combined.

Localizing Statistics. Making statistics specific to the community renders them more newsworthy. For example:

• 41,000 Californians die every year from tobacco.
• _____ residents of _____ County died in 1995 from tobacco, compared with _____ from all illegal drugs combined.

Media Entrepreneurship

One of the best ways to get media attention is to look for opportunities and take advantage of them. Take, for example, the potentially devastating federal court ruling that the 1993 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study overstated the proven link between secondhand smoke and cancer. Tobacco control advocates turned what the tobacco industry hoped
would be PR nightmare into a media opportunity. Savvy tobacco control advocates used the avalanche of media calls to showcase the preponderance of scientific evidence linking secondhand smoke to lung cancer, heart disease and many other illnesses.

Others used the ruling as an opportunity to publicly examine some of the once secret tobacco industry documents made available through litigation. These documents provided scathing proof that the tobacco industry:

- had evidence for years that passive smoking was dangerous and consistently played down the risks;
- funded studies “with the intent to publish data which refutes specific assertions by the antismoking forces;” and,
- paid scientists thousands of dollars to write letters criticizing the EPA report.

Tobacco control advocates artfully turned the media surrounding this court decision against Big Tobacco. The public was provided valuable continuing education about the cumulative scientific evidence that secondhand smoke kills. Finally, the effort provided a unique opportunity to voice support for the best means available to protect nonsmokers from the dangers of secondhand smoke: enactment of local clean indoor air policies.

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