

Tips for Effectively Using the Media

Media can be an important tool and ally when it comes to advocacy work. Media around health care reform has the power to:

- Create an environment of political pressure;
- Convey general information, serving as a public education tool; and
- Counter popular misconceptions.

You can engage the media in health reform through letters to the editor, reaching out to reporters, issuing press releases, or by organizing press events. This will allow your story to reach a wider audience, as well as educate the broader public about health care reform.

The following section provides tips on how women's advocates can engage the media through messaging, pitching your story, media advisories and press releases, letters to the editor and opinion editorials (op-eds), media interviews, and additional resources.

MESSAGING:

When planning a media strategy, it's important to develop a clear and specific message. The message and its three components (**problem, solution, action**) should be featured in every article, interview, and conversation conducted during the course of the campaign.

As you develop your messages, keep in mind:

- Messages take time to create. Don't rush the process.
- The core message should also reflect your organization's central mission and goals.
- Messages should not change frequently. To have impact, they must be repeated over and over again.
- Less is more. Within a single campaign, don't have more than three messages. Multiple messages can confuse the audience and may not be heard.
- Keep it short. Messages should be conveyed in a sentence or two. If it takes a paragraph to get your message across, keep working.
- Make it understandable. Use plain language and avoid specialized vocabulary or acronyms.

A sample message could be: "Our current health care system fails to meet the basic needs of far too many women, and we must act now to get comprehensive, accessible, and affordable health care we all can count on. NWLC has joined a new national effort on health reform—and we hope you'll join, too."

PITCHING YOUR STORY:

Once you establish your message, reach out to reporters and writers at local newspapers to discuss health care reform and its importance to women and families.

Pitch Call

The purpose of a pitch call is to propose a specific story idea, an interview or coverage of an event.

- Begin with reporters you know.
- Make your calls in the morning.
 - Print media deadlines can be as early as 4 pm.
 - For television, pitch two days ahead when possible. Decisions to send crews are made the night before a story appears on air.
- Be succinct and persuasive—pitch your story in one or two minutes.
- Offer a “hook” to your story, such as a compelling human story, an event, a celebrity, or a controversy.
- Find ways to present national information or events with a local angle.
- Stories about real people are ideal. Have community members who have been affected by the current health system (they lost their insurance, they are in debt from a hospital bill, etc.) available and prepared to talk to the press about why health care reform is important to them.
- Follow up with written information, if needed.
- Use pitch calls to build relationships:
 - Get to know journalists who cover your field. Call them with response to breaking news and with good, quotable quotes.
 - Suggest interview “experts” or “real people.”
 - Suggest getting together to discuss additional story ideas.

MEDIA ADVISORIES & PRESS RELEASES:

Use media advisories to announce an event (including teleconferences or webinars), and use press releases to announce or respond to breaking news. Templates for media advisories and press releases are available in the “Talking About Health Reform” tab of the *Reform Matters Toolkit* and can also be obtained by contacting the National Women’s Law Center at reformmatters@nwlc.org.

Press Release

- A press release announces or reacts to breaking news and is written like a news story.
- If reporters need substantial time to prepare a story, send an embargoed release (indicate this by writing “Embargoed until [date]”) ahead of the release date.
- The subject line of your e-mail must grab the reporter—and never send attachments (reporters may be concerned about viruses).

Media Advisory

- A media advisory alerts reporters to an upcoming news event.
- Keep it short (one-page).
- Offer a compelling preview. Don’t reveal your news, but provide a reason for them to attend.

- E-mail reporters who cover the issue, editors, news directors, bureau chiefs, TV/radio producers, and daybooks. Remember to put the text in the body of the email, rather than as a link or an attachment.
- Follow up with a phone call (pitch call).

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR & OPINION EDITORIALS (OP-EDs):

Letters to the editor and op-eds provide outlets to present your organization's view and control the message about a particular issue.

Letter to the Editor—A Short Rebuttal to an Article or Commentary

Usually 150-200 words in length.

If you get a story about health care reform placed in the newspaper, or if a newspaper runs a story on health care reform, ask the families or individuals you work with to follow up with letters to the editor about why health care reform matters to them.

- Timing is everything. Coordinate your letter to refute, contribute to, or correct a recently published piece. Identify a story or editorial that needs a response and submit your letter as soon as possible—preferably the same day as publication.
- Be concise and to the point, and know your facts. Focus on making one key point in two or three paragraphs, and use just a couple key facts or statistics (or a brief story) to support your argument.
- Write in good times and in bad. If a publication positively covers your issue, write a letter praising or thanking for the coverage or support.

Opinion Editorials—A Column or Guest Essay

Typically 700 words in length (check the newspaper's web site for specific guidelines).

Opinion Editorials (Op-Eds) are short guest pieces printed in the editorial section of a newspaper, and are a key way to influence the debate.

When writing your op-ed:

- Present three steps: problem, solution, and action.
- Tailor the requested action to your target audience.
- Use short, simple sentences and avoid jargon.
- Personalize the op-ed with an anecdote or story.
- Link the op-ed to a current news story but keep the focus local.
- Provide insight and understanding: educate your reader without being preachy.

Try the following outline for your op-ed:

- 1st paragraph: Begin with a personal anecdote or human story.
- 2nd paragraph: Make your main point.
- Following paragraphs: Begin to elaborate 2 or 3 supporting points. Keep your paragraphs short, with one point per paragraph. Use facts, statistics, and studies. Avoid being overly legal or formal.
- Conclusion paragraph: Draw the piece together and link to your opening anecdote.

MEDIA INTERVIEWS:

Once you have successfully garnered media attention, you or your spokesperson will likely be asked to do telephone or in person interviews with reporters. You can prepare for the interview by knowing all sides of the issue and thinking in advance about what kinds of questions the reporter will ask. Keep track of which reporters you work with so that you can build relationships with them, pitch them further stories, and send them follow-up information and press releases.

Preparing for a Media Interview

- Remember the audience—readers, listeners, and viewers—not the reporter.
- What questions will the reporter likely ask?
- Have your message points and sound bites ready. Practice them before the interview.
- Know your opponents' viewpoints and have counterpoints ready.

The Interview

- Stick to your message.
- In the presence of the media, you are always “on.” Don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to see in print.
- Use concise, conversational, and catchy language. Don’t use jargon or acronyms.
- If you don’t know the answer, it’s okay to say you’ll get back to the reporter with additional information.
- Be yourself. Be friendly, calm, and use complete sentences.
- Don’t make things up and never lie.
- Give examples that involve real people.
- When asked a question you feel uncomfortable about, use “bridge phrases” or “flag words” to bring the answer to your main message. E.g.:
 - The best way to answer that is to look at the broader issue...
 - What’s really at issue here...
 - That’s a good question. But first let me go back to an earlier point...
- Keep in mind the three C’s: Concise, Conversational, and Catchy.

**For further reading, see:**

Fenton Communications, “Now Hear This: The Nine Laws of Successful Advocacy Communications,” www.fenton.org

Spin Project Tutorials, www.spinproject.org

ImPRESSive Media Tip Sheets, <http://familiesusa.org/resources/tools-for-advocates/tips/impressive.html>