

Dealing with the media

Writing a news release

THE idea of a news release is to give a journalist all the information they need to write an article as well as contact information for your organisation should they need to get in touch further. Before writing a release, think about who you want it to go to. Most journalists now prefer to communicate by email. Call your local newspapers and radio stations to find out the best email address to send news releases to. Daily newspapers will need a couple of days' notice; weekly publications will need to receive releases at least a week in advance.

Now that you have your media list of all outlets you would like to receive your news, you can think about drafting your release. Journalists get inundated with information every day. With time at a premium, the best way to communicate your news is through a well-written, concise press release.

Although most news releases are now sent via email, it is still best to stick to the traditional A4 letterhead layout. Type 'News Release' and the date in large font at the top. Follow this with a headline that encapsulates the story.

Basically, a news release should tell the journalist who you are, what you're announcing and why they should care, in no more than one side of A4 or two at the most. Try to avoid acronyms. We use so many on a daily basis it is easy to forget that most people outside the drugs sector do not have a clue what NTA, DRR, DAT or YOT mean!

The opening paragraph should give the who/what/when/where/why as succinctly as possible. It should be standalone piece of information.

The following paragraph should give more detail or new information. Bullet points can be useful as an eye-catching, concise way of communicating information. Don't take up valuable space going into background information in the body of the release – this can be added under 'Notes to Editor'.

It is useful if you can then include a quote – ideally from a spokesperson who is willing to be interviewed.

This would explain why the product / event / service is so important. You may also like to include a quote from a service user (can be anonymous) saying what the product / event / service means to them.

All contact details and any further background information / statistics can be given under 'Notes to Editor'. This will include the contact telephone numbers for whoever is responsible for dealing with the media. If possible, provide a contact number for when you are out of the office. Also use this space to describe your charity in a few words and give your website address if you have one.

Once you have drafted the release, check with the spokesperson that they are happy with their quote and pass to the relevant person for sign off. Make sure you allow plenty of time for this process to account for people being out of the office etc. Once approved, the release can be sent to your prepared list.

ATTACHMENTS

As mentioned above, email is the best format. Make sure you use plain text rather than attaching a document. Newspapers receive huge amounts of junk mail and many of their firewalls will not allow attachments through. In addition to this, many journalists will simply delete unsolicited email attachments.

Do not include a company logo unless the graphics have been specially reduced for emails. Logos can make emails unnecessarily large which in turn can slow down their sending time or even mean they are blocked completely.

If photos are available, say so under 'Notes to Editor'. Do not attach them to your email for all the reasons above.

If your news is of interest you may be asked to take part in an interview – tips overleaf!

■ For examples of news releases go to the 'News / Press Office' section of the DrugScope website and click on 'Press Releases'.

Dealing with the press can seem intimidating, but just having a few basic tips at your fingertips can make all the difference. This factsheet gives some introductory guidelines on writing news releases and doing media interviews to get you started on your media relations career. For more help go to mediatrust.org

Media interviews

BEFORE agreeing to any interview, try to gather as much information as you can about what programme it is; whether it will be a one-on-one or part of a discussion; if it's live or pre-recorded etc to help you decide if it is something you would feel comfortable doing.

IF YOU DECIDE TO DO THE INTERVIEW REMEMBER:

- It is an opportunity for you to reach a vast audience of individuals
- Most interviewers will try to draw a good story out of you rather than be confrontational: they want a good product
- This is your chance to tell your side of the story
- Don't go along to be defensive. By taking a positive attitude, it can be your interview as much as theirs
- Always accept transportation if offered – it gives you extra time to prepare and you will arrive in a better frame of mind than if you are trying to negotiate the journey yourself
- To give a successful interview you must PREPARE!

PREPARATION: NOTE YOUR POINTS; KNOW YOUR BOUNDARIES

- Order and note your points on the key areas
- Always mention where you come from as a lead sentence, regardless of the question. For example, "Here at DrugScope we believe that..."
- Anticipate the questions and give yourself an agenda of three points to get across regardless. It's no use blaming the journalist afterwards for asking the wrong questions
- Make up revision cards of facts / figures / topics etc that you can either have in front of you if it is a radio interview, or that you can read through on the way to a television interview
- Practice with your colleagues – there are no sterner critics!

THE INTERVIEW

- Listen 'through' every question
- Address the questions but look for the chance to put across your key points. For example: "That's an

interesting point you make about young people. We work with a lot of young people here at [organisation] and we find that..."

- Don't stray over your boundaries – feel free to repeat a point
- If a question includes an inaccuracy deal with it first.
- If you don't know the answer DON'T try to make it up. Be honest. Explain who would know
- Pick up your cues and 'cut to the chase'. There is no time for a lot of background
- Beware of nodding during questions – you might seem to be agreeing
- Don't say more than you should. If in doubt, STOP and SMILE. It is then up to the presenter to move the interview on
- At the end of the interview, be aware that the camera / microphone may still be running
- Stay seated until you are told you can leave your chair.

...And a few practicalities for TV interviews

Remember that television is a visual medium and that a lot of the appearance we convey is, like it or not, based on appearance and body language. The general rule is to try not to do anything that will detract from the content of what you are saying. Some general tips:

What to avoid

- Noisy, loud or clashing clothes
- Stripes or checks as they can strobe and cause strange effects on the screen

Body language

- Sit up straight and don't fidget.
- Look directly at the interviewer throughout
- Use your hands if it comes naturally, but try not to wave them around too much

Make-up

If offered powder, take it as this can help prevent you looking shiny under the studio lights

And on a lighter note 'How to...do a tv interview'

by Guy Browning

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,,659417,00.html>