

Dealing with the media on drug issues may be intimidating and frustrating, says **Petra Maxwell**, but it's worth taking on the challenge

# Pressing the point

*"Hello. Is that the DrugScope press office? My name is John Smith from the London Informer. I'm writing a story about crack squirrels on the rampage in south London and wondered if DrugScope would like to comment?"*

Calls like this received late on a Friday afternoon do tend to make me lose the will to live, or at the very least share the despair often voiced by drug workers over the media's treatment of drug issues.

During a series of roadshows carried out among DrugScope members last summer, a survey found two-thirds thought the media's treatment of drug issues was poor. In fact, only five per cent agreed with the statement: "Overall, the media does a good job in its representation and coverage of the drug issue."

Speaking to drug workers at conferences, the general attitude towards the media is one of fear and loathing, with the accepted consensus being that avoidance is the best tactic. Individuals that have tried to work with the media often have tales of burned fingers.

I'm not going to deny any of this. The DrugScope press office receives well over a thousand calls from journalists from a variety of publications every year. Every day I read articles that sensationalise drug issues and stigmatise users. We also suffer from being misquoted or misrepresented – sometimes on the most basic points. A *Sun* journalist last year described me as a 'spokesman' for drug charity 'Kidscope'.

## IN IT TO WIN IT

However, I still firmly believe that the best – and only – way to improve the representation of drugs in the media is for the field as a whole to engage more with journalists. If we don't participate we can't complain. By burying our collective heads in the sand, factual inaccuracies go uncorrected, stereotypes remain unchallenged and myths are never debunked. Every day drug users, workers and agencies have to deal with public attitudes which have

been ill-informed by the media, so we need to ensure that the sector's voice is heard.

At the same time, we have to be realistic. Journalists have jobs to do, and limited time and space in which to do them. Newspapers, television programmes and radio stations are all dependent on their audiences for survival – in this age of media diversification perhaps even more so than ever before. Their content has to be attention-grabbing and interesting. On top of this, most media outlets have political affiliations that dictate the bias of what they publish. The *Daily Mail* is not going to start running leading articles calling for drug users to be treated compassionately, any more than the tabloids are going to stop running 'shock' stories about celebrities found taking cocaine. However, there are ways of working with the media to promote more accurate representations of drug issues.

In order to control the communication between your organisation and the media it is important to have dedicated spokespeople. Once these have been agreed all communication must go through these individuals only. It may be one person, it may be a team of people. Whatever the arrangement, these will be people who feel comfortable speaking to journalists and who are absolutely clear what your organisation does, what its aims are and the boundaries of what the organisation will or won't comment on. This will help ensure consistency of comment from your organisation, as well as providing protection from information slips where unprepared staff are caught out.

## GETTING IN PRINT

Media work is usually divided into two disciplines: proactive and reactive. The former is news you would like to publicise through the media, the latter is when you are responding to external stories. Both can be used to raise the profile of your organisation, communicate

**Petra Maxwell**  
is a Press Officer at  
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## Tips from the experts

### Alex Hunter, Assistant Director of Communications, Turning Point

Remember that journalists are just that – they aren't experts on drugs issues, and why should they be. This should be kept in mind at all times when dealing with the media. A story can only be as good as the information provided to the journalist. Using 'jargon' or thinking that you are speaking to someone who has a good knowledge of the issues is a mistake as they may misunderstand and present the facts wrongly.

In addition, before you agree to take part, ensure you know what the journalist is looking to get from you and what the story is likely to cover – the angle. This will help you make an informed

choice about whether to do it or not. Never allow yourself to be rushed into taking part – this is a 'golden rule'.

### Elliot Elam and Clare McNeil, Addaction Press Team

If you are trying to raise your profile locally, think about what information you have at your fingertips already. Do you have any interesting facts or statistics from your project that might make a good story? Consider having media training or asking your organisation if they can arrange some for you – you will feel much more confident about doing print or broadcast interviews.



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information about drug use and challenge any negative stereotypes that may exist about your client group in your local area.

The best way to communicate proactively with the media is via a news release. A guide to news release format and distribution – as well as tips for broadcast interviews – can be found in the Media Factsheet on page 24. News that you might want to promote could be a fundraising event you are holding, the 100th person successfully completing treatment with you or a new service you are introducing for local families. Your chances of getting coverage are even higher if you can provide images (remember you must get the permission of individuals featured in any photos). If you do decide to work with the media proactively, you must have spokespeople available who are able to deal with calls you may get from journalists who would like to speak to them in more detail.

The amount of reactive media work usually increases the more your organisation receives coverage and your local journalists begin to remember your

name. Although not initiated by you, it can still be a good way to get your messages across. For example, although most press offices avoid commenting on specific stories, if called for reaction to news of a local mother who has come to the end of her tether and ended up shopping her drug-using son to the police, your comment could go along the lines of something like: “A story like this shows the tremendous strain that families of drug users can often be under, which is why the Drug Help Group is starting up a parents support group here in Little Chipping.”

#### CASE STUDIES

One of the most effective ways to convey the difficulties that users and their families face or to show how important your service is for those who use it is to let the individuals speak for themselves. A word of warning, however. Many of the people you work with are very vulnerable and though they may be very keen to share their experiences in the hope of helping others, they may not realise what sharing their personal stories will involve. You do not automatically get any kind of editorial control just for taking part in an interview. Anything said during the conversation can be used. The safest way to protect your clients is to ensure that individuals only speak to the media when they have overcome difficulties that they may be experiencing. Otherwise the experience could be more negative than positive. If you have discussed media work with a client and they are happy to take part, make sure that any contact comes only through you unless that person says they are happy to be contacted directly. Offer to sit in on any interviews to ensure they are not pressured into speaking about anything other than what was agreed in advance.

There are ways of giving insight into your clients' experiences without necessarily going down the route of actual interviews. Keep a number of anonymous case histories that clients agree can be used (with any identifying details having been changed). Also, try to make a point of including quotes from service users in releases, either changing the names or attributing them to a '27 year old service user' for example.

#### PAY-OFF

Dealing with the media can be intimidating, but it can also have significant pay-offs both in terms of raising the profile of your organisation (which can be useful when it comes to fundraising), and of challenging stereotypes about drug users. With the media playing such a massive role in informing and shaping the debate – can you afford not to get involved? ■

### Further information

**The Media Trust** The Media Trust is a charity devoted to helping the voluntary sector with their communication needs. As well as running events and training, their website also contains a large number of excellent online guides to media work, marketing, design etc. [www.mediatrust.org](http://www.mediatrust.org)

**drugs.gov.uk** This Government website has a large number of downloadable guides to working with the media, including the Communications Toolkit 2005.

**DrugScope Library & Information line** If journalists are looking for facts and figures on drugs and drug-related issues the DrugScope library provides an information service on 0870 774 3682 or [info@drugscope.org.uk](mailto:info@drugscope.org.uk)