

A MEDIA TOOLKIT

Community Health Centers in the Spotlight:
How to Make the Most of Media Opportunities



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Community Health Centers are lifelines for millions of Americans. Our network of health centers provide high quality, comprehensive and affordable health care to medically underserved populations, keeping people both healthy and secure in the knowledge that their health care needs will be met. The challenges that are faced by health centers and their patients every day tell stories of trial, success and failure, and compassion. Those stories should be told honestly and capably by the storytellers themselves: you, your staff and your clients.

Today, news is relayed to the public through print, broadcast and the World Wide Web with journalists facilitating the messages. As traditional tactics converge with “new media,” more outlets are offering news. Most print publications now offer their news via Internet sites, and cable and satellite radio and television stations are posting news 24 hours a day. The competition for news placement, however, remains stiff, particularly in the mainstream media.

The result is that reaching out to the media must to be targeted and thoughtful. Savvy business people leverage media opportunities by knowing how and when to work with journalists to ensure that their messages are heard and understood. This media tool kit includes fundamental public relations tools and sample templates for your use in reaching out to the media and tips for presenting your perspective to the public through the media.

This media tool kit also outlines the importance of developing a relationship with the media and working with them both in your everyday activities and when you have special news to share. Keep in mind that is critically important that each health center or S/RPCA develop clear personnel and board policies and procedures about who can speak directly to the media before engaging in any media outreach. Once you have that policy in place and have communicated it to your staff and board, you can move forward.



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Introduction

Working with the media can be a powerful, albeit daunting, means of educating the public about your center's accomplishments and challenges. Many people and organizations shy away from the media because they are reluctant to expose themselves to possible scrutiny. Haven't we all heard stories about the innocent being tried in the "court of public perception" or seen unfair misrepresentations by a "trial by compelling image?"

In fact, working with the media presents many opportunities to establish your health center's reputation in your community, and should not be feared. Building relationships with the media should be considered part of your regular activities. Taking time to foster positive relationships with the media is a sound investment. You want to help them understand what you do by offering your perspective and those of the people who are in the trenches every day. Make them your ally so that if things get tough, they will help promote your mission, not disrupt it.

When working with the media, you always want to effectively articulate and demonstrate your health center's achievements. Even in adverse situations when the media asks hard questions, you want to feel comfortable and confident. Preparation is the key. This tool kit will help you better understand the media and get you thinking about the tools you need to effectively communicate your position.

Make the Media Your Friend

Essentially, there are two ways to work with the media: proactively and responsively. Both strategies are equally important, however, experience tells us that if you proactively establish a relationship with local media first, then you will be in a better position to react if and when the tough questions come.

Proactive Approach

Voluntarily reaching out to the media to educate them about the valuable role your health center plays in the community is good business. By welcoming them to your facility and providing relevant information, you help them understand your services and programs, and how they impact their audience. Offering your health center and its spokespeople as resources helps them do their job more effectively and makes them more likely to come to you for comment on future stories. The relationships you establish generate goodwill and help to ensure that the media presents a balanced, honest picture of your center when they report.

Responsive Approach

There may be instances where the media will call on you for information about your health center or its services. Media inquiries should be viewed as opportunities. Whether they are looking for background on a particular issue or digging into an allegation, take advantage of the query, offer solid information and put your center's best foot forward.



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Getting Started

In order to successfully promote your health center's activities and establish it as a valuable presence in your community, media relations must be an ongoing priority. Such a commitment can be a challenge, given the busy – often hectic – nature of your business. The demands on you never stop coming; however, putting a communications strategy into action now and nurturing it will pay off in the long run.

Here are some guidelines to get you started:

Develop a media plan

With your health center's decisionmakers, create a media plan that will showcase your upcoming activities, achievements and milestones. Your plan should be in sync with the health center's priorities and designed to support your overall mission. Based on a calendar year, the plan should be as aggressive as your budget and staff resources allow. Plans lay out opportunities to invite the media to see first-hand how your operation works and the impact it has on your community. When developing a plan, block out a schedule, remembering to build in some extra resources for opportunities that you don't know about yet, but may come your way.

Media plans contain various ways to highlight newsworthy events or milestones, such as the release of important data, survey results, health fairs, groundbreakings, VIP visits and other significant moments.

Designate a Communications Point Person

Appointing one person to be responsible for managing your health center's communications plan will ensure action and consistency. Once a plan has been developed, your "media coordinator" – with the help of others – should be responsible for drafting media materials for each activity and coordinating the distribution of all materials, including background information about your health center, to the media. He/she will also be the "go to" person responsible for responding to media inquiries and proactively developing relationships with local journalists.

Create a media database

The media should be apprised of any announcement your health center makes. If you have received a grant, welcomed a new professional staff member or are hosting an event, the media needs to be included on your notification list. Task your media coordinator with creating and maintaining a media list that includes not only contact information, but also any notes about the individual reporters. It is helpful to know what kinds of issues they have covered in the past, what time of day is best to contact them and whether they like to be contacted via email or telephone.

Your media list should contain the names, email addresses and telephone numbers of all local and regional health reporters and TV/radio news assignment editors.



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Also included should be the nearest news bureaus for the news wires, or networks of news affiliates, such as Associated Press, Reuter's and United Press International. Each news wire has a "Daybook" that is reviewed each day for potential stories. When you plan a media event, make sure the wire Daybook editors and all local reporters are notified.

If your news carries national significance or ties into a national story, you may want to distribute your news release to national publications and large market outlets such as the New York Times or Washington Post. Because of volume, identifying and distributing to these editors can be an onerous task, so you might consider using paid press release distribution services, such as PRNewswire, U.S. Newswire or EurekaAlert, to disseminate the information to the appropriate editors and reporters. These services will cost you money, but will greatly expand your reach.

Establish Relationships with the Media

Fostering relationships with the media is a valuable expenditure of time for your designated media coordinator and chief executive. If they take the time to get to know your local reporters and invite them to spend time at the health center, they will raise awareness and build goodwill. Your job will be so much easier when you need their attention: They will be more likely to take your phone calls when you have an event or news to share and be in a better position to present a balanced story if a troublesome query should arise. Remember that the media has the capability to amplify your news to the public and potential clients and funders.

Identify Your Spokespeople

Finding the right person to represent your health center or tell a compelling story helps bring a story home to your audience. Often, the human interest angle helps sell a story to a reporter by authenticating the content and putting a face on the issue. In many cases, your spokesperson will be your executive director; however, some situations will call for others to carry your messages. For example, your medical director will lend credibility to a health story; a board member can speak about organizational decisions, and a patient is the most compelling person to share his or her success story. Develop a short list of spokespeople, brief them on the specific messages and offer them when appropriate.

Develop Background Materials

Reporters appreciate all the help they can get when they are developing background for a story. Having ready access to your health center's profile – whether it is a brochure, fact sheets or a backgrounder – will expedite the process and ensure accuracy. Keep these resource materials updated and available on your web site so that they can be accessed at any time.

Safeguard Your Clients and Spokespeople

As you are aware, the HIPAA Privacy Rule is designed to protect confidential patient health information. When you open your health center to the media, you run the risk of breaching confidentiality. As a rule, as long as your materials and events don't reveal a specific patient's health information, you are not in violation of HIPAA.



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If a patient chooses to disclose his/her own information to the media through an interview, press conference or profile, ask him/her to sign a written release that allows the center to use their statement and/or likeness, waives the right to payment and ownership, and absolves the health center of responsibility [see attached release sample].

Photography

When taking photographs or video footage, follow these simple guidelines:

- Set the ground rules before the media enters your health center.
- Secure an agreement that there will be no photographs or video taken of patient records, charts or files and no individual patient histories will be part of the interview.
- Warn patients before camera crews arrive and give them ample time to clear the area before filming begins.
- Have releases signed by anyone appearing on camera.

The Tools to Leverage Your Media Opportunity

When communicating with the media, you want to be as accurate and concise as possible. You also want to use the communications vehicle that will garner you the most attention. Find below an explanation of the various tools that may be used to reach the media:

News release

The news release is one of the principal means of communicating with the media and is often the impetus for news coverage and feature stories. Typically, a Community Health Center release notifies reporters about new services, upcoming events, grant awards, new study or survey findings or staff changes. The release provides Who, What, Where, When and Why in a concise, accurate manner.

A news release should be written with a strong title that will intrigue the reporter. The first paragraph, or lead, should give the important information and tell the reader why it is timely and newsworthy. Follow with secondary facts and background information. Validate your news with a quote from your spokesperson. Don't underestimate the value of the quote. It is another opportunity to authenticate your news by a third party or other expert. End your release with a "boilerplate" paragraph that tells the reporter about your organization

Be sure to provide the entire story in your release. Sometimes they are used as background information; other times they are used verbatim.

The release should be printed on your health center's letterhead or special news release stationary and distributed on the day of the event or when the news breaks. If you are emailing the release, make sure the subject line tantalizes. Craft a brief pitch in the body of the email and include the release in the body, not as an attachment (many news organizations do not accept attachments).

News Release Tips

- *Make your release simple and easy to read*
- *Start with the most important information*
- *Use the active voice instead of passive voice (i.e. "The health center won a Quality of Care award" not "The Quality of Care award was won by the health center.")*
- *Don't use jargon and avoid insider acronyms.*
- *Make sure your data is accurate.*
- *Include a quote from a credible source,*
- *Limit your release to 1-1 1/2 pages.*
- *Include your URL or web site.*
- *Always follow up news releases with a call to reporters.*



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News conference

A news conference offers you the ability to gather the media in one place at the same time to announce important news. It is an effective way to garner media interest and generate news stories. Be careful, however, to select topics that are genuinely newsworthy to the community. You are asking the media to take time out of their busy day to attend your event so make it substantive and worth their time.

Plan on no more than 40 minutes to conduct a news conference and limit your speakers/participants to five people (preferably less). Participants should offer a balance of perspectives (e.g., your center director/host, medical/financial director, guest/VIP/elected official, patient). Plan your news conference in an attractive location or one that is significant to the news you are announcing.

A news advisory should be sent to your media list two to three days prior to the news conference and followed up with telephone calls. The advisory provides the who, what, where, when and why, but unlike a news release, it is more like a one-page invitation to the reporters, not the whole story. Generally, advisories do not include quotes. Also, remember the “less is more” approach and keep your advisory brief, with just the right amount of information to tease media interest.

Because reporters’ time is at a premium, you should be punctual with the start and finish of your news conference. Plan the event in the morning since many reporters are on deadline toward the end of the work day. Greet reporters as they enter and offer one-on-one interviews with your spokespeople following the conference.

Provide the media with information kits which should include:

- News advisory
- News release
- Background/pamphlet about the health center
- Speaker biographies
- Any other relevant materials (e.g., study/survey findings, white papers) about the day’s event.

Have a media sign-in sheet and an exchange of business cards so that you or your media coordinator can follow up with the reporter.

Press Conference Tips

- *Always follow up your advisory with a call to reporters to gauge their interest in attending the event.*
- *Conduct your press conference during the morning hours.*
- *Strategically select your speakers, limiting to 4 or 5.*
- *Place time limits on speakers.*
- *Make sure you have adequate audio-visual equipment, such as microphones, but note that power points are generally discouraged because of their length and limited appeal to news media.*
- *Offer one-on-one interviews with speakers.*
- *Supply press kits.*
- *Provide food (a big draw for the press!).*



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One-on-one interviews

When preparing for an interview, make sure your spokesperson is comfortable with the messages and nature of the questioning. If the reporter has requested the interview, ask him or her what they are looking for and whether the interview is for background or a specific purpose. Find out if the interview is live or taped, on the phone or in person, and how long it is expected to last. Brief your spokesperson on the tone of the interview (e.g., informational, responsive, confrontational) and make sure they are clear on the messages that are expected to be conveyed. Ask your spokesperson to rehearse his/her messages and be able to summarize them in a clear and compelling manner. If necessary, prepare talking points so that your spokesperson speaks substantively and concisely

Help your spokesperson understand their audience and tailor messages accordingly. Research prior stories produced by the reporter so that you can gauge the sophistication of his/her knowledge or edge to his/her questioning.

Interview Tips

- *Prepare, prepare, prepare.*
- *Always tell the truth.*
- *Speak simply and concisely.*
- *Don't use jargon or let your data sound complicated. If you must use technical terms, use consistent names and familiar terms of reference so people can draw a mental picture.*
- *When on camera, speak in soundbites (complete sentences).*
- *Don't assume that anything is "off the record."*
- *Relax, use eye contact, be friendly.*
- *Summarize your messages at the end of the interview.*

Editorial Board

Editorial board meetings are unique opportunities for advocates to present their viewpoints on issues directly to the press or broadcast media. Whether before an editorial board or a single editorial writer, these meetings allow you and/or your spokesperson to increase the visibility and credibility of health center issues, help shape public policy debate, and give your leaders and health centers increased exposure to the media. Often, editorial meetings follow news events, giving you an opportunity to present your views, discuss unfair articles and editorials or urge the paper to take a particular editorial position.

Editorial board meetings must be requested by you and your spokesperson. In a pitch letter or email, explain what you want to talk about, whom you will bring with you, and why the issue is timely and important to the community. You might also want to include supporting materials, such as other recent articles about your health center. Follow up your request a few days later with a telephone call to the editors.

Prior to your meeting, make sure you do your homework. Research any related news articles that the paper or station has generated, paying close attention to opinion pieces. Know whether the outlet is conservative or liberal, and prepare answers for tough questions from the editorial board. Even if they agree with you, they will want you to defend your position and give them material to write about.

Prepare one-page fact sheets in support of your position and bring enough copies for everyone at the meeting. Also, bring copies of any editorial memoranda your health center, PCA or NACHC has written on the issue and the names and number of people who can be contacted for more information. A typical editorial board meeting will begin with your



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opportunity to “state your case.” Limit your statement to a few minutes, but make those minutes count with a concise summary of your health center’s position on the issue, the evidence that supports this position, the anticipated criticisms of your opposition and appropriate responses to those criticisms.

Follow up your meeting with a note to the participants thanking them for meeting with you and reiterating your arguments and perspectives. If you find that they do not produce an editorial on your issue, suggest an op-ed piece drafted by your spokesperson.

Opinion Editorials

Opinion editorials, more commonly known as op-eds, are articles that express a reader’s viewpoint on a particular subject. Published in the editorial section of a paper, op-eds are usually timely opinion pieces that tie into current local, regional or national issues. Op-eds are limited to specific word counts (generally between 500-800 words), so be sure to check your paper’s submission criteria before sending. Newspapers prefer exclusive rights to opinion pieces; therefore, you can submit to only one paper at a time. The paper will let you know if the piece will be published.

Opinion pieces are also welcomed by many web sites. If you don’t have luck with your newspaper, try to identify an organization that might be interested in your perspective.

Letter to the Editor

Another responsive tool and a way to express your opinion on an issue is to submit a letter to the editor of your paper. Letters to the editor are shorter in length (usually between 150-300 words) and responsive in nature. Often they compliment a specific article or action – and by doing so reiterate a positive point – or

react to an incorrect or negative statement, thereby weighing in the “other side.”

Letters to the editor must be drafted and submitted quickly (most newspapers allow you to send in a letter by email), so that they are timely. When submitting, be sure to include your name and affiliation and a telephone number where you can be reached at all times so they can contact you and verify that you are the author of the letter.

Media page for Web site

Another easy, inexpensive and valuable tool for your media tool kit is a media page for your health center’s web site. This page offers background information about your health center, its services and leadership as well as other important information (e.g., news releases, facts about your health center, or news articles)) that reporters can access 24/7 as they prepare a story. Remember to include your media coordinator’s name and contact information as well as an offer for spokespeople on topics.

Profiles and testimonials

What better way to put a face on your health center than to put forward profiles of and testimonials from your staff and clients? As mentioned earlier, they tell the story best. Creating a databank of good stories and biographies and keeping them updated and accessible will relieve last minute worries before a press interview or event. Include photos where appropriate. Remember to get approval from the staff member or client before distributing to the media or putting online. You should also have the subject sign a legal form granting your health center permission to use their story.



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Talking points

When facing the media, your health center's spokespeople should be well-versed on timely and broader issues that impact health care at the national and state level, as well as their specific interview messages. We have already discussed how messengers should always have their specific talking points defined and rehearsed. But, as representatives of the health center and the community health network as a whole, they also may be called upon to weigh in on broader policy issues. Attached are some sample talking points on Community Health Centers. Be sure to add specific information about your health center.

Crisis planning

To coin an old adage, "It's better to be safe than sorry." In business, as in the rest of life, bad things happen – even to good people – so it is always prudent to decide ahead of time how you will handle a crisis. Don't wait until a crisis occurs and you find the media on the telephone or at your door asking for more information or a comment. Take time now to work with your media coordinator and staff to assemble a well-planned media strategy so that your health center can react swiftly and decisively when trouble is brewing.

Public support is critical to your health center's survival. How you respond to damaging allegations can be a defining moment and, in some cases, the response can be more damaging than the original incident.

When putting together a media strategy, keep in mind some of the most common areas of controversy:

- *Allegations of financial mismanagement.*
- *Complaints by disgruntled employees or board members.*
- *Charges of unfair "government subsidized" competition in the context of health center expansion.*
- *Executive compensation.*
- *Adverse medical outcomes*

Timing and leadership are two important factors in a crisis plan. If an allegation is made, it is critical that your center get right out front with appropriate, truthful messages. Your reaction can mean the difference between positive and negative media coverage.

When crafting a strategic crisis plan, we recommend you follow these guidelines:

- *Select the information that you and your leadership deem necessary to provide in each scenario and develop messages that communicate that information. Count on these messages being repeated, so get them right the first time. Be honest and forthcoming, but very careful.*
- *Identify a spokesperson who can effectively communicate your messages. As a general rule, an individual should not try to defend oneself personally (such as a CEO addressing allegations that his/her salary is too high).*
- *Enlist ally support if needed. Remember that NACHC and your state and regional PCAs can fortify your position.*
- *Establish your media point of contact, the person who will interface directly with the media to coordinate interviews and disseminate background information. Make sure the person manning your front desk is instructed to contact your point person as soon as the media approaches or calls.*
- *Decide with your lawyer when it is appropriate or necessary to ask for counsel.*

Organizations that get out in front of a crisis and are forthcoming with the basic facts may be able to steal the thunder from a news article or story. Know your audience, keep your messages simple and act quickly and decisively.



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Crisis Do's and Don'ts

- *Cooperate with the media.*
- *Display empathy.*
- *Take responsibility, when and if appropriate*
- *Always keep your cool.*
- *Correct any mistakes immediately*
- *Act quickly and decisively.*
- *Don't put your hand up in front of the camera*
- *Don't say "No Comment."*
- *Don't assume anything is "off the record."*
- *Don't talk about what you're not (i.e. "I am not a crook") and miss the opportunity to talk about what you are.*
- *Don't cover up damaging information.*
- *Don't repeat an allegation when trying to explain; focus on what's right.*

Some other tactics include:

- Audio News Release (ANR), a prepared 30 or 60 second radio "news" piece that is scripted and includes voice over and a spokesperson soundbite
- Radio media tour (RMT), a series of radio interviews booked in advance and produced within a prescribed window of time
- B-roll, background video footage from your center (possibly including soundbites from spokespeople) that news stations can use to build a story
- Podcasts, taped editorials from a spokesperson uploaded to your Web site

Always put your best foot forward and be persistent with the media.

Good luck!

When to Get Help

This tool kit covers the fundamental elements of a media outreach plan. Many other tactics exist to help your messages break through the noise; however, many of them are costly and may require the assistance of public relations specialists or distribution services. If you have the resources to engage public relations help, make your topic selections judiciously so that those dollars count. Note that NACHC has a more comprehensive Issue Brief entitled, "Media Relations and Crisis Communications" (November 2006) available at www.nachc.com.



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