

NAMI Southwestern Pennsylvania

Tips for Developing Relationships with Reporters

One of the most effective things an advocate can do to promote their organization's views is to cultivate relationships with reporters. In the book, *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists*, author Jason Salzman quotes a reporter from a major daily whose sentiments are probably echoed by journalists everywhere: "A lot of what gets covered depends on personal relationships at the paper."

Here are some tips for strengthening relationships with individual reporters, and expanding and prioritizing your media database:

News is a two-way street: Be a resource for reporters.

Reporters need you just as badly as you need them. You need them to cover your issue and carry your frame and message. They need the fresh information and real stories you can provide. Develop a reputation as someone who has accurate information, meets deadlines, can provide additional contacts and sources, and is always good for a clever quote or a much-needed fact. Make sure reporters know they can trust you. Help them feel the information they need that you provide about your issue is accurate and up-to-date, that you are playing fairly and squarely with them.

Respect their professionalism.

Even if their media outlet has a different opinion about your issue than you, all parties can engage in the process respectfully. Provide other contacts for the reporter, even from the other side if requested. Consider once or twice a year the offer to "do lunch" and then brief the reporter on upcoming news.

Think like a reporter.

Reporters (and people in general) won't listen to you just because you're right or your cause is just; they pay attention when you're relevant. Think in terms of what a reporter and her boss, the editor, would consider newsworthy. Everyone thinks their issue is the most important, compelling subject and should be covered all the time, but reporters are faced with hundreds of issues and stories. How is yours interesting? What sets it apart? What hooks make your story particularly relevant right now?

Be accessible to reporters.

They will usually try to get you on one phone call. If they cannot find you they will often move on to other sources. Give reporters your direct line and a cell phone number—plus your home number if appropriate.

Carry a pager or cellular phone, especially at media events where a reporter might be calling you to get the news as it is being made. One group scored extra television coverage simply because an editor, scrounging for news on a slow day, phoned an activist at a rally to get a quote. Before the activist hung up she had persuaded the editor to send a news crew to cover the event.

Always be prepared to say something about an issue when a reporter calls.

A reporter never likes to hear, "I'll get back to you later today." They may not have ten minutes to spare or you might not get back to them on time. Clever, fast-thinking activists can spin off a sound-bite at will. It takes practice, but you get good at it. If you absolutely do not know the answer to a reporter's questions—especially technical or factual inquiries—say the following: "I don't know that information. I will find out and get back to you immediately. What is your deadline?" Then get back to the reporter on time. You may also offer one or two other expert sources for the reporter's rolodex. Provide additional contacts and sources, and is always good for a clever quote or a much-needed fact. Clever, fast thinking advocates can spin off a sound bite at will.

Know your facts.

Your reputation rides on the accuracy of the information you give reporters. Never give reporters inaccurate or even questionably accurate information.

Do not expect reporters to be your cheerleaders.

Decision makers at news outlets often oppose progressive stances because of their pro-business (and pro-advertising revenue) disposition. Even those reporters working for supportive media can't be viewed as a megaphone for your issue. The job of the news reporter is to be unbiased, or at a minimum fair and balanced. So, among other things, that means they should not be expected to reprint your press release verbatim, although some small-size media might.

Do not call reporters just to be quoted.

Sometimes you may be a major source for a reporter and still not be quoted. It is frustrating, but those are the breaks. If you feel the omission of you or your group substantially affects the story, call that to the reporter's attention. But remember, reporters are wary of sources who whine about not being quoted all the time. Be a resource even if it means you might not be in the story. Maybe next time you will.

Do not waste reporters' time.

In other words, don't be a schmooze hog. This is tacky and will tarnish your reputation. Only contact reporters when you have newsworthy information, a good pitch or are responding to an inquiry or a story. Some reporters keep a mental list of news pests and other obnoxious non-sources who aggravate them on a routine basis. Do not make that list.

Many reporters loathe the caller who says, "Hi, did you get my press release?" Reporters do not have time to call everyone back to say whether or not they received the release. If you call a reporter, go ahead and pitch your story. In the course of the pitch, you can remind him or her about the media release and offer to send another.

Do not exaggerate.

You can spin your news, but check the hyperbole. Be reasonable. Not every story pitch will be “stop the presses” important. Reporters are primarily looking for the facts, additional contacts, or your quotes to convey a sense of importance or controversy. They do not want Oscar acceptance speeches, used car salesman, “act now!” pitches, or screaming drama queens on the other end of the phone. Only contact reporters when you have newsworthy information, a good pitch or are responding to an inquiry or a story. Reporters are primarily looking for the facts, additional contacts, or your quotes to convey a sense of importance or controversy.

Everything is on the record.

Enough said. Even if you feel like you have a great relationship with a reporter, don't say anything you wouldn't want to see on the front page or the evening news. If you talk with a reporter for an hour about responsible tax policy but utter one aside about how your organization is being investigated by the IRS, guess which part of the conversation is likely to make a headline?

Never say, “No comment.”

Like it or not, your audience and journalists will take that as an admission of guilt. If you don't know the answer to something or don't feel comfortable answering a question, it's perfectly acceptable to respond with, “Can I get back to you on that?” But remember: if you promised more information, deliver it on time.

Don't take it personally if you get “bumped.”

If you have the unfortunate luck of staging a living wage rally or photo-op right when some huge national story breaks, and your event is missed because all the media is covering the big story, those are the breaks.

Be a media consumer.

Many progressives dislike or ignore television and other important media outlets. If you want to reach the audience you've targeted, you have to know the media they use. Watch the news shows in your city, taking notes on the reporters. Read bylines and remember who covered what issue. Research your issue on Google News, Nexis, and websites of relevant publications.

A word about the “exclusive”.

Giving exclusives—the first and only shot at important news—can have both positive and negative repercussions. On the positive side, a well-placed exclusive to a key media outlet can result in a major, in-depth story that will spark other news coverage. Plus, you develop a stronger relationship with the reporter.

On the negative side, be prepared to take the wrath of reporters who did not get the exclusive. Never give an exclusive to a reporter and then feed the story to another reporter. Both will be furious. If you get into a “bidding war” for a story, take the audience size of the media and your relationships with the reporters into consideration.

Checklist: tips for a perfect pitch

- Pitch your story
- Don't call to confirm receipt of releases or advisories
- Treat this as an initial sales call, not a follow-up
- Keep it brief
- Pitch to reporters with whom you have a relationship
- This means first building the relationship!
- Have a back-up pitch – if they don't like your first idea, they might like your others
- Have multiple hooks
- Provide more than one reason your story idea is interesting
- Ask questions and anticipate and answer questions
- Be knowledgeable about reporter's prior work
- Ask for referrals; if this reporter is not interested in the story, which of her colleagues might be?
- Visualize your story for TV and print photos
- Reporters are human beings too
- Respect their schedule, deadlines, priorities, and humanness
- Personalize your story
- Offer compelling spokespeople to tell the story
- Always be more reasonable than your opponent
- Pass the "brother in law" test; would an outsider who is not in the MH advocacy world understand or sympathize with your story?
- Tell your story and control the message; if they ask you a question outside of your message, guide them back to the message
- Don't be a diva
- Don't exaggerate facts or the importance of your issue
- Avoid "sweeps week" in television. Check with your local stations to see when "sweeps", the ratings period, occurs. Avoid pitching TV reporters during sweeps so reporters can focus on the stories that boost ratings during those weeks.

Be Organized: Create a media list/database

- Know the media outlets your target audience consumes
- Purchase media directories such as the Yellow Pages, Bacon's, Burrell's, or the New California Media Ethnic Media Directory
- Exchange media contact lists with your partnering organizations throughout the mental health and broader disabilities community.
- Capture information on reporters who contact your organization
- Remember alternative, independent, ethnic and community media
- Continually expand and update your database
- Prioritize the reporters who can help you advance your goals

Bonus points: If you really want to start a great relationship

Take a reporter to coffee/ a meal. Call or e-mail a reporter who writes about your issue and comment positively about a recent article. Tour a newsroom or make other personal contact.

Some material in this tip sheet was modified from that created by The SPIN Project in 2005.

Press Releases

Press releases are the most basic tool when a person thinks about media relations. There actually are several forms:

- A "news release," based on an action or information, such as a letter sent to the governor or the release of a survey or special report
- A "statement" issued in response to a news event.
- A "media advisory" giving advance notice about an event.

Writing a press release

- Use NAMI letterhead.

Special note: Sending press releases by e-mail means they will not appear on letterhead. Instead, the headline and text are placed inside the body of the email to avoid newsroom concerns over viruses. However, press releases on letterhead are still important: They are used with faxes, they are included in press kits and they are used as handouts in personal visits with reporters or policymakers.

- In the upper left-hand corner note the release date. In the right-hand corner include the name, phone, and e-mail address for the local NAMI media contact.
- Keep it short and simple
- Focus on who, what, where, when and why
- Limit the release to approximately 400 words
- Use short paragraphs, with 1-2 sentences, when possible
- Include a quote from a NAMI leader to expand on the importance of the news. (Ideally the quote should be short and be the second or third paragraph in the release and include the person's title.)
- Include a compelling headline. (They catch people's attention and make them want to continue reading. Use clear, engaging words or phrases. Keep them short, or lay out two sentences or "thoughts" centered on separate lines.)
- Send your release on Monday-Wednesday unless it involves breaking news or there are other special circumstances. (That allows time for pitch calls and helps ensure they aren't lost over a weekend.)

When sending the press release via e-mail, remember that subject lines are headlines. It's what causes a person to decide to open the message and read it at all. Choose email subject lines carefully to reflect the topic. They need to be attention grabbers, but not be exaggerated. Don't waste space by spelling out NAMI's name. Some examples:

- NAMI Protest: Governor's Mental Health Cuts
- Schizophrenia: One Family's Story
- Teens with Mental Illness: Helping Parents



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
[Date]

Contact: [Name]
[Phone]
[E-mail]

NAMI [State] Calls for Moratorium on Mental Health Budget Cuts

[City, State]— In response to proposed state mental health budget cuts, NAMI [state] is asking Governor [X] to put a moratorium on the cuts and to appoint a special commission to evaluate them.

“We have a mental health crisis in [state], where the lives of some of our most vulnerable citizens literally are at stake,” said [NAMI executive director ____]. “Governor [X], state legislators and other officials need to protect and strengthen mental health care. We must invest in proven, cost-effective, community-based treatment and services that promote recovery.”

In [state] approximately ____ adults and ____ children face serious mental illness. Most people living with mental illness can lead fulfilling, productive lives if they have access to treatment.

State and local funding for mental health care historically has been inadequate, and budget cuts now will make a bad situation even worse, threatening life-saving health care for many. Cuts also will result in high costs being diverted to other sectors—such as emergency departments and schools.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness is the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and families affected by mental illness.



MEDIA ADVISORY

MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET CUTS PRESS CONFERENCE

- WHO:** National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
- WHEN:** Monday, March 1, 2010 at 9:00 a.m.
- WHERE:** State Capitol Building, Room 2010
123 Legislature Avenue, Capital City
- WHAT:** A press conference calling on Legislature to protect state mental health services from massive budget cuts that will only shift costs elsewhere
- Arnold Bell, NAMI Board president
 - Cathy Daytime, MD, Chair, Community Services Board director
 - Edward Friend, local chief of police
 - Gina Hello, peer counselor; lives with schizophrenia

CONTACT: Ingrid Jackson, NAMI executive director
000-111-2222; ingridjackson@nami.org

Why You Should Cover

- Approximate ____ adults and ____ children in [**state**] live with serious mental illnesses.
- The state mental health care system is in crisis. The Governor has proposed to cut ____ from mental health services.
- Without treatment, people will end up in emergency rooms, hospitalized, in shelters, on the street, in jail or dead. Treatment works. Cuts can kill.

###



Sample 30 Second Speech

My name is Jenny Jones from Springville and a member of NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I am here today to urge the legislature to oppose cuts to mental health funding. I am the mother of a son with bipolar disorder and I can tell you that mental health care can make the difference between despair and recovery. I have seen it in my own family.

My son is a young adult who is enjoying life, working hard and making me proud. It wasn't always that way. Before he got the treatment he needs, I saw him in the back of police cars and held him in my arms after a suicide attempt. No child—and no family—should have to go through this.

My family is not alone. One in four experiences a mental health disorder and one in every seventeen people lives with a serious mental illness, like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression, so the need for mental health care hits a lot more families than you might think.

With treatment, recovery is possible—my son is living proof. However, cuts to mental health care will leave people in our state without the treatment they need and will lead to more school failure and lost jobs and more encounters with police, visits to emergency rooms--and even deaths. The pain and cost this will bring to families and to communities is unacceptable.

Today, I urge our legislators to protect our families and our communities. Reject cuts to mental health funding and preserve the hope of recovery for children and adults who live with mental illness.

30 Second Speech Practice Sheet

Introduce yourself.

Give your name and city or town, your role and organization. State what you are advocating for (keep your goal in mind) and let your audience know how you are affected by mental illness. Aim for 3-4 sentences.

Tell your story.

Let people know what happened; what helped; how you are different today. Your story should make a point that supports your advocacy message. Add simple facts or talking points, if you like. Aim for 5-10 sentences.

Make your point and your "ask."

Help others by giving a brief, positive message about mental health services and recovery. Conclude with the action you want taken. Aim for 2-3 sentences.

