

## MEDIA ADVOCACY PRIMER

Definition: media advocacy is the process of disseminating policy-related information through the communications media, especially where the aim is to effect action, a change of policy, or to alter the public's view of an issue.

### 1. Prepare for both planned and unplanned media advocacy

Planned media advocacy can be an action or strategy your group is planning in part of your larger campaign. You've crafted a media action, created materials, thought about how to solicit coverage, and how this strategically fits into your campaign.

Unplanned media advocacy opportunities are those where your media action or coverage is in response to breaking news. For example, a reporter calls you for your comment after a tragic accident involving alcohol to hear your expert opinion. Both are important; they compliment each other and will ultimately give your group more coverage.

### 2. Make sure your story is newsworthy

Knowing current events, trends, research, what's of current concern in the news or community, will help you frame your story in the right way to get your story covered and in the news. Of course there could be many "newsworthy" stories to choose from that day and the editor must make choices. Ask yourself:

- Is your story relevant to the community?
- Do you have a news "hook" to draw the reader in?
- Does your story use current events or research?
- Who and how many people are impacted by the problem?
- Do you have a human face to your story?
- Does your issue have conflict or opposition?

### 3. Choose an action to fit your campaign

You've decided to use the media to fight the alcohol industry and advocate for a change. The next step is to decide what media action will help you do that best. If this is your first time doing media advocacy, you need to consider the amount of time and resources you have available to carry out this strategy. Choose from the following options outlines.

#### *Letter to the editor*

Why it works: letters to the editor (lte) are a good method to get your message out to a lot of people with little time, resources or effort. Policy makers often read the newspaper to keep up to date on what's going on in the community. Unlike interviews, letters can be crafted ahead of time and there is no need to prep for interview questions! You can make your argument without any follow-up questions. This is a good method to link to current events, hot topics in the community, spark a debate and get people's attention.

#### *Tips:*

- Keep your letter under 200 words (follow publication's guidelines)
- Start your first sentence with a "hook" to draw readers in
- Stay on point
- Link your letter to a current event or something that is already in the news
- Advocate for a solution or change to the problem
- Include the group or coalition the author represents in the signature

#### *Opinion/opposition or editorials*

Why it works: the op-ed section is often a place of authority within the newspaper. Editorials hold more weight than letters to the editor since they are sanctioned by the editorial board. Stakeholders and elected officials often read this section as well.

Keep in mind: editorials can be difficult to place. Most newspapers run between one community editorial per day and one per week. Depending upon your media source and the relationship you have with them, some media outlets print what you submit as is. In other cases, the editorial board will edit or re-craft an article based on their guidelines or current news cycle. Research each publication's guidelines to find out more.

#### *Tips:*

- Find out how often media outlets publish op-eds written by readers
- Write about the problem and the solution
- Include the names of group or partners are involved in your effort
- Thank your editorial board if you do get published

## *Interviews*

Why it works: interviews are a dynamic and interactive way to share your message on a platform. They give you exclusive access to the public and the opportunity to share expertise and knowledge. Interviews will vary in length; you may be given as long as an hour to speak in some instances, or you may only be quoted for one line in a newspaper.

Keep in mind: everything you say is on the record. Don't say anything you wouldn't be comfortable seeing in print or on tv. Assume that a taped tv or radio interview will be edited. Keep your statements short and focused. Interviews can be difficult to obtain. Make the most of each opportunity by knowing your talking points and practicing effective sound bites.

Important note: interviews can be done for print/web, on tv, and on the radio. Take into account the different settings. An interview that is planned and scheduled is different than one that is the result of a reporter calling to ask for your comment. If you're caught off guard or need to do more research, offer to call the reporter back — within their deadline — to comment or respond further. A reporter values a knowledgeable source of information and once they feel they can trust you as a source, they will call upon you again.

### *Tips:*

- Stay on message — see sound bites section below
- Relate all questions back to your issue
- Speak clearly
- State who you are and who you represent
- Use “this is important because...”
- Show energy and passion
- Have facts or data about the problem on hand

## *Press releases*

What it is: a press release or news release is information directed to media communicating or announcing why an event or piece of information is newsworthy. A news release encourages the media to cover the story.

Why it works: press releases can be given to media contacts at a media event and afterwards. They capture quotes, compelling statistics, involved organizations, your message, and proposed solutions. Most importantly, press releases tell the media why your issue should be covered in the news. Include a copy of your release in the press packet distributed at your news event.

Keep in mind: if reporters get news releases too far in advance or even before hand, they will rely solely on the news release for the story and not attend your event. You will still get your story out, you just won't have the excitement and coverage cameras and photos bring to an event.

### *Tips:*

- List spokespeople's contact information
- Share what happened
- Include quotes
- Include relevant statistics that describe the scope and severity of the problem
- Present practical solutions

## *Media advisory*

Why it works: media advisories or “media alerts” are communication tools circulated to the media before your press event. They articulate the who, what, when, where, and why. Media advisories emphasize the “hook” or selling point that entices reporters and cameras to attend your event — whether it's a high profile speaker, a large visual, an action, youth speakers, or the location, make sure you articulate that selling point clearly

### *Tips:*

- Create a catchy title
- Use organizational or coalition letterhead when possible
- Try not to give too much information on the advisory
- List contact information for interviews
- Highlight visuals
- Fax and/or email your media advisory to your media contact list one to two days before your event
- Follow-up with phone calls and/or emails the day before (print) and the day of (broadcast) your event – this is critical to persuading contacts to attend.

## **4. Frame it monitor the media**

Notice how the media in your community frame the issues. Media often reports on alcohol problems solely as individual problems, as though only the drinker bears the responsibility. There is little public scrutiny of decisions made in the community (number of alcohol outlets, advertising at community events and etc.) Or the influence of the alcohol industry. Your message should move your target audience to think, “that needs to change.”

### *Develop the message*

Next, your message must articulate solutions. This is your opportunity to propose a positive approach to the problem. As advocates, coalition members, and prevention professionals, we can speak volumes about the problem. Make sure you can also speak to the change you want.

#### **Examples:**

- “Teenage boy died in boating accident this weekend due to excessive drinking while boating.”
- “The lack of boating and park alcohol restrictions contributed to the death of a teenage boy this past weekend.”

### *Sound bites*

Sound bites are short, pointed statements that help tell your story. They are usually no longer than ten to fifteen seconds, or 2 sentences at the most. They don’t tell the whole story, but enough to get your point across. Prepared sound bites help ensure that journalists will know what facts are most important. They are also easy to record and understand.

#### **Example:**

- “Holding young people solely responsible for underage drinking is like blaming fish for dying in a polluted stream.”

## **5. Choose the right spokesperson**

Think strategically about who will speak for your cause. Whether it’s in a letter to the editor, an interview, or at a press conference, the person delivering the message, needs to:

- Be well versed in the content
- Know the community story
- Know the sound bites
- Know how to re-frame the issue, and
- Send a strong message.

A spokesperson that has experience with the problem tells the media you have credibility on the issue and may earn more attention. Ask yourself, who has credibility within your group to speak out on this issue? Is it a community coalition member who lives in the neighborhood that is saturated with alcohol outlets? Is it a youth from the coalition who was able to buy alcohol?

### *Make the call*

Media, advocates often wait for reporters to call them. It’s obvious when you are planning a media event, you will call and solicit the media’s attention to cover your story. But what

about when you don’t have an event? It’s a two way street. Reporters and journals rely on you, the advocate or expert, to call when you have something to say. They won’t always make the connection and call you. There are opportunities to contact media and build a relationship even when you don’t have an event. Don’t be afraid to contact the media and capitalize on different ways to share your message:

- Share information about your organization and what you do
- Comment on how a national issue impacts your community
- Comment on how a current event relates to your issue
- Respectfully let them know if they left out an important perspective (your group’s) in their coverage of an alcohol problem.

### *Maintain the relationship*

Now that you have received coverage or have made initial calls to the media outlet, make sure you maintain the relationship. Sustaining media relationships will position you as the expert in the community on alcohol issues, potentially allow for greater ease in publishing letters, op/eds, or articles, and increase interview opportunities about alcohol problems in your community. Maintain the relationship by continuing to contact the media when you have news and do your best to provide information when reporters call, even if it isn’t your primary area of concern.

## **6. Create media materials**

When interacting with the press, it is important to have your information neatly compiled and organized. Make it easy for reporters to communicate your story the way you want it told. Think of a press packet as a set of materials that will help reporters understand the issue from your perspective. The packet should communicate two things:

1) The alcohol problem and solution you are advocating for and why; 2) who your group is and why you have credibility to speak out against the industry.

Possible materials to include in your press packet:

- Individual and organizational/agency contact information
- One-page about who you are
- Fact sheet on the problem
- Press release about event or issue
- Other materials may include: list of key supporters, dvds, photos, spokesperson biographies, or a relevant report.