

...the power of social work

MEDIA TOOLKIT

Media Toolkit

WHY WOULD SOCIAL WORK WANT TO BE COVERED IN THE MEDIA?

The short answer to that question is that we are already being covered in the media and each story is an opportunity to shape the public's views of social work. We know about the tragic stories that make headlines across the country when social work is covered negatively. But, we as social worker also have the opportunity to work with the media, as a conduit to their readers, viewers and listeners to convey the positive messages of social work and all that social workers do for their clients and communities.

This toolkit is an introduction to working with the media. It is a crash-course in portraying yourself and the proud profession of social work in a positive light.

Please don't hesitate to contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org for more information or suggestions for specific media interactions.

You are the social work expert and you have the opportunity to shape the way the public sees social work.

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Media Toolkit

UNDERSTANDING WHAT THE MEDIA WANT



What is news and who cares about it?

THE SIMPLE RULE: MEDIA COVER NEWS

The rule can be broken down by defining who the media are and what they want.

WHO ARE THE MEDIA?

They communicate to the public—specifically newspapers, magazines, newsletters, Web sites, television, and radio.

News is commonplace. It's all around us. Unfortunately, understanding what makes news, and the value of news coverage is anything but commonplace.

WHAT IS NEWS?

M. Lyle Spencer, former dean of the Journalism Department at the University of Washington, offered a standard definition of news:

“News is...any event, idea, or opinion that is timely, that interests or affects a large number of people in a community, and that is capable of being understood by them.”

Some other definitions:

“News is anything you didn't know yesterday.”—Turner Catledge, former executive editor, the *New York Times*

“News is change.”—Reuven Frank, president, *NBC News*, 1971

“When a dog bites a man, that's not news because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that's news.”—John Bogart, 1918

According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, news is a report of recent events or matter that is newsworthy. Newsworthy is defined as sufficiently interesting to the general public to warrant reporting. News, for social workers, is a story or idea that illustrates the profession's issues and mission.

WHAT MEDIA SHOULD YOU TARGET?

Traditional media is still the most credible source for consumers to find information that affects their lives. According to a 2006 Lexis Nexis survey (Lexis Nexis is a searchable database of newspaper and magazine articles, as well as legal documents), when consumers are faced with major events that significantly affect their lives, their trust mostly remains with the traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio, versus emerging media sources such as blogs.

- 50% - network television for immediate news
- 42% - radio
- 37% - daily local newspapers
- 33% - cable news or business networks
- 25% - Internet sites of print and broadcast media
- 6% - emerging media like Internet user groups, blogs and chat rooms

(Source: www.lexisnexis.com/about/releases/0928.asp)

Another survey by the University of Michigan in 2008 found that the most credible news source was traditional media (all print and television sources) with their online counterparts, followed by radio and non-traditional Internet.

(Source: www.ns.umich.edu/htdocs/releases/story.php?id=6440)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TARGETING?

Consumers are still turning to traditional media sources for their news and entertainment. It is important to target these media outlets as the primary targets for your outreach.

However, the media is becoming increasingly complex with the convergence of blogging, wikis and other sources of information on the Internet. These outlets should not be ignored as they are powerful and emerging source of information for consumers.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEDIA OUTLETS?



What makes one media outlet different from another is its audience. An “easy listening” radio station in Muncie, Indiana has a different audience from the *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*. The campus newspaper at the University of Maryland has a different audience than the *New York Times*. The *NASW News* has a different audience than the magazine of the American Bar Association.

Three adjectives commonly describe the word media are: national, local, and trade. These are used to define the audience. National media often refers to *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *NBC Nightly News*, *Good Morning America*, cable news programs, and National Public Radio (NPR), because these media have national audiences.

Local media cover a specific city, region, or area. Local media include neighborhood newspapers, citywide magazines, radio stations, local cable channels, and the local network affiliates such as NBC Channel 4 in Washington, D.C., the *Houston Chronicle* in Texas, or *Chicago Parent* that comes out weekly in Chicago.

Examples of trade media include the *NASW News*, *Social Work Today*, and *The New Social Worker*. Trade press address a specific audience, in this case, professional social workers.

National news ➔ story needs to appeal to a large audience. It can be a “local” story, but it needs to be able to be mirrored in other communities.

Local news ➔ story needs to appeal to the community. It is very effective to take a national story and refer to its local angle. Seek out local people who highlight the issue and use them as storytellers for the important points of the story.

Trade news ➔ story needs to appeal to the target audience, usually a specific profession. Timely news that directly effect professionals or those who work with them is useful for garnering attention from this media.

VARIETY IN NEWS: HARD NEWS, OPINION, AND FEATURES

Hard News

Ideally, all hard news would contain only facts, and the reader would draw his or her own conclusions. Often, however, we detect a bias in the hard news sections of a newspaper or the stories heard on the nightly news. That bias is what gives a newspaper, for example, the reputation of being conservative or liberal.

Opinion

All opinions should appear on the opinion pages of the newspaper—editorial page and the op-ed pages—or be introduced as a commentary on the nightly news. Viewers and listeners should, in a perfect world, be told in advance that something is an opinion so that they can decide whether they agree or disagree with what is expressed. Radio talk shows usually revolve around the opinions of guests. Often the host also expresses an opinion.

Feature

Feature stories—sometimes referred to as “soft” news—appear in “style” sections of newspapers and magazines. Also, nightly news programs have segments that are more “feature” than hard news. An example is the NBC Nightly News segment called “In Their Own Words” which gives an average person

the opportunity to talk about how a hard news event is affecting them personally.

Lines sometimes blur between features and hard news, in part because feature stories are often “hooked” to current hard news. For example, the media covers the War in Iraq from a strategy and outcome perspective, while it also might cover individual soldiers and how their lives and families are being affected by the war. This is where social workers can provide the feature story angle on a hard news story.

The feature story can be characterized as focusing on a human interest angle to a hard news story. Much of what social workers do falls into the feature category, unless experts are commenting on public policy issues.

HOW IS MEDIA CHANGING?

In the last 15 years, how people receive their news and information has changed dramatically. More people are turning to the Internet for breaking news. An increasing number of people rely on cable news networks, which broadcast 24 hours a day. There is no “news cycle” anymore. No longer are people waiting for the morning newspaper or the evening news to learn about what is happening in their community and around the world. Because of this, the way that we pitch the media needs to change as well.



With the advent of 24 hour news operations, journalists need more information, more experts and more stories to fill their programs and Web sites. Learning the angle of each particular program or Web site and tailoring your pitch will enable effective outreach.

The newspaper industry is seeing a decline in print readership and an increase in online readership. Although many stories appear in the print and online counterparts of a newspaper, the way that an article is written for print can be different from the way that an article is written for the Web.



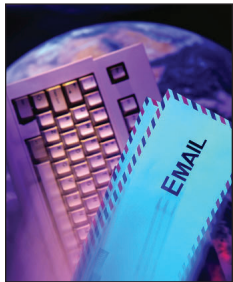
THE GENERAL PUBLIC MUST UNDERSTAND THE STORY

It's the reporter's responsibility to make the story understandable to their audience. To do that, reporters often seek the help of the “expert” or “real people” whose circumstances exemplify the story. “Real people” do not use jargon or talk over people's heads. They help the general public build a picture of what is happening. An interview with a single mother using TANF, detailing her frustrations with trying to get and maintain a job while attending all the meetings and required classes to continue to receive assistance, helps us to better understand the complexities of the system.

Often a reporter uses “experts” to put a story into context. Experts can provide numbers and an overview of a story. For example, an expert on the public welfare system can provide statistics and examples of the administrative challenges in the system and the history that brought about the current frustrations.

NASW is currently recruiting social workers from across the country to help tell the story of the profession to journalists and media outlets. As a professional social worker, it’s likely that at some point in your career, you will be considered an expert on a topic that’s being heavily reported in the news. If you are interested in speaking with the media, contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org. NASW has been able to place social workers in stories in outlets such as *CNN*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Oprah & Friends on XM Satellite Radio* to speak on issues important to the profession and social workers.

HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE HEARD



Targeting reporters by e-mail

Today, it’s so much easier to send e-mail than to pick up the phone or compose a letter. In fact, a majority of reporters prefer e-mail to phone and fax pitches. In order to get a reporter to pay attention to your e-mail, though, there are specific things you must do:

- When sending a press release to more than one reporter, *always* put the reporters’ e-mail addresses in the “blind courtesy copy” or “BCC” window. When possible, personalize individual e-mails with notes to specific reporters—this helps build relationships.
- Be specific in the subject line. Do not use social work jargon, and get right to the point.
- Send only one e-mail screen of copy. Be clear and concise in your message. Do not pitch a story unless you can clearly state the significance of that story to a reporter’s readers, and how that idea ties into a larger trend.
- If you have a lot of information, provide links in your e-mail so that reporters can go directly to the background or supporting facts on your Web site. This also helps ensure that the e-mail’s content is concise and easily accessible.
- Add contact sources, and note the information those contacts can provide. For example, if a social worker in the field can provide commentary related to your issue, contact that person in advance so that they are ready when the reporter calls. It’s also a good idea to identify an educator, researcher, or other expert who can provide statistics to back up your point of view.

Last but not least, know how to target the right reporter. Knowing who you are sending your e-mail to is the most important part of pitching a story. Research news outlets by reading/listening/watching, so that you know exactly who would best cover your issue.

If you don’t have access to media outlets outside your local area, you can contact the NASW Communications Department for a targeted media list by sending an e-mail to media@naswdc.org. Include an example of the story idea, so that we can help you target the right reporters.

HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE WITH OP-EDS

An op-ed is one of the best tools for gaining visibility for an issue, as well as making social work a credible source on a variety of issues. But writing one and getting it published are often easier said than done. So, how do you accomplish those goals?

Identify your message

First, identify your message. Be focused and clear. What is it that you want to happen in the end? Do you want legislators to do something, or just increase public understanding of an issue? Regardless of the end result, you need to be able to state your opinion in a clear, concise sentence. If you can’t, you need to continue to work on your message.

Back it up with facts

Next, you need to express that opinion, and then back it up with facts. For example, if your message is that legislators should not cut money from the social service budget because it will be detrimental to families, then you need to supply examples. How many families use social services in your community now? How many jobs would be affected by the budget cuts? How much more would it cost your community in crisis care versus preventive care? You can usually find numbers and statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau at www.census.gov/ or other government agencies. Think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution or the Urban Institute, often have research that is broken down geographically.

Write for the reader

The standard way to make an argument is to state your main point, present evidence to support that opinion, and then offer a recommendation or conclusion. The more conversational you can make the writing, the better. Avoid clichés and jargon. Emphasize active verbs and forget the adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing. Explain why your position is better than the opposition.

Try different angles with different outlets

If your op-ed is not published by your media outlet of choice—remember that the *New York Times* receives thousands of op-ed submissions every day—then consider re-submitting to a smaller, local or regional paper. They are always hungry for news items. The key is to keep pushing—if the issue is important to you, try different angles and different outlets. Be careful not to send your Op-ed to too many newspapers. Giving a newspaper an exclusive to the Op-ed might be an enticement to run it. If you need to send it to other publications, rewrite it to meet the needs of that publication.

Timely and relevant increase odds

Just as each organization or person has his or her own agenda, so does each publication. In order to make your Op-ed more desirable to a media outlet, the author should make it timely and relevant. Current issues affecting a community or a national topic that can be tied to an issue facing the entire community are more likely to be published.

Stick to the guidelines

Most publications have submission requirements, including word count—which usually falls between 700-800 words maximum. Make sure to draft your op-ed within these guidelines. Submit your piece with a letter that includes a brief biography (including your social work credentials), your phone number, and an explanation of why your piece is timely and relevant to readers.

Send your op-ed and cover letter by fax, e-mail, or regular mail, depending on the guidelines set by the publication. Most publications do not read faxes—e-mail is probably preferable, but again, research the specific publication's requirements. For more information about submission guidelines, go to the outlet's Web site. For more information contact NASW Communications for assistance at media@naswdc.org or call 202-336-8228.

HOW TO WRITE AND USE AN EFFECTIVE BACKGROUNDER IN PUBLIC RELATIONS



In order to write an effective backgrounder for a press kit (or for other uses), you must first understand what a backgrounder is.

What is a backgrounder?

A backgrounder is an in-depth informational piece providing, as the name implies, background information on a specific issue. They often accompany press releases and provide additional information not found in the releases.

How do you write a backgrounder?

To write a backgrounder, you need to follow some basic guidelines:

- Start with a concise statement on the issue or subject about the topic of accompanying press release. For example: “Clinical social workers provide the majority of the nation’s mental health services.”
- Follow the opening statement with a historical overview of the issue. Trace the issue’s evolution—how it came to be—and the major events leading up to it. You can utilize outside information in this section. However, cite your statements within the text, according to the appropriate style guidelines of the publication you are sending it to.
- Explain why this issue is important TODAY. State its significance and back that statement up, as appropriate.
- Present the implications of the issue. Back up that statement with facts.
- Use subheads where appropriate to make for easier reading. A backgrounder should average four to five pages in length; however, it is always a good idea to let the information, not the page number, dictate the length of your piece.

What are the uses for backgrounders?

- Collateral material for partner groups
- Talking points for an interview
- Preparation documents for a media interview
- Inclusion in an online or print press kit

For help preparing a backgrounder, use *Social Work Speaks*, *NASW NEWS*, and the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, or contact the NASW Communications Department at media@naswdc.org.

HOW TO WRITE A SOUND PITCH

Social workers are not public relations experts. But, we are viewers/readers/listeners of media that influence us in our daily lives. As media consumers, we know what kind of stories we like to hear. Frequently, we are saying to ourselves, “I would love to see a story on...I wonder how I might get that story out to the public.”

Journalists need story ideas pitched to them. With 24-hour news operations and the advent of Web sites that complement every media outlet, there is plenty of opportunity to have your story heard by reporters and conveyed to the public.

There are some general pitching tips that apply whether you are a social worker suggesting a story to a journalist, or trained public relations professional:

- **Convey a well thought out story.** Provide the journalist with not only the idea, but also the key players in the story. Provide experts who convey both sides of the story, including an expert or two who conveys your messages. Give real life examples of how this story affects people and allow the journalists to speak with those people.
- **Research the appropriate contact to send the pitch.** You can research a reporter’s beat, or topical areas of coverage, by reviewing the Web site for their publication or program. Reporters appreciate when you understand their interest areas and pitch a story idea that is relevant to their work.
- **Determine the best way to reach out to a journalist.** Most journalists prefer to be contacted initially by email. The days of faxing and snail mail are slowly drifting away. A phone call can be effective follow up, but only when you have something new to add to your pitch. Don’t send attachments of press releases or photos unless they have been solicited by the journalist.
- **Make the pitch compelling.** Use an interesting subject line, keep the copy of the pitch short and keep them reading with a couple of compelling paragraphs (at most) about your story idea. Keep in mind that reporters receive hundreds of emails a day and they need to be selective about the ones that catch their attention.
- **Connect your pitch to a timely news event.** If you can connect your story idea to a larger story or to a community event, then the pitch is more likely to be considered.
- **Provide contact information** It might seem basic, but providing your email and daytime and nighttime phone numbers to a reporter will only help your cause of getting them to cover your story.

PITCHING – THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY EXAMPLE OF A GOOD MEDIA PITCH:

Good morning. Prof. Frederic G. Reamer, PhD of the Rhode Island College of Social Work is an expert on missing persons cases where the parent is the suspect. He has been a member of the Rhode Island Parole Board for more than 25 years, has experience dealing with these cases and can help your readers understand the situations. [Include a brief quote from the expert.]

Prof. Reamer is the author of: [Include names of publications]

I am pasting below Prof. Reamer’s bio which includes his contact information. Good luck on your story. [Include brief bio for reporter’s reference]

Theresa Spinner
202-408-8600 x468
media@naswdc.org

What is right about this pitch?

- The pitch gets right to addressing the needs of the reporter by identifying the expert and explaining his credentials.
- A quote, names of related publications and a brief bio are included to give the reporter more information about the expert.
- The reporter understands why it will be helpful for his/her readers to hear from this expert.
- Theresa provides the contact information for the expert as well as her own contact information.

EXAMPLE OF A BAD AND UGLY MEDIA PITCH:

Hey Bert:

What’s shakin? I wanted to tell you about this great product we have. It’s going to blow your mind. The Orbitron 5000 is the latest in hair care products. We’re even having a contest on our web site for someone to win the full line of Orbitron products. I attached a picture of the Orbitron 5000. Check it out!

Let me know if you’re interested in doing a story.

Cheers – Ernie

What is wrong with this pitch?

- The pitch is too conversational. Unless you know the reporter, “Hi” or “Hello” is more appropriate.
- The pitch does not describe what the Orbitron 5000 is and what it does.
- The pitch is entirely self serving. In a good pitch, you would describe how the product or service will benefit readers or viewers, rather than just peddling your product.
- Ernie didn’t include his contact information for Bert to contact him if this pitch made him interested in the product.
- Ernie attached an unsolicited picture to the email.

Depending on what your responsibility is as a social worker, you may or may not have direct contact with the media. Here are some suggestions, broken down by function in your organization:

NASW Chapters

- Look at stories that are affecting the community and see how to interject social workers as examples of good work or experts to add perspective.
- Promote events that might be of interest to the public like Legislative Days and guest speakers.
- Create a list of experts in different topic areas so that when a reporter calls you are ready with a social worker.
- Some of the most interesting work to the larger community is work that is done in the State Capitol. Promote your legislative activity and position yourselves as experts on the topic as it comes before the legislature.

Private Practice

- Make sure that your private practice has a Web site that promotes your expertise.
- Send your information to journalists who cover the areas of practice in which you specialize.
- Make yourself available to journalists when a timely news story hits your community.

Social Workers in Organizations/Agencies

- Make yourself and the important work you're doing known to the PR/Marketing staff at your organization.
- Include the PR/Marketing staff on the planning of important events in the Social Work Department.
- If possible, share success stories with the PR/Marketing staff that they can then present to the media as examples of the stellar work being done by social workers.

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE PRESS RELEASE

Immediate Release:
Date

Contact: Name
Phone number
Email address

Your Compelling Headline Goes Here

Your City – The most important information in your press release should be in the lead. In the first paragraph, the journalist should be able to determine what the story is. This lead paragraph should draw the reader in.

Each subsequent paragraph should add to the lead paragraph, making it come to life. Include statistics, examples or more information to illustrate the story.

Make sure that when you're writing a press release, that your information is newsworthy, timely and written in a way that appeals to the media. Think about the way that a news story is written. The most important information is first, followed by details that fill in the gaps for the reader.

Press releases should be like inverted pyramids with the more compelling information first, followed by the more detailed information.

“Quotes provide the first expert, as well as defined opinion on the topic.”...

There are also ways to make your press release more searchable on the Web. If you imbed links to relevant information, then this will allow your press release to be picked up more readily by search engines. Additionally, post any press release you have to your organization's blog to encourage others to read it.

Other tips to writing an effective press release include:

- Try to keep the press release to one page, if possible.
- Avoid passive voice.
- Stay away from industry jargon.
- Be concise and don't use overtly exaggerated words to describe something.

About Your Organization

A press release usually ends with a boilerplate. A boilerplate is a short paragraph that best summarizes who you are and your mission as an organization or chapter. The paragraph should remain constant throughout all media information. The number signs below indicate to a journalist that the press release is finished.

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Here are some suggestions of good sample press releases:

- Medicare Bill Gives Victory to Social Workers
www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/2008/071708.asp
- NASW Hails Supreme Court Decision Protecting Victims of Child Rape and Overturning Louisiana Death Penalty for Child Rape:
www.socialworkers.org/pressroom/2008/062508.asp
- Musical Alternative for the Superbowl?
www.artsjournal.com/sandow/2005/01/a_really_good_press_release.html

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

Letters to the editor usually relate to a story that was in the newspaper. If you feel passionately, either way about a topic, you should consider writing a letter the editor. Letters to the editor are usually 250-300 words (many times less) so you need to make sure that you are able to get your point across in a succinct and compelling way. Timing is everything with letters to the editor. Try to respond to an article the same day or the next day. If you have statistics or examples that back up your stance, use them.

Look on the Web site of the publication to which you want to send the letter to the editor for guidelines. Most papers will confirm with you before they print the letter. Make sure that you include day and evening phone numbers. Finally, sign your name, and include any information that would indicate why you have a specific interest in this topic.

Ernie Muppet

Ernie is a Public Relations Pro at PR Agency, Inc.

EXAMPLE OF A PUBLISHED LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Boston Globe

Social Workers at Risk in Flawed System

February 12, 2008

I read with much dismay and sadness about the murder of a social worker during a home visit. Some lessons need to be learned to avoid such tragedies in the future.

Home visits during times of mental health crises are in face dangerous work. One does not know what awaits on the other side of the door. You are one someone else's turf. You are alone. There is much risk attached to these visits.

Because of the risk, such visits often are made by two clinicians. This does not prevent tragedy, but it does provide a modicum of safety and some control to the clinicians in such a situation.

-A. Berns, Brookline

The writer is a social worker.

HOW TO USE WEB 2.0 IN YOUR OUTREACH EFFORTS

Public Relations is more than simply Media Relations. Public Relations is the way that an organization or person interacts with the public directly and not just through the conduit of the media. With the advent of social networking, Public Relations professionals cannot ignore a strong force in connecting with audiences that are important to your cause or your brand. Considering Web 2.0 as part of Public Relations will only enhance your outreach.

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term used to describe the second wave of the World Wide Web. Sometimes called the “New Internet,” Web 2.0 is not a specific technology; rather, it refers to two major paradigm shifts in how people use technology.

One shift is to *user generated content*, which describes how individuals contribute to online content. The second shift, which is more related to business, is *thin client computing*. This is how Web-based or remote desktop applications allow users to interface with much larger programs and work simultaneously online with other users through a remote server.

These two shifts have created many popular Web 2.0 applications, including the following:

- Social Networking: Facebook, MySpace and Linked In
- Video and Photo Sharing: YouTube and Flickr
- Blogs and Blogging
- Search Engine Optimization and Search Analytics: Google
- Podcasts and Webinars
- E-mail Marketing
- Feed Aggregators and News Services
- Web Chats and Forums
- Second Life
- Wikis and Wikipedia

WEB 2.0 SUMMARY

- Web 1.0 was about **reading**, Web 2.0 is about **writing**
- Web 1.0 was about **companies**, Web 2.0 is about **communities**
- Web 1.0 was about **client-server**, Web 2.0 is about **peer to peer**
- Web 1.0 was about **HTML**, Web 2.0 is about **XML**
- Web 1.0 was about **content management systems**, Web 2.0 is about **blogs**
- Web 1.0 was about **portals**, Web 2.0 is about **RSS**
- Web 1.0 was about **page views**, Web 2.0 is about **cost per click**
- Web 1.0 was about **publishing**, Web 2.0 is about **participation**
- Web 1.0 was about **taxonomy**, Web 2.0 is about **tags (folksonomy)**
- Web 1.0 was about **wires**, Web 2.0 is about **wireless**
- Web 1.0 was about **owning**, Web 2.0 is about **sharing**
- Web 1.0 was about **Netscape**, Web 2.0 is about **Google**
- Web 1.0 was about **Web forms**, Web 2.0 is about **Web applications**
- Web 1.0 was about **screen scraping**, Web 2.0 is about **APIs**
- Web 1.0 was about **dialup**, Web 2.0 is about **broadband**
- Web 1.0 was about **hardware costs**, Web 2.0 is about **bandwidth costs**

If you need more information about Web 2.0, please contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org.

Media Toolkit

HOW TO BE A BETTER SPOKESPERSON FOR YOURSELF AND FOR THE PROFESSION



Health care, mental health, school social work, and social issues like child welfare and poverty are among a few of the most widely reported stories in the United States. As a professional social worker, it's likely that, at some point in your social work career, you will be considered an expert on a topic that is being heavily reported on in the news.

Local media or NASW may even call on you to appear on television or radio, or to do an interview for an article on that topic. **This is a very important opportunity, when you have the chance to educate the public about what social workers really do.** You can use this time to teach them about a specific practice area, to talk about new research, or to discuss legislation affecting social workers and, more often, their clients. You want to accurately represent your area of expertise and educate the public about the specifics, but where do you begin?

First, professional social workers need to have a voice. They need to accurately represent the work they do in communities, schools, hospitals, and other practice areas. The public doesn't necessarily understand the role of the social worker or what a social worker can do for them. This is **your** chance to explain what social workers in your area of expertise do, and why that is important.

These are just a few of the reasons that social workers should consider participating in media interviews, or even becoming media spokespersons. NASW is actively recruiting members to become part of the Media Referral Database, in order to respond to reporters' inquiries quickly and efficiently, matching the appropriate social worker to each reporter, so that the reporter's questions can best be answered. To join the Media Referral Database email media@naswdc.org.

We understand that many social workers have not been trained to be "media savvy." This is why we have provided the following tips, which can help you develop the skills to become

a good spokesperson. Remember, giving a good interview sheds a positive light on social work, and educates the public about what social workers and their various roles mean to the community.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA'S MOTIVES

Understanding the pros and cons of being interviewed by the media—print, radio, or television—is your first step to becoming media savvy. Members of the media know why they want you for an interview. Why do you want to be interviewed? Only you can answer that question, and you must be clear with your answer.

As a social worker, you are in the unique position of representing yourself, as well as your profession. Today's news media are a critical source of information and education for Americans. Being active and visible in the media is an important way to educate the public about the value of social work, and communicating through the media can create the opportunity for you to help solve pressing social needs by increasing public awareness. Interviewing can also give you the opportunity to voice your pride in your profession, as well as a chance to promote your own work or research.

Participating in media interviews will require considerable preparation. But, a good interview can reap the benefit of increased public awareness and understanding of a particular issue relevant to your work.

How to be a better spokesperson for yourself and for the profession

The most important thing to remember about a media interview is that you are the expert in the interview. The reporter has a role in gathering and reporting information and you are part of that role. They are looking to you as a source of information and expertise to add to their story.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

In working with the media, each of you has a job to do. The journalist needs to write or produce a compelling story that will illustrate a balanced look at the issue. Your job is to articulate the information you want the audience to understand. Each of you must work together to get your goals accomplished. And when it happens, it is a story that both of you can be proud of.

Each interview will be a different experience from which you can learn. It is important to understand that interviewing is a preparation and learning process, which never ends—even journalists must do their homework.

Finally, a journalist's job is to discover the truth and present both sides of an issue. Many times people are intimidated by the media because they feel like they are "out to get them." The honest answer is that the media are not out to shine a bad light on you or the profession. They are looking for honest and truthful answers to articulate a good story for their audience.

STEPS FOR THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interviews you should turn down

You do not have to accept every interview request you receive.

In the beginning, you will be tempted to say yes to any interview opportunity; however, you should choose wisely and carefully consider whether to participate in an interview that:

- A. Might compromise you in any way
- B. Is out of range of your expertise
- C. Is a multi-person interview where you are not familiar or comfortable with the other guests



Depending on the set up for a panel-style interview, you may or may not want to consider doing the interview. Most times, the producers gather experts with varying perspectives on an issue to discuss and debate. Occasionally though, shows are set up to be argumentative debates about a divisive topic. You need to decide whether or not you think that the other people in the interview are acceptable and if you think you can provide the unique social work perspective effectively.

KNOW YOUR MESSAGE

Before you start an interview, know exactly what you want to say. Prepare three to five talking points you want to make and integrate them into your answers during the interview. Write them down and practice a few comfortable ways of saying them.

It is particularly helpful to use stories or case studies to make a point. Be sure to keep them short and remember to state your conclusions *before* you use your supporting evidence. Most often, producers and editors are looking for that sound bite that quick thought that summarizes your points.

You can also use *Social Work Speaks* and other policy statements that your organization may have, as well as statistics that support your talking points.

Finally, as you are preparing your messages for the interview, it is also a good idea to consider potentially challenging questions that might get asked and how you would handle their response. If a challenging question is posed that you think you have prepared for and can answer, by all means do so. However, if you feel there is a question that you cannot answer, make a note of the question and tell the reporter that you will get back to them. You can head off these kinds of uncomfortable exchanges if you are able to anticipate hot button questions and craft a response.

SETTING LIMITS

Once you have decided that you want to pursue being interviewed by the media, you will need to set limits. First of all, say yes to a request for an interview *only if you want to give the interview*. This statement may seem obvious, but there are many people who agree to an interview when they are unsure and uneasy about doing it. Whatever your state of mind is during the interview, it will show. If you are enthusiastic, you will perform better. If you are uncomfortable, it will show. If you are preoccupied, you will come across as uninterested.

Examine your knowledge of and attitude toward the subject of the interview. Your answers to the following questions will help you to determine if you should do the interview:

- A. What do you want to accomplish with this interview?
- B. What do you want to say about this subject?
- C. What do you have to gain by doing it?
- D. Will there be more opportunities in the future?

If you decide not to accept, inform the media representative as soon as possible. All you need to say is "No, thank you." Don't worry that your decision will be used against you in the future. They will call again when they need you. Others will call too. If NASW Communications staff schedules the interview, please let them know immediately if you do not feel comfortable participating in it. You can reach them at 202-336-8228, or by e-mail at media@naswdc.org.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

If you receive the media call directly from the PR/ Communications staff at your organization or from NASW, you should always insist on having a few moments to gather your thoughts about the topic and check on statistics and stories that will illustrate your expertise.

If you receive a call from a media professional requesting your participation in an interview, they should have already vetted the reporter and media outlet. They should provide you with topical areas that will be covered or specific questions that will be asked. Many times these are not the only questions, but they will give you an opportunity to fully understand the interview topic.

If you receive the call directly from the media outlet, you should request topics that will be covered in the interview and/or questions that will be posed. Many times reporters are working on a deadline, but you should still have the opportunity to take a few minutes to gather your thoughts and supporting information.

Just as the journalist has come to the interview after preparation and research, you should be afforded that courtesy as well. They want you to be as prepared as possible for the interview.

Occasionally with radio and television interviews, there is an opportunity for a pre-interview. These interviews should not be taken lightly, as they allow you to practice some of your answers and identify areas where you might need more information. Usually the radio or television producer will phone you to discuss the interview and potential questions prior to the live or taped interview.

Off the record

Don't consider anything you say is "off the record" simply because you say it is. Say only what you want in print, and keep confidential information confidential!

While most journalists strive for accuracy in their reporting, it is possible to be misquoted. There are very rarely deliberate errors. **One important way to avoid being misquoted is to be concise in your responses to questions. The longer, more rambling you are in your response, the greater chance you will say something you didn't mean.** Your greatest concern should be that the meaning of what you said to the reporter is conveyed accurately, not so much the exact words you used. If the reporter completely missed the point, you should let the reporter know (in as helpful a manner as possible). In a case of serious misstating of your data or your views, you can certainly request a correction by way of letter or phone call to the editor.

HOW TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF

When talking with the representative, establish how you want to be identified. If you want to be identified as Dr. Smith, consistently refer to yourself as that. In most instances they will try to accommodate you. However, some publications (*Wall Street Journal*, for example) have their style rules and will not identify anyone with a PhD as "Dr." **NASW encourages you to ask the reporter to identify you as a professional social worker.**

THE PRINT INTERVIEW

Most print interviews will be conducted over the telephone or after a news conference, lecture, or presentation. It is typical to have one or maybe two conversations with a print journalist. Therefore, it is important to be very organized and confident about what you want to say and how you want to be quoted.

The journalist should identify himself or herself, and his or her affiliation, prior to any interview. If this is not done, you should ask before agreeing and proceeding with the interview.

Selecting your main points in advance and sticking to them is key to any successful interview. But the competent journalist, particularly the experienced health or social issues writer, also has an agenda to complete during your interview. Aggressively trying to steer the reporter away from his or her main line of questioning can dampen the overall outcome of your interview. **Whenever you can supply new facts, insightful information and a fresh perspective, you are in as much control of the interview as possible.**

It is always the best policy to simply say, "I don't know," when a question is out of the range of your expertise or knowledge base, and perhaps offer to find the answer and forward it to the reporter later.

Sometimes reporters may ask you to draw conclusions from research that is inconclusive or does not exist. It is important in this situation to explain the difference between preliminary research and "known" behavioral science; however, it is also important to remember that preliminary research is often more newsworthy than known science.

After the interview, you're rarely given the opportunity to read a story before it appears in print. Even more rare is the opportunity to edit any part of the story. Offering to read a story or to have portions or quotes read back to you to check for accuracy may be helpful, but the offer is seldom accepted unless a reporter is dealing with highly complex information. Demanding to read a story before it is published accomplishes little.

Take precautions

In lieu of "editing" power, there are precautions you can take. Before the interview, determine if there are any controversial or easily misinterpreted aspects of your work. Roughly frame your answers in these areas beforehand. During the interview, emphasize to the reporter how important such points are. Assert the fact that your information may be inaccurate if stated another way.

Keep a record

You should always keep a record listing the name of the journalist, his or her affiliation, the story idea, and a telephone number. After the interview, it is a good idea to ask the journalist if you can contact him or her with more information that you may think of later. Good journalists are interested in **all** the facts. However, don't follow up with a call unless your information is truly important.

For magazine or newspaper articles, you can request that copies be sent to you, but don't count on it. Make a note to buy the publication.

You can also contact NASW Communications to find copies of the story. Please have the date the story ran and the publication name for the staff to search.

THE RADIO INTERVIEW

Most large cities have a radio station with an all-news or all-talk format. These stations feature in-depth coverage of issues and present many interview opportunities. Other radio stations rely on “feeds” from network newscasts (like NBC, CBS, and ABC) and wire services.

Many news directors will accept interviews conducted by telephone, both live and taped. Many of the same rules from print interviews apply to a radio interview, particularly staying on message and answering with clear, concise responses.

THE TELEVISION INTERVIEW

A media representative will generally contact you to go over more details and/or to make travel arrangements. Often, they will conduct a pre-interview to confirm that you are the expert for whom they are looking. Many times to avoid travel expenses, the media outlet will either have a local affiliate come to your office to set up for the interview or they will ask you to come to a local network station to conduct the interview.

An interview cancellation is an occupational hazard. A late-breaking story or interview will replace a non-time sensitive interview every time. Don't take it personally, it happens often.

Live v. Taped

On-camera interviews can be some of the most nerve wracking moments. Keep in mind your main talking points and remember to look confident in your answer. If you have a taped interview, you will be able to answer a question and re-tape the answer if it did not come out the way you wanted it to. If you have a live interview, more off-camera preparation time will need to be taken so that you remember your points, but don't seem rehearsed.

Appearance

Wear conservative clothing and avoid large shiny jewelry. Stay away from checks, stripes, or other busy patterns that may take the attention away from you. Do not wear white clothing. Do not wear sunglasses or glasses that turn dark under lighting. If you don't normally wear make-up, don't start for this occasion. If you do wear make-up, don't over do it. Remember that you want to look as natural as possible. Applying powder to the forehead, cheeks, and chin will help you reduce the shiny spots on your skin that might result from the studio lighting.

The interview

It is important to arrive at the studio with sufficient time to acquaint yourself with your surroundings and review your talking points.

During the interview you will be most effective if you speak in short, succinct sentences, what are referred to as “sound bites” in the industry. An effective way of delivering your message is to

determine before the interview your overall message and the supporting points.

For instance, the subject of the interview might be, “How to prevent youth violence”:

Know your message—

Youth violence is preventable because it is a learned behavior.

Point 1:

It is important to recognize the early experiences that can lead to violence and confront them. For instance, exposure to violence in the media, effects of prejudice and hostility in the home or community, access to firearms.

Point 2:

Social workers are helping to develop school programs that reduce aggression and prevent violence.

Point 3:

Provide examples of successful programs that have been implemented in schools and communities around the country.

By keeping your statements short and to-the-point, you will effectively communicate your message.

Inject an appropriate level of emotion or passion into your voice to tell people you believe what you say. Use natural hand gestures and facial expressions to highlight your points. This applies to all interviews (even radio and print) because it shows enthusiasm, is reflected in your voice, and helps convince the audience and the interviewer.

For television, as in any conversation, maintain good eye contact with the interviewer; do not look directly into the camera or seek out the monitors. Your main focal point should be the person interviewing you.

CONTROLLING THE INTERVIEW

It is important that you control where the interview is headed. An effective way of doing this is by using a transition phrase such as:

- “That’s a good point, but what is really important is...”
- “I’d like to make this point before I continue...”
- “Let me give you the latest information on...that is really interesting.”

Using one of these phrases gives you an opportunity to direct the interview so that you can make one of your points.

Try not to interrupt the interviewer. However, if you are part of a discussion panel with other experts, each one will be competing for airtime. Do not wait until a question is directed to you before you respond. You were invited on the program because of your expertise, and you should participate and raise important points or clarify those made by another panelist, when appropriate.

Be assertive—most interview segments last no longer than a few minutes, so claim your airtime before the interview is over.

CORRECTING INACCURACIES

One common mistake made by television interviewees is allowing reporters' false or inaccurate statements to go unchallenged or uncorrected. If, in asking a question, a reporter creates a false premise, the interviewee should first correct the false premise, then answer or reframe the question.

Also, if a reporter cites information or statistics with which you are not familiar, do not assume that they are being reported accurately. Simply state that you are not familiar with the information being presented. If you have them on-hand, consider offering statistics with which you are familiar.

KNOW THE VALUE OF YOUR EXPERTISE

Remember, you are the expert who has been called to give information for a program. Your expertise and knowledge is what distinguishes you from other guests and the host of the program. The producer who calls you likely has limited knowledge about your field.

It is important, therefore, that you take control by shaping the interview in a professional, non-aggressive manner. Know your key points and say them consistently throughout the course of the interview. Do not wait to be asked the right questions, and do not expect the producer or the host to have the same amount of knowledge that you have about your field. You are the expert—the audience wants to hear your information.

More so than in interviews for publications, brevity and tightly constructed responses are critical during interviews for television shows, radio shows, and Web casts, which usually offer you less than 30 seconds to make your point. Preparation is the key to success.

WHAT TO DO AFTER A MEDIA INTERVIEW

Now that the interview is finished, you can breathe a sigh of relief...until the article or segment runs. Sometimes journalists are on deadline and the story will be running later that day or the next day. Other times, with more in-depth stories, you might have to wait days, weeks or months for a story to run. Here's a quick checklist for you after you've finished with a media interview:

- Make sure you know from the reporter when the story is expected to run. Follow up if it doesn't run at the expected time.
- Did you promise to provide subsequent materials or information to the reporter? Make sure to do that in a timely fashion.
- Ask the journalist if you can call him or her if something changes about this story or if you have other stories that you think might be of interest to him or her.
- Post a link to the story or segment on your Web site or send it to interested people so they know that you were positioned as an expert.

MEDIA TRAINING



Training and practice will give you a good foundation and help you improve your interviewing skills. Take advantage of any media training opportunities that come your way. In each workshop or lecture you attend, you will learn something new and helpful.

It is also important to watch the television programs and read the publications for which you would like to be interviewed. Familiarizing yourself with various formats will help you better understand the target audience, as well as the kinds of news and type of interviews in which a publication or television show is most often interested.

For more information about these tips, or if you have specific questions about a media opportunity, contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org or (202) 336-8228.



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