

Getting Ready for Media Advocacy or How to Get Your Ducks in a Row

There's an old saying: "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Good media advocacy is the right combination of preparation and opportunism in the *strategic* use of mass media to advance an initiative. Therefore, having the systems and planning in place before you begin is at least as important as the media work itself. This briefing paper outlines some minimum requirements for the prepared advocate.

How to Use This Briefing Paper

This is not a recipe or cookie cutter that will guarantee uniform results. It is, however a guide to shaping an effective media advocacy plan. Use the steps to develop strategies that fit your organization's unique resources, barriers and opportunities. Start with an assessment of where the group is and develop a plan with timelines to address any shortcomings. Most of all, take the time to discuss these issues throughout your organization to ensure that everyone is "on the same page."

Know your territory. Imagine driving cross country and having no idea what direction to go, what month it is or what the weather will be. Framing your issue without first monitoring media coverage of it is much the same thing. Good media advocacy requires some surveying of the terrain and a system for tracking coverage and media outlets.

- Keep an updated media list with names. You can start with the many published media lists available through bookstores or nonprofit associations. However, calls must be made to outlets that are important to your efforts to get the names of key contacts. Routine calls should be made to update lists as personnel moves frequently.

- Track coverage at least monthly. Clipping services (both electronic and paper) are useful for tracking newspaper coverage. Some electronic services will also track broadcast transcripts uploaded on databases or the world wide web. Many local papers, especially ethnic and other community presses, are not a part of these services. It makes sense to regularly monitor (i.e., read, watch, subscribe to) key outlets in your area.

- Monitor with a mission. Look for the issue's placement in papers or on broadcast news; who's quoted, how are they quoted and how much; whether the reporter had a grasp of the issue's complexity/importance; and the overall angle or frame of the story. If there are no stories on the issue, look for coverage on related issues. For example, if there are no recent stories on teen suicide, what kind of coverage are teens getting in general?

Define an issue. Media advocacy requires the identification of an issue and an initiative to address that issue. An issue is the overarching concern that drives your initiative. Whether it's a problem or vision statement, your issue defines the boundaries from which you shape your initiative. Issues should reflect the mission, core values and concerns of the organization or coalition -- and should incorporate an institutional angle.

Incorporating an institutional angle means identifying ways that institutional actors (government, corporations, etc.) have an impact on your issue, and developing strategies to make institutional change for the better. This is important as a key tenet of media advocacy is *advocacy for change* at the institutional level -- not marketing individual behavior change. Here are some examples:

Not So Good Issue Statement: Teen violence is a problem and we have to get teens to leave guns alone.

No institutional angle here; no opportunities to advocate for institutional change. In this construction of the issue, there's only room for education programs that seek to market new behaviors to youth. Of course, education programs are important, but they are not advocacy.

Good Issue Statement (Problem): Teen violence is a problem and we have to address where young people get their weapons.

Good Issue Statement (Vision): We can have a safe and healthy community for our young people if we expand opportunities for healthy, alternative activities.

From conditional use permits for gun sales to public funding for parks, these issues provide a wide range of opportunities for institutional change.

Know what you plan to do about it. Once an issue is defined, the group is ready to identify an action or initiative to address the issue. This is the most important step in preparing for media advocacy because it will define what you communicate about and to whom you'll be communicating. Identifying an initiative requires an honest assessment of the group's strengths and weaknesses, the political climate, and thorough research of the available options. An initiative:

is a clear, succinct description of the specific change or action the group is seeking;

has a clear target -- target in this case means an institutional actor that has the power to enact the change or action;

is doable, winnable and will address the issue at hand;

is of immediate concern to the group's allies and constituents and fits within their vision and values.

Some examples of initiatives using the teen violence prevention issue:

Have city/county government enact an ordinance prohibiting new gun outlets within its limits.

Get local sporting goods stores to agree to a “good neighbor policy” including discontinuing the sale of handguns; and no weapon sales of any kind to minors.

Have city /county government dedicate resources to improving and expanding youth recreational opportunities.

Know who you are talking to. Most media advocacy is focused on the initiative’s target because it is the target that has the power to enact the desired change. In some cases, groups use media advocacy to mobilize supporters as a preliminary step to targeting policymakers. It’s important to note that although media can support organizing goals, it can never be a substitute for organizing. That’s why most groups shape their media strategy to target policymakers.

Once the target is chosen, spend time researching how they get their information. Most elected officials and other gatekeepers read the editorial pages of local newspapers to gauge community concerns. Television news also helps set the public agenda and affects the “public conversation” on a particular issue. In any case, identifying the target will help shape a more effective and efficient strategy.

Know what you're saying. Now you are ready to take the final step in preparation: developing a message. A message is not a soundbite or a slogan (although it can help shape them). It is the overarching theme that neatly frames your initiative for your target audience. Messages should be relatively short, easy-to-understand, emotive and visual. The message should reflect the hard work and research that went into developing the initiative and should be supportive of the overall strategy.

It's best to test messages on friends and co-workers -- especially those who are not familiar with your issue. Colleagues working on similar issues are another good resource. Listen carefully to feedback: Did the message convey the importance of your issue? Did they "get" it? Keeping your target in mind, use the input to help shape and refine your message.

Now, you are ready to mount a media advocacy initiative. Good luck!