Communicating About
Violence as a Health Issue

Health Messaging and Guidance for Spokespeople

Messages on Violence as a Health Issue

Key message
• Violence is a health issue and we need to treat it like one.

Supporting messages
• Violence can be prevented.
• We are missing opportunities to prevent violence.
• Health approaches can save lives.
• We need to invest in health strategies proven to reduce all forms of violence.

Tips for Delivering Messages

Know Your Audience
As with every other type of communication, you must first identify your audience and target your message to that audience. To identify your audience, identify your goals as an organization and target those that matter to these goals. Here are some examples of goals and audiences:
• Goal - change community norms -- Audiences - community members, community stakeholders
• Goal - increase resources -- Audiences - local activists, local elected officials, philanthropy
• Goal - change the understanding -- Audiences - elected officials, thought leaders

Develop Your Key Message
Determine the single most important piece of information you want to convey. Test your message by sharing the message with a colleague, friend or family member. Thirty minutes later, ask them to repeat your message. If they can do it verbatim, you’ve probably got a strong message.

You Control the Message
When it’s time to deliver the message, remember, the media can only report what you provide; you are in the driver’s seat. You and the reporter each have a job to do – yours is to deliver the message.

The following communications guidance was adapted from materials developed by the US Department of Justice’s Office of Justice Programs’ Diagnostic Center
Ten Rules of Good Communication

I. Preparation
There is no such thing as over-preparation in good communication. Prepare all you can for a public event such as a speech, town hall meeting or interview. Review and re-review all printed, video, web and audio materials your organization has distributed on the topic being discussed.

II. Repetition
The average person must hear something seven times before he or she remembers it. Say your message once, then again, and again, and again – you get the picture.

III. Always tell the truth
Never lie. You do not have to tell everything you know but everything you tell MUST be the truth. Your most important commodity is credibility. If you are caught in a lie, you and your organization lose credibility and it is very difficult to get it back.

IV. Accept reality and take responsibility
If you or the organization made a mistake, own it. Admit it and explain it - do not make excuses. Explain what corrections have been made and how the mistake will be avoided in the future.

V. Respond quickly
The best message is meaningless if the article gets printed without it. Deadlines are real in the communication field, respect them.

VI. Know your audience
Determine the audience and tailor your communication to them.

VII. The result of the communication is the communicator’s responsibility
You are responsible for the message and information you are communicating.

VIII. A reporter is not your friend or your enemy
A reporter is a channel for you to communicate with a broad audience. Treat members of the media with respect and remember both of you are trying to do your job.

IX. Control what you can
Whenever possible, set the time, place and length of meetings, events and interviews.

X. Communication is a management function
An organization’s communication team should have a seat at the management table. Strategic communications must be reinforced from the top.
Pitching a Story to the Media

Just like in baseball, a media “pitch” can result in many different outcomes. You can strike out, hit a foul or hit a homerun. And just like in baseball, studying the strengths and style of the other team – in this case, the media outlet you are pitching – can improve your chances of being successful.

Pitching stories to the media takes skill. The more you practice and prepare your pitch to the media, the better you become at it and the greater the likelihood the media will run your story.

Here are 10 tips to improve your media pitching:

1. **Know the content you are pitching** – Be familiar enough with the information you are pitching to provide a full story to the reporter – What is the human interest aspect? How does your content relate to a larger market? How does your pitch relate to current events?

2. **Customize your pitch** – Familiarize yourself with the reporter and the media outlet(s) you’re pitching. Know their beats, what they do and do not cover and their preferred way to receive information. Be personal; use the reporter’s name in your pitch.

3. **Keep it simple and clever** – An email pitch should usually be one paragraph and absolutely no longer than two. A Twitter pitch is 140 characters or less. A phone pitch should be under 90 seconds. Imagine the headline and help them visualize it. Be creative with your word choice. Do not just cut and paste the press release.

4. **Clarify the hook** – Articulate why their readers need your story. Develop 3-4 different angles to your story. Make sure what you’re pitching is news for their readers and not just coverage for yourself or your organization.

5. **Link to visual media** - Use photos, video clips and sound bites to support your pitch – link, do not attach anything to your email (media spam filters often auto delete emails with attachments).

6. **Offer personalities** – Provide access to a dynamic individual who can put a face to your pitch and issue.

7. **Time your pitch** – Reporters are always working under a deadline; respect this and consider pitching early in the morning or after hours.

8. **Don’t harass** – One follow-up is okay, anything beyond that is annoying. Make your initial pitch so good that the reporter is compelled to follow up with you, not the other way around.

9. **Provide contact information** – Make your contact information and a web address easy to find in your pitch.

10. **Follow-up** – After your story runs, provide a follow-up note to thank the reporter, give input and build toward the next opportunity.

As with many aspects of business, good relationships can substantially improve your efforts. Reporters are more likely to use trusted sources for their stories; such relationships are critical for effective media pitching. Build rapport with a reporter by consistently providing substantive comments on a reporter’s current stories whether you agree with them or not. Doing so will allow the reporter to see you as a source for future content. Also, any face time you can get with a reporter – whether over a beverage or at an event – is extremely valuable. It is never too soon to start building relationships with members of the media.
Responding when the Media Contacts You

Talking to the media is always an opportunity to deliver the message. Regardless of how you connect with the media – whether you proactively contact them or they contact you – speaking to the media provides you an outlet to share the message and you should always have a message to share.

Never “No Comment”

You should always have something to say. Regardless of the circumstance, your organization has a mission, and that mission statement provides the basic message for any conversation with the media. Saying nothing, achieves nothing. If you're not sure what to say, consider saying, “I'm in the middle of something, is it okay if I call you back in 30 minutes?” and then prepare accordingly.

Stay on Message

A reporter can ask you anything he chooses, it is his job. You also have a job; stay on message. You are responsible for your answers. He can only report what you say. If needed, repeat it over and over and over again. Yes, there will be awkward pauses, silence and possible frustration (on both sides), especially if it is not a positive story. Do not succumb to social politeness of always answering a question when speaking with a reporter. Each of you has a job; stay focused on your job and deliver the message.

Bridging

Bridging is a valuable technique to keep an interview focused on the message. Bridging phrases improve the chances of the message being both heard and included in the reporter’s story. By redirecting a question through bridging, you remain in the driver’s seat. Here are some bridging examples:

- Let's look at that another way…
- The better question is…
- What's important to look at is….
- Here's what's really important…
- What this all boils down to is…

- Let me emphasize this again…
- The real issue here is…
- Let's look at the bigger picture…
- To the contrary…
- In fact, just the opposite is true…

Bridging does not come naturally and must be practiced to develop the skill. The more you practice, the more natural bridging becomes and the better able you will be to keep on message.

Ten Tips when Responding to the Media

1. Don’t panic.
2. Breathe.
3. Designate someone ahead of time to be the point person for any media calls.
4. Speak plainly.
5. Share your message.
7. When you don’t know an answer to a question you want to answer, be honest and follow-up.
8. Ask for the reporter’s deadline and ask when the story will run.
9. Share your message again.
10. Request the reporter’s contact information – there may be an opportunity to follow-up or proactively contact the reporter as more information is available on for a future story.