

Working with Local Media

Chapter 1

Understanding the Media

Getting Started

Knowing where to start is sometimes the most difficult part of any new activity. You can begin by understanding what news is and how it is made.

What is News?

‘Man bites dog’ is news. ‘Dog bites man’ is not. In searching for news stories, media professionals look for human or social interest. Information in the media is a means of improving community members’ knowledge and of raising public awareness and interest. An informed public will be more cooperative in looking for solutions as well as in taking action.

How is news reported?

News is the end chain of decision-making by media professionals. Your information goes to various workers and can be substantially altered at each stage. At most media outlets each worker has a specific job to do. Reporters, editors and producers generally decide what events become stories. Editors and producers then decide what stories make it to the news. Reporters research and write news stories and submit them to their editors or producers. The newspaper editors or radio producers and their staff rewrite, copy, shorten it and give it a new emphasis.

It is also important to have an individual who will act as the ‘Media Contact Person’. This person should be well informed on the event/campaign, as well as knowing the background of the public health issue. In the best-case scenario, this person speaks Cree. If not, arrangements for having a Cree translator/interpreter should be made.

Knowing the audience

Your ability to present your information so that it is of interest to the media will largely determine your success in getting balanced coverage of your stories. Before approaching the media, consider who the audience is for each media contact and tailor your approach so that your information is of interest to as many of their listeners or readers as possible.

This will get your media contacts interested and will increase your chances of getting coverage.

Knowing what approach to use

Always be positive in your approach. Acknowledge public health issues in the community/region, but emphasize the action being taken to address them. Stress the good work of community members and the positive aspects of the Public Health Department. Give options and alternatives and highlight encouraging changes.

Altering your approach to catch the interest of different audiences is important. For example, if the audience for your radio show is both youth and parents, link the information to both audiences. Emphasize that public health is an issue that affects everybody and that both the youth and their parents are involved in public health. Stress the cooperation between parents and youth and encourage everyone to participate.

Making contact

Here are different ways to contact the media: visit local media outlets (local radio); set up a brief meeting with reporters; send a letter introducing yourself as a person who can supply current, accurate information on public health issues. If your time is limited, contact only the key media people in your area.

When making this initial contact, discuss:

- Your role in Public Health. Be specific but brief.
- Your background. Talk about your current projects. Stress the services that you can provide.
- Who your contacts should be for news releases and public service announcements.
- Current public issues pertaining to your file.

Other issues and tips

Timing

Timing is extremely important with media professionals. Your reputation with the media will largely be determined by your timeliness.

Special opportunities

Some special events, such as LAGA (Local Area General Assemblies), offer good opportunities to work closely with the media.

News calendar

Certain events each year, such as public health-themed months (eg. Diabetes Month), involve working with the media. Noting these events on a calendar will make it easier to schedule your time and resources around specific projects with the media.

Chapter Two

Working to publicize and inform

There are various formats to use when communicating your message to the media. The most common of these are discussed here. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. In any local setting it is appropriate to ask your media contacts what they would advise.

News releases

The news release is commonly and effectively used to inform the media about activities and events. Local and regional radio, as well as regional print media (the Nation) are always looking for good community news stories and tend to pay close attention to news releases.

Before writing a news release ask yourself, “If I was not involved in public health, would this information interest me?” If the answer is “yes”, write a news release.

To compose a news release put essential facts in the first paragraph (who, what, when, where, why and how). Then give background information in descending order of importance.

Start your release with an interesting sentence. Keep the paragraphs short. The news release should be between 200 and 300 words. Use several good quotes by an appropriate spokesperson. Write short, accurate and descriptive releases. Remember, you are a person writing to other people. Write in a friendly, conversational tone. Readers will be more accepting of your ideas if your writing shows respect and warmth for other people.

News releases must be distributed effectively to be more useful. Email them so they arrive well before deadlines. Copies of news releases should also be published on the Cree Public Health website (<http://creepublichealth.org>)

Follow up with a telephone call to ensure the release was received and to give more detail. During this conversation, discuss the public health issue and what your project/program is doing for it.

Technical tips for writing news releases

1. Use letterhead and include your name, address and telephone number.
2. Below the letterhead, on the right side, or at the bottom of the page, put the names and telephone numbers of two people who can be reached during the day to answer questions about the event.
3. In the upper left corner, type "Release Date" and add the date when you want the information released (usually "immediately")
4. Start the text one-third down the page. Use margins to make 65 character lines. Double space. Do not hyphenate words.
5. On the line immediately below the last typed line of the text, centre and type "-30" to indicate the end of the release.
6. Proofread for accuracy of facts. Ensure all dates, times and places are correct and that names are spelled correctly.

Public Service Announcements

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are advertising pieces, for not-for-profit organizations and civic programs. Regional and local radio stations provide public service air-time. The Nation also has a section to announce upcoming events, in their classified section.

Many PSAs are simply read on air by announcers; others are produced with music and sound effects. The Public Health Department prefers to produce our own PSAs, in order to ensure correct translation of specialized terms into Cree. PSAs come in varying lengths: 15-, 30-, and 60-second spots are the most common.

Technical tips for PSAs

1. Rough estimates of English word counts for PSAs are:
 - a. 15-second: 32 words
 - b. 30-second: 65 words
 - c. 60-second: 125 words.
 - d. Note that Cree words are generally longer than English words; with this in mind, plan to have longer PSAs.
2. Use the first sentence to gain interest. Remember that on the radio you are appealing to the ear more than you are in the print media.
3. Use statistics and figures sparingly. Appeal to the heart, not the mind.
4. Use the present tense as much as possible.
5. Use conversational language and short sentences. Avoid tongue-twisting phrases. Read the copy out loud to judge its simplicity, flow and clarity.
6. Once the copy has been written, it may have to be rewritten by the Cree voice talent who will be carrying out sight-translation into Cree.

Media Kits

A media kit is a set of materials related to a major event or campaign. It is distributed in a package to local and regional media. Media kits commonly include: a press release about the event; a fact sheet summarizing relevant statistics and research; a current list of experts who can be contacted for comment; letters of endorsement from government officials or community leaders; details of related local events; concise, relevant background information; and pictures, buttons, pens or stickers.

Why use Media Kits?

Media Kits have three main functions:

- To make it easy for journalists to cover your event/campaign. By providing them with background information, useful facts and details you save them valuable time and effort.
- To increase media interest in your event thereby increasing the likelihood of media coverage. This, in turn, will lead to increased public interest.
- To educate media personnel about public health issues and the work being done locally and regionally.

Distributing Media Kits

Media kits should be sent to interested media outlets one or two weeks before the campaign starts. Make a schedule of deadlines for less regular publications or programs and time the delivery of kits so that you get coverage around the time of the event/campaign. A personal visit will also give you the opportunity to discuss the issues with your media colleagues. You may also distribute the kit to members of community organizations who may be interested.

Interviews

Interviews are a common way of gathering and giving news to an audience. Some interviews are done live on radio. Others are taped and a small segment is used. Some are done face-to-face but often interviews are done over the phone. Regardless of the particular approach used, the following will help you prepare:

Before the interview:

- Be familiar with the background of the Public Health Department and of your project
- When the reporter contacts you, you may want to ask:
 - Will the interview be live or recorded?
 - Who is the interviewer?
 - In what language will the interview take place?
 - In what kind of program or story will the interview be used?
 - When will the interview be printed or aired?
 - Who else is being interviewed?
 - What is the general line of question going to be?
- Think ahead, anticipate what questions will be asked and prepare yourself. Know your interviewer's style.
- Choose three main points to make during the interview. Select the most effective examples, facts and arguments for making them.
- Assume that you will be asked the question you least like to answer and decide how to answer it.

Tips for being interviewed

1. Stay calm – relax. This is a valuable opportunity to get your message across.
2. Keep answers simple and straightforward. Try to answer each question in 20 to 30 seconds.
3. Make sure that your answers reinforce your key points.
4. Use simple language. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
5. Be helpful, friendly and natural.
6. Never guess. Say, “I don’t know.”
7. Correct misinformation quickly and precisely.
8. Make your points clearly.
9. Be assertive but not too aggressive. Avoid weak and vague phrases such as “I suppose.”
10. Be positive in your language and manner.