

## Strategic media relations

For the media advocate, changing public perceptions and old ways of thinking and reacting is critical. Once a community determines its policy goals, advocates become charged with determining how the media can advance those goals. When conducting media campaigns and working with the media, advocates stay focused on shifting responsibility for the debate from individuals to collective decisions of policies and norms.

Effective media relations begin with taking advantage of every opportunity to relay your message. Start by regularly monitoring local media newspapers, radio and TV (both broadcast and cable) to capture how each outlet is reporting underage drinking stories. Keep a log of individual reporters with names, stories and tone of reporting. If you can, clip all newsprint stories relating, not just to underage drinking, but also to its root causes. When appropriate, respond to a reporter's story or a clip with praise or a critique. Your goal is to create awareness of your project.

## Show your professionalism

**Treat reporters with respect.** Learn their deadlines as well as their assigned beats. Reporters are always racing the clock, so acknowledge their time by being concise and courteous. In general, mail or fax press releases to arrive three to five days before an event so that assignment editors have time to prepare for your story. When phoning in a story, give at least one day's lead time.

**Be prepared and credible.** When possible, have your background material close at hand. Be prepared to respond to requests for additional information. As much as possible, make sure you or another coalition colleague answer questions; don't make a habit of referring a reporter to another news source. You may never see the reporter again.

**Be polite.** Never burn any bridges! If a reporter seems uninterested, accept it and seek out another reporter. Consider asking the reporter if anyone else might be interested in the story.

## Making your story newsworthy

In general, there are three ways to frame your story. *The first method frames it for access to the media and allows you to set a reporter's agenda.* The story is shaped to gain the attention of journalists and access to the media. This step is often called "baiting the hook" or utilizing the "peg."

### Types of hooks or pegs:

- **Anniversary** Can the story be associated with a local, national or historical event?
- **Breakthrough** What is new or different about the story?
- **Celebrity** Is there a celebrity already involved with or willing to lend his or her name to the story?
- **Controversy** Are there adversaries or other tensions embedded in the story?
- **Injustice** Are there basic inequalities or unfair circumstances?
- **Irony** What is ironic, unusual or inconsistent about the story?
- **Local interest** Why is the story important or meaningful?
- **Milestone** Is the story an important historical achievement?
- **Personal angle** Who is the face on the story? Who has the authentic voice on the issue?
- **Seasonal** Can the story be attached to a holiday or seasonal event?

*The second framing method is to frame for content and is also known as shaping the debate.* The story should be told the way you want it told emphasizing root causes and conditions. See your issue in a larger context and follow these points:

- Translate the individual problem to a social issue
- Shift primary responsibility away from blaming the individual to looking at a systems perspective
- Present a solution, one that fits with your overall policy goals
- Make a practical or policy appeal
- Develop story elements by creating compelling pictures and images. Identify authentic voices and symbols
- Tailor the story to the audience know who will be seeing or hearing the story and appeal to them

The third framing method is known as advancing the policy and involves understanding how you will further awareness of your cause beyond the current event. Know this before you ever contact the media! Follow these steps:

- Monitor the media Know and understand the outlets and gatekeepers that you're trying to influence.
- Work on media inputs these are the vehicles to gain access to the media: news events, news advisories, news releases, letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, public service announcements (psa's), paid advertising and spokesperson interviews
- Work on community inputs media advocacy workshops, spokesperson trainings, youth news-making workshops, "meet the journalist" workshops, rapid response capabilities

## How to determine newsworthiness

A quick way to determine the newsworthiness of your story is the following checklist. *If your story is timely and you answer "yes" to at least two other criteria, then your story will probably be considered by the media.*

- Is the story timely? Is the material current, especially the data?
- Is it distinct, unusual, unexpected? Is the issue or some aspect of it new to the public?
- Does it pick up on a trend or other breaking news?
- Is it essential? Does it convey something people want or need to know?
- Will it affect many people in the community? Does it hit close to home? Localizing a national story by adding local statistics, spokespersons and experts significantly increases a story's chances of being picked up.
- Is the information useful?
- Does the story have emotional appeal? A human interest element?

*Know how to pitch your story by phone.* Before you call, write down a few key points to want to remember to say. Keep your points concise and practice reading them aloud in a natural voice. When you call a reporter or editor, state clearly who you are and why you're calling. Try to keep your message to 15-20 seconds. As you think about your pitch,

it might be helpful to think of it as you would a headline. Ask the reporter if it is a convenient time to talk. Remember to respect deadlines. If the reporter seems rushed, make one quick point and hang up. If the time is not convenient, ask when you can call back.

*Pitching a story by letter to a reporter gives you room to expand your story idea.* A good pitch letter will serve as a reference document; if it doesn't generate a story today, it may tomorrow. In general, follow these guidelines:

- Target pitch letters and news releases to one journalist at one media outlet.
- Be timely by playing off recent events.
- Be concise. A good pitch letter should be no more than one type-written page; less is okay.
- "Sell" the story. If pitching to television, remember to sell visual images.
- Skip flowery text or self-congratulatory language.
- Organize the pitch like a news story make every sentence count.
- Offer the names of interview subjects (with their permission, of course) who would lend credibility to the story
- Conclude with your intent to follow up as well as your name and phone number.
- Follow up!
- Use your organization's letterhead and hand address the envelope.

*Once reporters learn you are a resource for their stories, they'll begin to call you.* Following are some general guidelines in responding to their requests:

- Ask questions of the reporter. You are under no obligation to respond immediately to their request. Ask the reporter for a time when you can call back and what the deadline is. Then determine if you're the best person to field the call; if not, brief your contact person and have him or her return the call.
- Make a note of the reporter's name, media affiliation, phone number and deadline. If you are unfamiliar with the media outlet, research it before returning the call. The call may have come from the "opposition."
- Make sure your facts are in order before you return the call.
- Always call back and respect their deadline. Reporters will remember if you don't!

When you're asked to conduct an interview, there are several tips to remember:

- Don't forget those three or four main points and deliver them as naturally as possible.
- Avoid jargon or technical data.
- When asked to be a guest on a radio or television talk show, find out as much as possible beforehand about the show's format, the other guests, the moderator, whether there will be phone calls, etc.
- Be prepared. Try to anticipate questions and practice answering them. While practicing, get feedback.
- Keep control of the interview. If you have points to make, don't wait for the right questions to be asked.
- Try to be as specific as possible.
- Always tell the truth. If you don't know an answer, don't try to make one up or fake your way out of it.

## Media kits

Organizations that work with the media should have a standard media kit, also known as a press kit, prepared that can be customized for each new story. If customized printed folders are not available, use computer-generated labels to identify your organization on the kit's cover.

Effective media kits house unduplicated information, arranged in order of importance to the recipient. Your most recent news release should be on top when the folder is opened. Other components can include:

- Table of contents
- Pitch letter
- Media advisory
- News release
- Fact sheet or backgrounder on the issue, as well as on your organization
- Additional information such as:
  - Printed brochure
  - Reprints of speeches or articles by organization leaders
  - Biographies of key persons
  - Press clippings from previous coverage of the organization
  - Annual report
  - Calendar of events
  - Photo(s) with identifying captions

- Business card or label with contact information for your organization's principal media contact

## News release

A good news release will provide the basis for a story or an interview. It should tell your story in a matter of seconds, beginning with the most important fact first. Following are criteria for an effective news release along with a sample release:

1. Does it grab the reader's attention from the start?
2. Does the headline inform the reader? Does it pre-sell the story?
3. Does the lead paragraph single out at least two of the five "W's" (who, what, where, when, why) that explain why the story is important?
4. Does the second paragraph address all the other "W's"?
5. Have you put the most important information up front?
6. Is the text concise, readable and easily understood?
7. Does the closing paragraph succinctly restate the purpose of your group, the study or Campaign?
8. Is the information accurate? Have you double-checked facts and figures? Are attributions and sources complete? Are names, titles, etc., spelled correctly?
9. Does the release avoid jargon and spell out acronyms in the first mention?
10. Are quotations used properly to express opinion, subjective ideas and explain actions, not merely to puff up the story?
11. Is there a pertinent Web site or other reference information?

*For news release sample see Appendix A, page VI-5*

## News advisory

A news, or media advisory, is a condensed version of the news release. A media advisory may catch a busy editor's attention when a longer news release may not. If your story provides photo opportunities, be sure to list them.

*For a news advisory sample see Appendix B, page VI-6*

## Op - ed

The term “op-ed” is short for a newspaper’s opinion editorial and often expresses a strong position about a subject that has already been reported on or one that the writer would like to see reported. Like any other news component, the op-ed is backed by researched facts and figures. The written piece should be kept between 500 and 800 words and should be localized with information that is designed to provoke discussion. Selection of the author for the op-ed is critical; the more prominent the signer, the more likely the op-ed will be printed. Call the newspaper 3-10 days after sending your op-ed to ask if it is being considered for publication. An op-ed can be mailed, faxed or e-mailed. Check the newspaper’s guidelines for suggested submission methods.

*For an op-ed sample see Appendix C, page VI-7*

## Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor of local newspapers provide an excellent way for your organization to state its opinion about an issue or to correct facts in an inaccurate account of an issue. Sometimes these letters are used to praise or criticize a recently-published article. Other times, a letter is useful in expressing the connection with a fact in an article and your organization. As with the op-ed and news release, localize your letter with local names or personalities as well as local statistics to make your point. Keep your letter brief less than 250 words is a

good rule of thumb. Like the other building blocks, follow up. Don’t be discouraged if your letter is not printed. Newspapers are inundated with letters every day. Keep submitting by making your letters crisp, concise and timely.

*For an letter to the editor sample see Appendix D, page VI-8*

## Calendar items

Newspapers, television and radio stations as well as public access cable television stations often list or mention special events and meetings within the community. When your meeting or event is open to the public, send the editor a one-line description of the program along with information about time, date and place. Mention cost is there is any and if the event or meeting as a featured speaker. Don’t forget to include a contact name. Call the media outlets first to inquire about calendar deadlines and preferred method of submission.

## MSTEP Guide

Confused? Don’t be. MSTEP is an acronym that stands for Message Statement Telling Essential Point. In working with the media, it’s a good idea to have one message that stands out above the rest. It’s your overriding communication objective when talking about your group’s mission. The MSTEP Guide asks you to answer five questions designed to help you narrow your message into a concise talking point.

*For a Message Statement Telling Essential Point form see Appendix E, VI-9*

# SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

November 14, 2002

For more information, contact:

Beth Wilson, 816-000-0000

MYAA LAUNCHES *12mirrors21* AT PRESS CONFERENCE HOSTED BY  
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP OF THE OZARKS

**(Springfield, MO)** Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance (MYAA) will officially unveil its new statewide underage drinking public awareness campaign, *12mirrors21*, next week during a press conference designed to build on Community Partnership of the Ozarks' successes in reducing underage drinking in Greene County.

Speakers for the press conference set for 10 a.m., Wednesday, November 20 at the Springfield Chamber of Commerce, 202 S. John Q. Hammons will include Darrell Moore, Greene County prosecuting attorney; Melissa Haddow, executive director Community Partnership of the Ozarks, and Leonard Lamkin, deputy director of the Reducing Underage Drinking Through Coalitions project for the American Medical Association.

*12mirrors21* emphasizes that while children often mimic the actions of adults, drinking alcohol is a behavior reserved for adults, even though recent statistics report that roughly 1/3 of Missouri's children have had their first drinks of alcohol beyond a few sips at age 12.

"Many of today's children look more grown-up than they are, thanks to clothes, makeup and behaviors," says Sherry Neal-Horsey, MYAA project director. "The reality is they are still children with 12-, 13-, and 14-year-old developing brains and central nervous systems. Any amount of ingested alcohol can damage their developmental process. This is a critical message for parents and caregivers to understand."

Springfield through Community Partnership of the Ozarks is the official launch site for the *12mirrors21* campaign, slated for full statewide release in the first quarter of 2003.

Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance is a collaboration of the American Medical Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to reduce underage drinking. This initiative is comprised of 10 statewide coalitions, plus Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

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# SAMPLE NEWS ADVISORY

## URGENT NEWS ADVISORY

February 27, 2001

For more information, contact

Beth Wilson, 816-000-0000

### ALCOHOL-FREE YOUTH SERVE BREAKFAST, IDEAS TO LEGISLATORS

- WHO:** Youth leaders representing Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance, a coalition to reduce underage drinking
- WHAT:** Catered breakfast for legislators hosted by alcohol-free Missouri teens
- WHERE:** Missouri State Capitol, Hearing Rooms 2A and 2B
- WHEN:** 7:30-9 a.m., February 28, 2001
- WHY:** "Last September at the *100 Youth/100 Days Statewide Youth Summit* in Kansas City, young people told us, 'as young concerned citizens, our role is to seek information about issues which confront our society; to share our knowledge and ideas with others, especially those in government; to make an educated vote at 18 and beyond, and to encourage others to be active citizens,'" says Sherry Neal-Horsey, MYAA project director.

"These youth are committed to drug- and alcohol-free lifestyles," Neal-Horsey continues. "They believe legislators have the power to support them through legislation that continually denies youth access to alcohol. These young people have tremendous ideas about addressing underage drinking in Missouri. "Our job as adults is to listen and respond appropriately."

Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance is a collaboration of the American Medical Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to reduce underage drinking. This initiative is comprised of 10 statewide coalitions, plus Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

## SAMPLE OP-ED

There's trouble brewing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it can be named underage drinking.

Two independent studies recently drew these conclusions:

- Children who begin alcohol consumption in elementary school are four times more likely to continue drinking in middle school
- 57 percent of teens surveyed believe that “popular” kids drink alcohol

The two studies portray a disturbing distinction between underage drinking among young people of previous generations and what we see today. Twenty-first century underage drinking is the perceived road to popularity, begins in elementary school and continues progressively into middle school and beyond.

In the first study, Dr. Nance Wilson of the University of California-Berkley interviewed more than 300 children in elementary school and again as they entered middle school. Her results indicate that we are not seeing “passing experimentation” at earlier ages, but alcohol initiation and continuing alcohol consumption by children.

The second study shows how ingrained drinking has become among children 57 percent of the 14-22 year olds surveyed by Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center believed “popular peers” drink alcohol. Surprisingly, these same young people recognized the health risks of alcohol use.

This isn't a pretty picture of childhood in America.

Today's child lives in a world soaked in billions of dollars of alcohol advertising each year. He or she has easy access at the local grocery store to cheap, sweet fruit-flavored alcoholic beverages and watches cool, hip people on television in the latest beer ads. Today's child can download video games from beer web sites and screen savers featuring their “favorite” brands of beer.

Underage drinking is not a result of bad parenting; it is an environmental threat that should concern all parents, just as they are concerned about their kids' exposure to dirty air and water.

Parents do have power to fight underage drinking. They can express concern about communities saturated with alcohol advertising and sponsorships that teach children the false notion that everyone drinks equally. Parents can make it clear to community and school leaders that they will not provide alcohol to minors or tolerate those who do. Concerned adults can ask community leaders to rethink the appropriateness of alcohol sponsorships for family events and take steps to separate alcoholic beverage service from family and youth events. Parents have the ability to clean up the community alcohol environment.

One aspect of childhood hasn't changed. Children still have developing minds and growing bodies. Alcohol consumption in late childhood and early adolescence may cause brain damage or even death from alcohol poisoning. The Centers for Disease Control released a survey in 2000 showing 20 percent of ninth graders reporting binge drinking in the past month. Children are also much more vulnerable to addiction than adults. A child can become alcohol dependent in as little as six months, less than a school year.

It is time for members of every Missouri community to thoroughly examine its own alcohol environment and make the changes that will reduce childhood drinking. Just as a community can unintentionally allow underage drinking, a community can focus attention on eliminating the factors that permit or encourage underage alcohol use.

Thank you,

Chris Davis  
 Chairperson  
 Missouri's Youth/Adult Alliance,  
 A Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking  
 Jefferson City

# SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

Congratulations and thanks to the Missouri Division of Liquor Control, the Greene County Sheriff's Department, the police departments in Springfield, Willard and Republic, to Community Partnership of the Ozarks and to Greene County Prosecutor Darrell Moore for all your hard work, education and enforcement efforts to reduce underage drinking in Greene County.

Last week's press conference demonstrating the amount of alcohol confiscated from minors in a three-month period (50 kegs and between 1,500 and 2,000 alcohol containers) was staggering. However, we are proving by the strength of our numbers the committed professionals and community volunteers that we can affect changes. We can reduce alcohol use by children and youth.

Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance, a statewide coalition to reduce underage drinking, which counts among its members several of the entities involved in last week's news event, applauds your ongoing efforts to turn the tide against the rising epidemic of underage drinking.

Sincerely,

Sherry Neal-Horsey  
Project Director  
Missouri's Youth/ Adult Alliance,  
A Coalition to Reduce Underage Drinking

## **MSTEP Guide** **(Message statement telling essential point)**

Name your passion about the story you want told.

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Identify the “who, what, where, when, how and why” of your story.

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Of these elements, determine which is the most dominant and why.

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Who is your primary audience? Secondary? Why is your story important to these groups?

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Write one or two concise sentences that combines your passion with the most dominant element. (This is your Message Statement Telling Essential Point or MSTEP).

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