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Training Your Spokespeople

Identifying a Spokesperson

For many of the materials and activities mentioned throughout this toolkit, you will need to identify a speaker or spokesperson who will serve as the “voice” to carry the messages. This can be a health officer, a subject matter expert, or a public information officer. A spokesperson should have a healthy balance of technical expertise and an engaging personality. Not only should he or she be an expert on the topic but your spokesperson should be engaging, upbeat, and easy to speak with.

Preparing a Spokesperson

Regardless of who serves as your media spokesperson, he or she should be prepared. Prior to an interview or press event, prepare your spokesperson by practicing questions and answers, reviewing key messages, and giving him or her background information on the journalists conducting the interview. You can also create a list of potential questions that you expect to be asked with sample responses. For example, a common question may include debunking common “myths” about influenza and the flu vaccine (e.g., the vaccine can give you the flu; you can only catch the flu in cold weather region; you must get a flu vaccine before November for it to be effective,; flu is only a danger for older people and small children).

The following tips might help provide guidance to your spokesperson:

- Speak in layman’s terms and avoid jargon so that all audiences can understand.
- Be courteous and patient when answering (or re-answering) questions.
- Never be too casual in your conversation. There is no such thing as “off the record.”
- Discuss what you know, not what you think.
- If you tell a reporter you’ll get back to him or her with information, remember to do so, and provide it as soon as possible.
- Do not express personal opinions.
- Do say if you are confused by a question. If you say something that is wrong, or misstate a fact, just admit your error and make sure the correct information is conveyed in the end.

Staying “On Message”

Once goals and messages have been established, the challenge becomes one of delivery and ensuring that messages are heard and goals are met. Take every opportunity in an interview to reiterate your key messages. Another way to stay on message is to exercise some control over the conversation you are having, be it during an interview, press conference, or when taking questions from an audience. Do not allow the conversation to go down paths that are not pertinent to your goals or message—no matter how persistent the questioner might be in pursuing a line of inquiry. For example, if you are trying to promote a vaccination clinic at the local hospital, do not allow yourself to get bogged down by questions related to other issues that might be in the news that day, or on speculation about pandemic influenza.

For more guidance on preparing your spokespeople, see Appendix G for tips on writing speeches and presentations, and Appendix H for tips on public speaking.