

MEDIA RELATIONS 101



What Is Media Relations?

Media relations is the process of working with the **news media** to inform the public of an organization’s mission, policies, and practices in a positive, consistent, and credible manner. Essentially, it means having a relationship with reporters and journalists to facilitate sharing your story. The goal of media relations is to garner earned media opportunities—positive news media mentions that aren’t paid for but are earned from the relationships you have built with reporters and journalists.

Types of Media Outlets

There are different types of media outlets, including:

- **Print media:** Magazines and newspapers
- **Broadcast media:** TV, radio, and podcasts
- **Online media:** Digital native news publishers (e.g., Axios, HuffPost), “legacy” news websites (e.g., *The New York Times*, Fox News), and blogging platforms (e.g., YouTube, Medium)
- **Trade media:** Print, broadcast, and online media covering topics relevant only to those working in a particular industry

ENGAGING THE MEDIA PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES TO:

- **Advance the public’s understanding of actions and initiatives**
- **Increase awareness of a health practice, health campaign, or public figure**
- **Encourage tracking/coverage of future actions and initiatives**
- **Demonstrate expertise in a trending or timely health topic**

Types of News

There are different types of news stories, including “hard or spot news” and “soft news.” Hard or spot news generally refers to up-to-the-minute news and events that are reported immediately, whereas soft news refers to background information or human-interest stories.

- **Media relations for hard news stories** would include positioning your agency’s subject matter expert to explain a health statistic on-air during a morning news show or as the go-to health expert for a journalist to quote in an online news article that publishes that day but goes to print for daily circulation within 24 hours.
- **Media relations for soft news** would include taking the time to develop fun or engaging ways to share your agency’s key messages with news media; for example, telling a success story that has an unexpected or local community angle.

The sweet spot is when you’ve developed human-interest angles to complement your key messages, and your agency spokespersons are ready to share facts and statistics that hard news stories require. These—combined with personal stories—create compelling news that people in a community can relate to, empathize with, and sometimes even feel compelled to act on.

Local v. National Media Outlets

For each type of media, there are local and national media outlets. The guidance included in this job aid primarily focuses on local outlets. However, many local media outlets are part of a larger media corporation, which means that a local story might get picked up by the parent company and broadcast at a national level. For example, a story in the *El Paso Times*, a Texas newspaper, could get featured on the Yahoo! home page, which will boost the original article’s reach on a national level.

Trade Media Placement Example

Healio: CDC gives \$279M toward reducing drug overdoses in US (9/1/23)



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced the awarding of new Overdose Data to Action (OD2A) funding for 49 States, the District of Columbia, and 40 local health departments to help stop overdoses within their communities in a **press release** distributed to their media contacts on August 31, 2023. Healio picked up the news release and published the story on September 1, 2023.

Healio is a multi-channel news outlet and information platform providing healthcare specialists with tailored news, information, and education that supports their daily practice of medicine.

Why Should You Work With the Media?

The media can help highlight your work and amplify your key messages to a large audience. However, for media outreach to work, three things are important:

1. **Ensure a meaningful message is delivered clearly and effectively.** Clearly explain your key messages to reporters. Repetition and simplicity are key. Think about the calls to action for your health campaign or agency mission, and strategically craft messages to focus on delivering the top-line messages for your pitch. The details can be sourced in your links to the campaign website or in the reporter’s subsequent follow up.
2. **Prioritize working with reporters who reach your intended audience.** Ensure that you are working with reporters who have a relationship with your intended audience(s). For example, if you are trying to reach health practitioners, then *Medscape* may be a better outlet to engage than *USA Today*. *Medscape* is a niche health news outlet that focuses on providing medical information and news stories to health practitioners, whereas *USA Today* delivers a wide range of news stories for a general audience. Although health practitioners may include *USA Today* in their media consumption habits, their viewership within a larger audience is harder to track. To reach a larger portion of your intended audience, focus on outlets that you can be sure will reach them. Do your homework on which outlets—and reporters—cover certain topics and who makes up their readership. Spending time focusing on this background information will pay off in the end.
3. **Build a relationship with reporters over time.** How do you build a relationship with reporters past the initial outreach? Research their preferences for news stories. Does the reporter prefer long-term feature stories or breaking news? What topics has the reporter covered recently? What interests them? Invite a local reporter to coffee, email them a note about an interesting fact you learned from their news coverage, and read past headlines they wrote to demonstrate that you respect their journalistic work. As you build relationships over time, reporters will contact you when they’re looking for a new story or will respond more favorably to your outreach.

What Makes Something Newsworthy?

Your story can be newsworthy or have a news hook (i.e., an angle that hooks the interest of the audience you're trying to reach) if it is:

- **Timely**—new information or data available or something happening soon or at a specific time; when possible, give reporters as much advance notice as you can
- **Impactful**—something that will have a big or direct effect on the community
- **Prominent**—something that involves prominent members or organizations in the community, like a mayor, local representative, or business with significant economic impact to the community

Or if it:

- **Has proximity**—something that is taking place nearby and will affect people at the local level
- **Has magnitude**—something that will affect many people, such as a new CDC action on overdose prevention
- **Highlights conflict**—an issue that poses a problem to the community
- **Highlights an oddity**—something unique or unexpected
- **Demonstrates human interest**—something that tells a compelling story or something/someone to which many people can relate and empathize

Lived Experience Storytelling

Human interest stories are designed to engage readers' or viewers' attention and sympathy by enabling them to identify with people, problems, and situations. Offering reporters lived experience stories—those in which a person shares firsthand accounts of their experience and the unique perspective it grants them—can be a great way to get a reporter to write a human interest story on the topic you're trying to highlight. Because firsthand accounts are so personal and relatable, they have the power to uniquely transform the sterile communication of facts and figures into stories that bring those facts and figures to life.

In your work, you will come across patients, practitioners, and even government leaders, either in person or on your social media channels, who have a story of lived experience. These people may be willing to share their story with you to include a quote in your press release or to highlight as an interview subject for reporters. It's as important to build relationships with these individuals as it is with reporters because you can call on them when the next pitch needs to be made.

If you're struggling with prescription opioids, there is hope. Recovery is possible.



American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are heavily affected by the opioid overdose epidemic. Stories of Alaska Natives, bring to light how their cultures helped with their recovery.

Sharing lived experience stories of people in your community is one of the best strategies you can use to garner interest and media coverage.

Below is a collection of firsthand stories of prescription opioid addiction, told by real people, that CDC compiled for their **Rx Awareness campaign**. This is a great example of taking the time to find individuals who are willing to share their experience both in print and on camera.

How to Write a Pitch Email

Pitching is the most common way of alerting the media that you have a potential story to share with the public. What does it mean “to pitch”? It is an attempt to persuade or present an idea for consideration. For media relations in particular, it’s the attempt to promote campaign messages to reporters in a newsworthy way that garners placement.

Current media consumption patterns have changed traditional newsrooms. Social media and streaming entertainment options, combined with a **declining trust** in traditional news media, has led to a decrease in traditional news media consumption. Traditional newsrooms have historically relied on ad dollars and subscriptions and, with those dwindling, have had to lay off a number of staff in recent years. That’s why there are fewer beat reporters now than ever, and remaining newsroom staff have higher workloads. With these changes, pitching compelling news stories is essential to cutting through the noise and getting coverage of your topics.

To successfully pitch an ideal news story you’d like a reporter to write or broadcast, use the following strategies:

- **Personalize the email.** If you don’t know the reporter’s name because you’re emailing a general inquiry box, you can start the email with a simple “Hello.” However, if you have an idea of which reporter would be best for your story, be sure to include their name in the greeting.
- **Put key details up front.** Include key details in the subject line, including the main news hook and specific details, like when and where something is happening. In the pitch email, include quotes from subject matter experts or spokespeople and/or details the reporter can copy directly into their story.
- **Let reporters know how they can reach you.** Include your contact information so they know how to reach you if they want to schedule an interview or find out more.
- **Follow up.** It’s okay to follow up with another email or phone call if you don’t hear back right away. When leaving a voicemail, be sure to state why you are calling and how a reporter can reach you.

*Reporters are always looking for the 5 W’s: **who, what, where, when, and why.** Make sure that information is front and center in your pitch.*

Pitching Tips

When writing a pitch email:

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Research your reporter. Know what topics the reporter typically covers or whether they have covered similar topics in the past. Read their work first and reference their work in the pitch. ✓ Begin with a bang (frame your story). Draw in a reporter’s interest early with an attention-grabbing sentence. Provide enough information upfront so that the reporter gets a sense of the story you want them to write. ✓ Be passionate. Emphasize the topic’s importance to you and why the reporter’s audience should also care about the information. ✓ Keep it relevant. Keep in mind why your topic is newsworthy and why the reporter should care. ✓ Keep it short. Get the most important points across, and then wrap it up. ✓ Include facts. Use statistics to grab the reporter’s attention. Don’t forget to localize! ✓ Say thank you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Cross the line from persistent to aggressive. Following up is fine, but don’t go overboard. ✗ Blanket multiple reporters with a “form pitch.” Reporters can tell when they get an email that has gone to hundreds of other journalists. Referencing a relevant story they previously wrote can help personalize your pitch. ✗ Pitch something completely off topic for the reporter or outlet. Know what topics the reporter or outlet typically covers. ✗ Misspell names or use the wrong names. If you aren’t sure of a name, keep it generic. ✗ Pitch stories with no news value or seek blatant advertising. ✗ Have spelling or grammar mistakes. ✗ Use jargon. Your reporter may not know what your medical term or acronym means. Make it clear by avoiding acronyms and explaining medical terms more simply for better readability. If your reporter has to stop reading your pitch to look up a term, you may lose their interest.

How to Work With Reporters

The job of a reporter is to explore newsworthy topics and write about them in a way that will be interesting and informative for their readers, viewers, and listeners. Reporters get their information from numerous sources, including personal interviews, subject matter expert interviews, pitch emails, wire services (services that distribute news releases), news briefings, and more. Your job is to provide the reporter with compelling information, delivered in a concise manner, so that they are motivated to cover your story. You can show them why their readers, viewers, and listeners will care about a story and what makes it newsworthy. Here are ways you can do that:

1. **Think through your angle:** Have a clear, defined reason to reach out to reporters, such as an upcoming event you'd like reporters to attend or a new program you want them to highlight for your local community. Before reaching out, think carefully about the angle or what you want the reporter to do (e.g., interview a spokesperson or reference a press release to write a feature).
2. **Identify the right reporters:** Think about what reporters and which types of media outlets make sense to cover your story. Specifically, decide what reporter from which outlet will most effectively tell your story and reach your intended audience(s).
3. **Find contact information:** Once you've identified the media outlet(s) and/or reporter(s) who would be best to pitch to, research the best way to contact them. Although there are tools that can help you find reporters' contact information—such as software like Cision and Muck Rack—these can be expensive and may not include information about smaller, local outlets.

Other tips to find contact information:

- Start with people at your organization who work in communications or public relations to see whether they have recommendations or relationships.
- Look for contact information on the media outlet's website for an email address or phone number, even if it's a news desk for general inquiries. Often, news organizations will provide a web form to submit messages or have social media profiles to follow and with which you can engage.
- Should you have a specific reporter in mind, try looking them up on LinkedIn or other professional platforms. Let them know who you are and that you'd like to speak with them about covering an event or other initiative you're working on. Include your contact information so they can respond via email.

Once you've identified the reporters and their contact information, add it to a database or spreadsheet so you don't have to start from scratch next time you want to reach them.

Working With Local Media

Local media outlets are a bit different from national outlets, and often pitching and engaging with these outlets requires different strategies, including:

- **Customizing the pitch for your local audiences:** Provide data or statistics for people in your city or town to help your pitch stand out from others.
- **Sending an editor a matte article:** Use matte articles, which are short feature articles that are already written and ready to be placed directly in a local newspaper or online outlet. Matte articles work great for local newspapers and community newsletters. Refer to [CDC's Rx Awareness matte article](#) for a placement-ready example.
- **Hosting events such as a ribbon-cutting ceremony, kickoff event, or milestone celebration:** Invite a reporter and local champions (e.g., the mayor or other local elected official) to attend a kickoff or other special event.
- **Participating in local events such as fairs and community days:** If a local event is coming up, try to get a table or booth so you can talk to attendees. You can let the media know you'll be there.
- **Partnering with other local organizations and companies:** You can work with grocery stores, churches, and schools to host joint events, and invite the media to attend.

Local News Coverage Example #1

The Kansas City Star: Drug overdose deaths on pace for record year during coronavirus pandemic, CDC says (08/09/23)



This story, originally published in 2020, was updated with CDC’s *Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts* periodic announcements via **press release** in 2023. When a news topic is relevant to a local community, news outlets will often update and customize statistics for a reprint. You can motivate an outlet toward a reprint by keeping them up to date with current press releases from CDC.

Local News Coverage Example #2

WHSV3 Harisonburg, VA (ABC): US drug overdose deaths slightly increased in 2022, CDC says. (05/17/23)



CDC’s Vital Statistics Rapid Release, pointed to in this **CDC blog**, resulted in a local media story aired on a local ABC affiliate.

What's Next?

Once you've gotten the reporter's attention, you can work with them to provide any additional information for their story. You might need to connect them with your spokesperson or to set up a conference call for them. Sometimes reporters will ask for photos or infographics that can accompany their story, or they might need special press registration to attend your event. Please refer to your campaign materials, such as infographics, factsheets, and campaign graphics, when responding to a reporter's request. It's helpful to cater to—and even anticipate—their needs as much as possible so that not only will you begin to build a relationship with them but you will secure media coverage quicker.

Maintain a Relationship

After the story airs or is posted online, it is important to follow up with the reporter to thank them for their time. You can let them know about any future events you're planning, encourage them to keep in touch, and let them know you'll do the same. The next time you have a new story to pitch, you'll already have the relationship established and you can reach back out on a more personal level.

If you've established a positive relationship with the reporter, they might reach out to you if they get assigned another story. Remember that this can be a symbiotic relationship in which you help each other.

Conclusion

Employ these strategies to build and improve your media relations practice to earn coverage of your activities, events, announcements, and other special occasions. This begins with understanding types of outlets and types of news, and ensuring you draft compelling pitches sure to break through the noise that busier-than-ever newsrooms face day to day. You should continue to foster reporter relationships on a regular basis—even in the absence of a pitch—so that when you do have something you'd like to receive coverage, that door is readily open. It will take time and effort, but generating publicity for your stories will be more than worth it.