

# THE SOCIALWORKER'S MEDIA TOOLKIT

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## INTRODUCTION

Not-for-profit and agency management is changing faster than ever so it's important to present your messages succinctly and effectively in order to influence decision-makers, attract funders, and fulfill commitments to stakeholders. This media toolkit, prepared for BCASW members, offers practical approaches to delivering your message to the media and public, whether it is directly related to a social justice issue or whether it is generating community interest for an upcoming event.

Social work is a practical profession that focuses on helping people lead healthy and productive lives by addressing issues and connecting clients to the resources they need. Underlying this is a deeply rooted value system called social justice, which is connected to the belief that everyone in society should have equal opportunities including economic, political and social rights. This value system might be what makes you get up in the morning for work. It might be why you entered social work in the first place. You can use the energy and enthusiasm that propel you to continue in social work for your social marketing and to effectively communicate your message to the media. Because, if you think about it, it's easier for social workers to learn how to deal with the media than it is for communications professionals to learn enough about social work to do this advocacy work for you.

Social workers today compete with a barrage of messages coming from TV and radio to email and print, all of them screaming to be heard. We believe that a social worker's greatest media asset is his or her depth of understanding and passion for people, issues and societies. Translating these elements into action by using media and other channels can become a powerful tool for social change. After all, media has played a huge part in leading social change in other areas, bringing many different ideas and products to the consciousness of the general public. Social work, which advocates for real, constructive social change, should have a piece of the action as well.

## DEFINE YOUR OBJECTIVES

One of the first things to ask is, “What’s your objective?” This might seem obvious, but defining your objectives at the outset will allow you to answer other questions connected to your target audience, potential challenges and measures of success. For example, your objectives could be marketing an event, or creating social change. Keep in mind that it’s always better to have a tangible objective in mind. General public awareness campaigns are very hard to pull off with limited budgets; it is often easier to reach a goal that is measurable in concrete ways. For example, instead of setting out to educate the public about drug addiction in rural areas, it might be more helpful to target teenagers through a series of radio spots that direct them to a website.

## KEY MESSAGES

When creating a strategy for getting your message out there, it’s important to think of what it is you’d like to achieve. What outcomes would you like to see occur for you to call your efforts a success? It could be a few articles in the local papers, a letter to the editor printed in a provincial newspaper or overwhelming attendance at your event. Maybe it is overall greater exposure in newspapers, or on radio and TV about a specific issue or your organization and its mission. Or, it could be that you hope increased media attention will improve outcomes from stakeholders and governments.

Another important first step is identifying and writing down your key messages. Jotting down three to four points that you want to get across will allow you to write your news release, email or public service announcement much more quickly because you’ll already know the core points of what you’d like to say. Key messages should be in keeping with the vision of the organization you work for. When you create promotional material on behalf of an organization, you represent the organization to the media and community at large. Before formulating your key messages make sure you have a clear idea of what it is your organization does, how it wishes to present itself to the media, what kinds of issues it rallies around, which of those issues are emerging, etc. Answers to these questions will provide a foundation for your key messages.

## CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

Some challenges to overcome in getting your message out there include:

- Less-than-desirable media attention from media outreach initiatives (this could mean negative reports on your organization, or misinformed reports on one of your key issues)
- Finding people and time to carry out an ongoing media strategy
- Creating “hooks” for news releases and other media tools that interest and excite media
- Finding out which reporters and other media contacts will be sympathetic to your cause

## TARGET AUDIENCE

This refers to the group that your message is directed to. Is your audience the general public, stakeholders, other social workers? Identifying your target audience or audiences at the beginning allows you to develop and personalize your media materials, whether they are news releases, public service announcements, posters or brochures. For instance, if your message is geared to youth, you will make your message short, snappy and maybe use references from popular culture or themes such as dating, peer pressure or fitting in that speak to them directly. It’s important to spend some time on this so that your target audience feels that you are speaking directly to them.

## WRITTEN MATERIALS

Written material includes news releases, articles, advertorials, letters to the editor, speeches, workshop notes and so on. The best advice we can give you is to make your promotional piece short! Media and government are much more likely to read your document if it is brief, upbeat and engaging. Be dynamic; if you put your potential contact to sleep, he or she will not be interested in your message. Remember to include a short description of your organization in the materials you send out as well as contact information. Try not to use language specific to social work; remember that journalists or members of the public must be able to understand your message in order to be interested in it.

Editors are always looking for “human interest” stories from reporters. That means events that resonate with the average viewer or reader. What is it about your subject that would have an impact on those listening to your story? As well as having a spokesperson speak on behalf of your organization, it is also helpful to find people from among your clients or others who are affiliated with your organization who are willing to tell their story to a reporter. Media people will like this because it shows that you’ve done your homework and it will make for a more complete and captivating story.

## MEDIA KIT

A media kit is an information package for media. Mostly, you will be using one or two elements of the list below for promoting a particular event or news item. However, for large-scale events there might be call for a full-fledged media kit. Make sure your kits are well organized and uncluttered. Like all media related communications, include the essential information and nothing more. If someone is interested, he/she will contact you. It could include:

- News Release
- Fact sheet on the topic
- History of issue
- Quotes or comments by professionals and contact details
- Selected press clippings
- Photographs, or other visuals
- Background details about organization's spokesperson
- Brief description of organization

## NEWS RELEASE

A news release is a written document that is usually faxed or e-mailed and refers to a particular news item such as an upcoming event or hot news topic related to social work issues. The purpose of the news release is to hold a journalist's interest and to encourage him or her to contact you for further information. A news release could begin with something eye-catching like, "Child Poverty on the Rise."

Never send a news release that is not current; for example, do not send an event notice three months in advance to a busy newspaper. The words "for immediate release" are on all news releases so that they may be used for publication right away. Typically a news release would be sent out up to two weeks in advance of the event and then again a few days before. Also, it should read like a news story and answer the questions: who, what where, when, why and how. Always make sure your spokesperson is available to speak to media when a news release is sent out. Use point form when you have a list to convey. The more clear and concise the news release, the more likely a media outlet want to do a news story. News releases get dumped on journalists' desks in huge piles. Yours is more likely to be picked up if it stands out in some way.

BCASW's protocol for news releases and position papers is to have the document be created by the person whose area of expertise matches the issue being covered. BCASW's position papers and news releases should be:

- Developed by the Executive Director, President, Committee Chair and/or Branch Representative singly or together or by members appointed by them
- Inclusive of quotes from the Executive Director along with quotes from the President, Committee Chair or Branch Representative, as appropriate
- Signed off before being released. The Board should review positions that are of a larger import
- Edited by the communication consultants along with the Executive Director
- Distributed to a list of provincial media and media contacts maintained by the Association
- Circulated to the branches to distribute to local media
- Distributed to Board members for inclusion in their briefing book
- Stored in a separate file for reporting purposes to the AGM

## **ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS**

Although the reporter or editor may not use your news release, don't give up! Sending the news releases whenever there's an event and making those calls helps to establish a relationship with your local media. This relationship takes time and, eventually they will use your news when you least expect. For example, they will be more likely to come to you with questions about a story they're working on if they already have some kind of relationship with you and recognize your expertise on the topic.

## **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

As most of you know, letters to the editor address a recent news story by critiquing or providing more information about the particular topic. These are good opportunities to educate the public and the media at the same time. The best way to ensure that your letter is printed is to keep it short and polite. If it is too angry or whiny, the paper will not print it and if they do your point may not come through clearly. Always back up your arguments with facts and include your contact information, a basic requirement for letters to the editor. Be aware that your letter will be edited; keep your points clear and simple. The more concise your original letter the more likely your comments will escape the editor's pen.

## SPOKEN MATERIAL

Spoken material includes public service announcements (PSAs), speeches, and interviews on television or radio. What if you are asked to speak at an event as a representative of your organization, or one of the media contacts you sent a news release to wants to interview you? Do you panic? Of course not! These are wonderful opportunities to “put a human face” on your organization and the particular event or social issue you want to be covered. Quite often, the spoken word is more effective than the written word.

Remember to keep it short. Also, your audience, like most audiences, is easily bored. Be simple and direct. Stick to your major points and remember that in an interview situation very little of what you say will be printed or broadcast. Prepare yourself for possible questions. Unlike written correspondence, it is difficult to plan for what might happen in an interview or at a community event. If you do an interview, ask for the questions ahead of time so that you can do any additional research. If you can't see the questions beforehand, or if you are speaking at a live event, brainstorm with colleagues for possible questions your listeners may ask you.

When being interviewed, remember who your audience is. The reporter or event participant is not the only person listening; there is a much bigger audience out there who may not have any prior knowledge of social work issues and who may need clarification. Don't be afraid to summarize or repeat yourself. Like most of us, listeners have short memories.

Never say, “No comment.” Even if the journalist is asking you tough questions on a sensitive or confidential topic, you can always comment, just perhaps not in the way the interviewer expects. An answer could sound like, “My organization doesn't know the details of that case, but we often help children who have been abused, and those children often struggle with self-esteem, attachment and rage for much of their lives.”

## PSA EQUALS GENERAL AWARENESS

PSAs are free advertising spots on radio or television. A radio PSA will usually look similar to a news release; it is a text document that a radio station can produce quickly and cheaply. TV PSAs may require actual production on your part; however, before you send anything, check with your radio or TV station and find out what their requirements are. Radio and TV stations must run a certain number of PSAs each month, so they tend to be fairly receptive. Most PSAs run from about 15 to 30 seconds. They are best used for general awareness; the more general it is, the better chance that the PSA will be broadcast for a long period of time. If you are using them for events or for time sensitive issues, keep in mind that they will only be run for the relevant time period. With a PSA, you are very restricted for time, so it is paramount that you outline only your major points.

## ATTRACTING MEDIA TO YOU

Well, now you know a little bit about the tools to use in order to get your message out, but what about ways you can convince the media that your message should be heard? There might only be a few issues that you're trying to shed light on, but there are often plenty of fresh angles from which to sell your story. For instance, if the issue is child poverty, the angle you use might be to connect a low rate of adult literacy to a high rate of child poverty. Always look for new ways to attract media to publish your story.

After you've sent out a news release, it's important to follow up with a phone call. Make sure that you have the name of the reporter who covers this kind of story. When you call don't ask if they've received the news release as they receive several of them a day and probably won't remember. Tell the reporter about the event or topic in few words and let them know that you or another spokesperson would be happy to be interviewed. Ask whether they need more information and tell them you can send them a poster of the event or research findings on the topic. Reporters are very busy people and they'll more than likely be happy that you're being so accommodating. If you're organized with an angle for your story, background information and contacts to interview, there's more chance that your story is picked up because you're making the reporter's jobs a whole lot easier. And remember that just as having an article appear in the paper is a tremendous boost for you and your organization, it's also a boost for the reporter on the lookout for stories. In other words, you're doing them a favour by hand-delivering such interesting material to them.

## TYPES OF MEDIA RESPONSES

Apart from having an event to promote, you might read something in the newspaper and feel that the person writing the piece is misinformed about a certain issue and needs more information. This is what's known as *reactive*. In this case you might be responding to previous news coverage through a letter to the editor highlighting a popular misconception or communicating by using a news release that criticizes government action.

Another reason to contact the media might be to raise an issue that hasn't yet been discussed while perhaps suggesting a call to action (*proactive*) from either government or the public. This media outreach strategy calls on governments to take action on a particular issue. Ask whether the messages that are written in the news releases or other material are proactive; do they introduce a subject or story idea to the news media for the first time?

Considering whether the message you want to convey is proactive or reactive will help you determine how quickly you should act and what kind of media tool you should use (for example, letter to the editor for reactive, news release for pro-active).

## KEEP YOUR ORGANIZATION IN THE KNOW

Whether you're being proactive or reactive, it's important to be organized so that you can act immediately before the issue turns from hot to lukewarm. To prepare for media contact, your organization might want to sign up to Google News or a news-monitoring service such as Google Alerts or Infomart (although Infomart is based on a monthly fee) to locate current provincial and national news on issues affecting social workers. This way you can find out when child poverty is raised in the news or the latest ruling in an elder abuse case.

- Prepare a series of quotes from your Director and/or President on a number of "hot issues"
- Create position papers on issues such as child poverty, elder care, and the social work profession that can be used and adapted for news releases, articles, letters to the editor and PSAs
- Create target media contact lists including newspaper, radio, television and stakeholder lists that can be used regularly. This might involve creating a comprehensive database of these contacts once they're established (include full name, outlet, journalist title, telephone and fax numbers, email, city and any other pertinent information)
- Direct journalists to websites and other resources that provide background information relevant to issues and the organization.
- Create Q&A sheets for possible media questions. This allows you to be ready to answer questions that may be difficult.
- Create "talking points" in three or four sentences and that pinpoint your organization's central message. This is good for print interviews and broadcast media. Use winning arguments and statistics or facts to support the messages.

Links to useful media sites:

IMPACS, the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society ([www.impacs.org](http://www.impacs.org))--great information on communications and media for not-for-profits.

Altstuff.com ([www.altstuff.com](http://www.altstuff.com))--listing of media outlets across Canada

Media advocacy ([www.thcu.ca/infoandresources/media\\_advocacy.htm](http://www.thcu.ca/infoandresources/media_advocacy.htm))--includes a media advocacy workbook

