

DHHS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

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Different media are looking for different things. It is important that you understand these differences, so you give a reporter what he or she needs.

Television

What sets television apart from the print media or radio? The answer, of course, is pictures. If you want your story to get good play on television, then you need to think of pictures. What pictures can tell your story?

If you want television to cover your news release, then you must be prepared to have someone willing to do an on-camera interview. Your story will get better play if you can also think of other good pictures to go with the release material. For instance, if you're making a major release on mental health news, you'll need the following:

- A mental health expert who is ready to do on-camera interviews.
- Even better than a bureaucrat is a "real" person who has been/will be affected by the new pronouncement.
- Pictures of a mental health facility. You might want to consider setting up a tour of one (1) of the state hospitals and allowing cameras to cover that tour.

With these three (3) elements, you have taken your story from a mere possible mention to a full story on television news. The easier you make it for television to get pictures, the more likely you are to get a complete story on the air.

It takes real creativity to figure out what pictures work, but that planning can be the fun part of setting up a release or an event.

Television reporters don't particularly like "talking heads." That's just a person doing an interview. Where possible, television reporters prefer more pictures. That's why you should think carefully before setting up a straight news conference featuring a bunch of talking heads. You might want to consider making the location of your news conference part of the story. If you're going to announce childcare reforms, then do the announcement at a child care center. If you're going to announce a new initiative on water quality and health, then do the announcement on the bank of a river.

Many television reporters aren't specialists. They don't cover a particular beat like health care or children's issues. They are general assignment reporters, covering their current assignment. They are also often required to do more than one story a day. You could very well be dealing with a reporter who just left the scene of a fatal wreck who is scheduled to do a liveshot from a football stadium later in the day. That reporter doesn't have the time to sit down and listen to hours of background. Unless a television reporter asks for lots of background, don't waste their time. They'll get frustrated--and so will you--when your hours of talk end up as a 20-second "bite" on the nightly news. A fact sheet is a very useful tool in situations like this.

Who do you call to talk about television coverage? In general, the best person to call is the assignment editor. The assignment editor is responsible for deciding what stories are going to be covered and by whom. Assignment editors are very busy people. They are multi-taskers--listening to police scanners, monitoring other station's signals, juggling reporters and photographers in the field and taking calls from people with news tips. They don't have time to waste. You should bear that in mind when calling them. Call at the right time and be brief. Don't waste their time with repeated annoying phone calls. Make one (1) or two (2) calls and make them count.

Most stations have a day assignment editor and a night assignment editor. If your story is going to happen during the day, talk to the day assignment editor. If your story is going to happen during the late afternoon or evening, talk to the night assignment editor who arrives at around 3:00 p.m.

Call when assignment editors are least busy. The best times to call day assignment editors are 7:15-8:15 a.m. and 1:00-2:30 p.m. If you're having an event or press conference, place ONLY two (2) calls. Give the assignment editor a heads-up about the event a few days before it happens; make that call in the afternoon. The day of the event make an early morning call as a reminder. The best times to call night assignment editors are 3:00-5:00 p.m. or 8:00-9:00 p.m. Place the heads-up call in the evening a few days before it happens and the reminder day-of-event call in the afternoon.

No call to an assignment editor should last more than a minute or two, unless the assignment editor lengthens the call by asking questions. Be prepared to make a short pitch. Don't whine, needle or threaten. State your case clearly and concisely. Thank the assignment editor for his or her time and end the call.

Radio

What makes radio different than newspapers? Obviously, the answer is sound. What makes radio different than television? Once again the answer is sound. Without pictures to distract, the listener is totally focused on sound. Finding and identifying sound for a radio reporter will give your story greater presence on the radio.

Sound can be simple--just a taped interview. Sound can also be much more involved. Today's national public radio style reporter is also focused on what's called natural sound, the sounds you hear in the background of everyday activities. If you are announcing an initiative that replaces paper files with computer files, then you should be prepared to take the NPR-style reporter to your file room. Open up files for him and talk about the size of the files and what a waste of space they are. That's the kind of sound that will improve your story. A story on playground rules can be improved with the natural sound of children playing.

You also need to have someone ready to do a taped radio interview. Nothing is more frustrating for a radio reporter than to be told that "the news release speaks for itself." It will speak all right---to the radio reporter, telling him that you think he or she is unimportant. Your story won't end up on the air.

There are two types of radio reporters--the NPR-style, doing longer stories filled with natural sound and the more traditional reporter, often expanding stories that have already run elsewhere. You may get a call from the latter kind of reporter who has seen a story on the wire or in the newspapers. They are calling you for one thing; they want sound. They want somebody saying what the newspaper reported. Whatever you do, don't insult them by saying "just read the story in the newspaper." They've already read it, and they are calling for your help in making that story into a radio story.

Newspapers

What sets newspapers apart from radio and television? The answer is clear--details and background information.

Most sizeable newspapers assign reporters to beats. That means that there are specific people assigned to cover specific areas like health care, medicine, environmental issues, women's issues, and business. Find out who is assigned to your beat and communicate with that person. Beat reporters have a lot of time to spend on stories. You should get acquainted with the beat reporter. Invite them over for a tour. Invite them to see what you do in the field. Invite them to lunch to talk about your area. Call them with any new details. In other words, spend as much as possible getting to know and staying in touch with the beat reporter. That time will pay off in informed stories by a reporter who has the time to understand the issue.

Smaller newspapers, especially weeklies, may not have beat reporters. Reporters may cover a variety of issues, but they probably still have more time to spend on a story. Invite new reporters to sit down for a chat. Invite them into the field. Give them heads-up as stories progress. Remember that today's weekly newspaper reporter is often tomorrow's daily newspaper reporter. This is a vital opportunity to get to a reporter early in his or her career and make sure they understand the importance of your program.

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