

Smoking Cessation Services: Telling The Success Story

This brief public relations guide aims to help smoking cessation services maximise success through raising awareness of your work to the general public and other important audiences. Good media coverage can greatly enhance your profile, encouraging smokers to come and use the service and also bringing your work to the attention of potential funders and commissioners.

This guide provides advice on:

- Developing key messages
- Targeting your audience
- Selecting a method to ensure your messages are communicated
- Selecting and targeting the media
- Developing relationships with spokespeople and case studies
- Developing a press release
- Selling in your story
- Evaluating your coverage

Message

Public relations campaigns aim to deliver certain messages, to a chosen target audience, at a specific time. These messages will influence that audience to carry out a certain action, change their behaviour, or change their view on an issue.

Therefore, the first steps are to clarify your communication objectives and key messages, then plan how to reach and motivate your selected audience.

Objectives and Key Messages

You will usually have one primary objective, for example, to increase the number of people attending your clinic, but you may also have multiple secondary objectives from time to time, for example, encourage pregnant mothers to stop smoking and to stay stopped after the birth of their child.

Another objective might be aimed at potential funders or service commissioners, to whom you would want to demonstrate effectiveness and value for money.

Your key messages should convey your objectives in a manner that will be understood and will motivate your target audience – which means they should be phrased in plain, jargon-free language.

It is common to select between three and five key messages for a press release or media interview. These will be the most important points that you want to get across to your target audience. Any more messages and you run the risk that your key points will become confused or lost.

Framing Your Key Messages

On most occasions, the underlying objective of your communication will be to promote your service. This means that whatever the news hook that is creating the story, you should have strong simple themes to convey.

For example, No Smoking Day's underlying campaign messages do not change from year to year – they are:

- No Smoking Day is an opportunity to stop smoking
- There are health and other benefits from stopping smoking
- There is effective help available when you want to stop smoking

ALL OF NO SMOKING DAY'S PRESS COMMUNICATIONS CONTAIN ONE OR MORE OF THESE MESSAGES.

For cessation services, constant underlying messages could be:

- The service is effective and popular with smokers
- Helping people stop smoking is highly cost effective

You should make sure you are familiar with the evidence underlying these messages, and be able to back them up with figures about your service.

An excellent reference document to help you with this is “**The case for commissioning smoking cessation services**”, produced by WHO Europe Partnership Project and Smokefree London in July 2001, available online at <http://www.ash.org.uk/html/cessation/servicescase.html>.

Audience Targeting

Decide who you want to target and know where to find this audience. If you are unsure, ask your service users:

- What they read? And what parts of the publication? Letters pages are widely read as well as editorial content
- What they watch and when?
- What they listen to and when?
- Where they go regularly? (for example gym, library, supermarket)

For professional audiences, consider also the professional publications they would read – especially trade newspapers and magazines, and letters/news pages of professional journals. Would your story be relevant there?

Drive-time local radio can also be a useful way to reach this audience.

Vehicle

In order for the message to reach the target audience, a communications vehicle is required. There are several vehicles that can convey your message to your target audience. The choice of vehicle will depend on what your message is and whom you want the message to reach.

Possible communication methods include:

- *Proactive press release*
Press release based on a created platform (for example, exceeding government targets or national days such as No Smoking Day)
- *Opportunistic/reactive press release*
Press release issued in response to recent events
- *Features*
In depth articles that expand on a particular issue or news piece
- *Case studies*
Individuals who have succeeded in some way with your help and would be comfortable to talk to the media about their experiences
- *Spokespeople*
Either yourself or somebody else in your organisation who can speak comfortably to the media about your work

Key points that would make a story popular with regional newspapers include:

- Human interest element: journalists prefer to feature local people in their newspapers, sharing their experience, as this makes compelling and newsworthy reading
- Reproducible elements such as relevant quotes and photography
- News factor: newspapers are always keen to bring their readers relevant information that is new or surprising in some way

Media

For your messages to reach the appropriate audience, targeting is essential.

When a journalist receives your press release they will initially ask themselves four questions:

- Is it relevant to my readers / listeners / viewers?
- Is it new or surprising?
- Is it helpful to my readers / listeners / viewers?
- Is it credible?

Therefore, in order to target publications successfully, there is no substitute to reading, watching and listening to the media that your target audience use.

- Make a note of local journalists who specialise in health, especially if they have an interest in your therapeutic area
- Keep a file of their articles about any relevant health issues. Refer to these articles before you call journalists, to ensure that you do not ask journalists to repeat articles

When working with the media remember that they need fast and accurate information, ideas that will interest their readers and information that they can make their own. They do not appreciate inaccuracy, weak stories, waffle, failure to appreciate deadlines and failure to understand readers' interests.

Key tips include:

- Exploit milestones – for example anniversaries of a specialist clinic, 1000th user to register
- Use annual opportunities – for example New Year resolutions, No Smoking Day (second Wednesday in March) or World No Tobacco Day (31 May)

- Highlight human interest success stories – for example three generations who have successfully stopped smoking together
- Prepare a list of local experts and case studies, noting their availability for media interviews
- Keep an up-to-date record of facts and figures about your service

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Spokespeople and Case Studies

Remember that people make the news, so it is important to have spokespeople and case studies available to bring your story to life.

If you are trying to achieve coverage in a number of different types of publication, it is best to get a variety of spokespeople and case studies to target different media.

- Once you have identified a patient who would make a good case study or a colleague who may be an appropriate expert/spokesperson, ask them if they would be willing to be interviewed by local journalists.
Make sure they are able to present your message in the right tone – highly knowledgeable experts are not always the best at talking plain, lively English. Match the spokesperson to the tone of the publication or programme you are targeting
- Then it is essential that you talk in person to your potential spokespeople/case studies to:
 - Profile what they feel comfortable saying about an issue
 - Brief them thoroughly
 - Agree key messages with them
 - Provide them with copies of all the media materials
- Check their availability and negotiate time to be booked out for interviews well in advance
- Make sure you have all their contact details and a plan of their whereabouts at the times they will be required
- Every time you receive a request from a journalist to interview somebody, you should call the spokesperson/case study and explain which newspaper/radio station would like to speak to them, outlining what questions they will ask and when the news story will be published
- If, at this point, the spokesperson/case study agrees to be interviewed, you should then either ask them to call the journalist, or seek their permission to give their phone number to the journalist
- Never pass a spokesperson's or case study's contact details to anyone without their prior permission

Radio

Radio interviews can be either 'live' or 'pre-recorded.'

- Live interviews are the best way to ensure the station includes your key messages, as pre-records may edit them out
- Avoid telephone interviews if at all possible. Always encourage your spokesperson to attend the radio station for a face to face interview, as the radio station will prefer this method and the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee will be much better

Press Release

In general, when communicating your messages via a press release, ensure that the first paragraph encapsulates your news and that you only include essential background. Overall the story should be brief and self-promotion subtle.

- Make a list of your key messages (between 3 and 5)
- Imagine that you have 30 seconds to relay these messages and prioritise them accordingly
- Use these message points as a road map for a press release, summarising the news element in the first paragraph then detail who, where, what, when and why
- Use short quotes to support your story, including full titles of spokespeople
- Fully reference health claims and any research findings
- Include contact details of your clinic and opening times
- Provide publications with top tips to improve the management of your area of interest, for example how to stop smoking
- Constantly evaluate whether your press release is relevant and interesting to your target audience – consider the principles in the checklist below

Take a hard look at your story – is it news or not?

NEWS is...

New
Credible
Conflict
Controversial
Shocking
Sex, money, death, corruption
Funny
Personalised

NEWS is not...

Opinions (unless they are from someone important or surprising)
Policy papers (unless influential)
Meetings (unless unlikely pairings)
Letters (unless leaked secrets)
Visits (unless famous person)
Theoretical
Predictable messages

Top Tips for Selling In

There is more to getting your story covered than simply sending out unsolicited press releases. Investing time in talking directly to journalists about your story can be much more productive – it can also give you a chance to match your story more closely to the journalist's interest. This is known as 'selling in' your story.

When selling in a story there are some basic tactics that are worth remembering:

- Watch, read or listen to the media before you make contact. Try to understand where your story may feature in the publication, for example, the health page, woman's page, success story of the week
- Call the correct contact. Relevant correspondents for press release distribution include news desk reporters and health editor/reporter. Feature ideas should be sent to the features editor
- Know the best times to call and avoid calling journalists when they are on deadline or just before a programme is due on the air. If you call at an inappropriate time, ask them what are good and bad times for you to call
- Begin your call with a brief but interesting introduction, clearly demonstrating your relevance to their audience

- Tie your news into an emerging trend or opportunistic news item
- Be prepared to defend your position and cite relevant references
- Be ready with times and availability of spokespeople and case studies
- If you have promised to get back to a journalist – do it quickly
- Be wary of voicemail, it is always better to call back. Only leave a message if you have a truly irresistible story, leaving your name and telephone number at the beginning and end of the message

Checklist

Have you...?

- Agreed your campaign objectives and target audience
- Listed your key messages
- Identified media that are in tune with your target audience
- Developed a news hook that will be of interest to your target audience
- Identified appropriate journalists to contact
- Ensured that spokespeople and case studies are fully briefed on key messages and are comfortable speaking to the media

Evaluating Your Coverage

It is important to check the outcome of your media work – did the story get covered? If so:

- Were your messages conveyed properly?
- Did anything unexpected crop up in coverage of your story for consideration next time?
- Did any journalists seem particularly interested - or cynical?

Keep a file of your cuttings with copies of the press releases and press lists you used, and review them to improve future releases.

If your story doesn't get covered, consider the range of reasons:

- Competing news? Even the best story can get swamped if big stories break
- Wrong journalists targeted?
- Wrong timing?
- Story presentation not interesting enough?
- Story just too dull? Looking back at your press release, would you be interested in reading this if you came across it in a newspaper?

And Finally...

Effective media work can really increase your service's success, by helping potential users feel comfortable about approaching you, and by keeping its profile high amongst funders and commissioners. The NHS's smoking cessation service is a good news story that deserves to be told.