

10 Steps to Getting Press

A tip sheet by the Drug Policy Alliance



1. Identify what's "newsworthy." There is a big difference between an issue and a news story. We can assist the media in covering issues that are important to us by letting them know when a related "story" emerges. What makes something newsworthy? Controversy, anniversaries, civil disobedience, human interest, strange bedfellows, superlatives (first, biggest, etc.) If a topic isn't newsworthy – no matter how important – they probably won't cover it.

2. Develop written materials. The first thing a reporter is likely to ask when you call them to pitch a story is: "Do you have anything in writing?" Help make their job as easy as possible by developing brief, easy-to-read materials. Especially important is a 1-2 page media advisory or press release with details of an event or news story. The style and content should resemble a simple newspaper story, with strong headlines, facts and quotes. When possible, other background materials can be helpful, including fact sheets, spokespeople bios or report summaries.

3. Develop a targeted media list. It is important to think about which reporters will be interested in your story. Are they reporters who cover health? Politics? Entertainment? Is it a local or a national story? Is it a story that's good for newspaper, radio and/or television? From there, develop a list of reporters' names and numbers to call.

4. Be by a fax machine and / or email. In order to quickly send your written materials to a reporter, it is important to be close to a fax machine or email when making pitch calls. If a reporter wants to see something right away, it will not help to send them something several hours later or the next day.

5. Identify strategic spokespeople. The messenger is often just as important as the message when it comes to the media. A doctor or patient talking about the importance of medical marijuana will probably be more effective than a college student in perfect health, for example. It is also crucial that spokespeople are articulate and knowledgeable on the issue, and easily reachable by reporters on deadline. (Not having a cell phone can sometimes mean not being included in a story!!) Having experience speaking to the press is always a plus. Remember – reporters are not your friends. Be careful and strategic when doing interviews.

6. Practice your telephone pitch. Reporters get hundreds of calls a day. What's likely to make a reporter not hang up on you, or immediately delete your message, is if you develop a well focused, 30-second pitch that highlights the essence of your news story. Once you hook them, you can describe in more detail why you are calling and how you can get them more information. Practice leaving messages on your own answering machine. Don't forget to leave your phone number if you leave a message.

7. **Never lie or exaggerate.** It is important that reporters feel they can trust the information you give them. If they find out you are lying or exaggerating, it will greatly hurt your chances of ever being able to pitch them a story again. Usually the facts are strong enough to make a case for a good story.

8. **Don't take no for an answer.** Pitching is not dating. If a reporter says no, try another reporter, or call them again when you have a different story. If you get one out of ten reporters to write about your story, that is a huge success! Remember, one reporter can represent thousands of readers, listeners or viewers.

9. **Use the media to get more media.** If a good article comes out on your issue, send it to other reporters who might also be interested. Oftentimes newspapers will be more interested in oped pieces if the topic has been in the recent news. Articles and op-eds can also lead to radio interviews, and local stories can lead to national stories, if they're seen by the right editors / producers.

10. **Say thank you.** Developing friendly relationships with reporters is helpful when trying to pitch news stories. If a reporter writes a story you like, call them up and say thank you. They appreciate it, and will be more likely to return your phone call the next time around.