

Media Engagement Basics

Involving the media, such as local newspapers and radio and television stations, is an excellent way to share information with large audiences. An important part of a media organization's mandate is to be of public service. Thus, the media should welcome an opportunity to address the problem of underage drinking.

Use or expand a previously developed list of media contacts who cover stories about health, substance abuse, and education; or create your own list. Don't overlook community newspapers, faith-based organizations, and youth-related groups as potential outlets for promoting your Town Hall Meeting.

In working with reporters:

- Remember that they are frequently on deadline and may not return messages quickly;
- Be sensitive to their time constraints;
- Be patient but persistent; and
- Make them aware that your Town Hall Meeting has important information to share with your community.

How To Use Media Tools

Media are more responsive to requests for space or airtime when they receive information about a local issue and receive it in a ready-to-use format and style. The list below provides basic information about how to use each tool and when.

Talking Points

Talking points are succinct, persuasive and relevant statements that highlight the importance of an issue. These points, used internally, will be the core communications tool of your entire initiative. They will crystallize your message and should be used with your other communications tools. Include relevant information about underage drinking in your own community. The [State Summaries](#) on underage drinking prevention, your county's health department's alcohol and drug services unit, or a substance abuse prevention group within your community should be able to provide these data.

Use [talking points](#):

- To emphasize your main points to the media (i.e., that underage drinking is a public health problem that has serious consequences for your community);
- To add impact and interest to the materials you submit for print or broadcast publication;
- To exude confidence in response to media inquiries; and
- To offer these points in advance to your guest speakers to include in their remarks.

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements (PSAs) are messages that the media broadcasts or prints free of charge to serve the public good. Most media outlets have public service directors who handle requests for PSA placement. Additionally, these can be forwarded to local schools for use in their morning announcements and telephone calling systems. PSAs can be useful to create interest and promote attendance if used during the **weeks leading up to your event**.

Media Advisory

A media advisory alerts the media to your upcoming Town Hall Meeting, providing just enough information to encourage reporters to cover the event. Send the advisory **1 week in advance** of your Town Hall Meeting so reporters can schedule coverage.

In developing an advisory:

- Include only the highlights of your event in outline form: who, what, where, when, why, contact information, and interview opportunities;
- Lead with a short and informative or catchy title to draw attention to your message; and
- Identify a spokesperson who is available to take calls in advance and on the event day.

Pitch Letter

A personal approach can make all the difference in getting media coverage for your event. More informal than a news release and more substantial than a media advisory, the pitch letter gives a reporter both a story idea and the information needed to get started. Send a pitch letter **1 week in advance of your event**. Make a followup call the next day to be sure the reporter received your information and to encourage coverage.

Your pitch letter should include:

- A brief description of your Town Hall Meeting and key facts underlining its importance to your community; and
- Contact details to make it easy for the reporter to get more information.

News Release

A news release, one to two pages in length, provides complete information the media can use to write an article on your event. News releases are delivered personally or by fax or email to the media **the day of your event**.

Some suggestions for drafting your news release follows:

- Lead with an introductory paragraph describing who, what, when, where, and why (i.e., all of the essential information);
- Continue with one or two paragraphs of supporting information;
- Close with a paragraph identifying sponsoring organizations;
- Include quotes by key local leaders or individuals involved in your Town Hall Meeting that can make your news release more lively and interesting;
- Use printed letterhead when issuing your news release; and
- Mark the end of each page with “more” and the end of each release with “-30-” or “###.”

Letter to the Editor or an Op-Ed Piece

Consider submitting a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece (an opinion editorial article) to emphasize key points about alcohol use and the need for the community to engage in preventive actions. Whenever possible, get a prominent community leader to sign the piece. Not only will this signature make it more likely that the piece will be used but it will also give greater weight to the message. Be sure to provide a draft of the letter or op-ed to the leader for their consideration.

A **letter to the editor**, most often, is written in prompt response to published articles.

Potential opportunities are to respond to articles about:

- Your Town Hall Meeting.
- Harmful consequences of underage drinking, such as a traffic crash or public disturbance.
- Possible environmental solutions that can help make your community safer.
- Other events related to underage drinking. For example, April is Alcohol Awareness Month. Any article related to this national observance can easily be linked to a Town Hall Meeting held close to or during April.

An **op-ed** does not have to be written in response to a previously published story. It can be used to increase community awareness of the risks associated with underage drinking and to generate support for your event.

When writing an op-ed:

- Impress upon readers the seriousness of underage drinking by incorporating several key talking points in your text;
- Remember that this piece can be longer, and showcase relevant research on the topic;
- Describe why underage drinking is harmful, refer to a recent local incident related to underage drinking (if possible), and explain how your community can take effective steps to prevent it; and
- Consider using an email address for contacting the author for additional information, although this is optional.