

# How to Communicate the WAPC Message in Your Local Community

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## I. Media Advocacy Basics

Media advocacy is one of the keys to getting the WAPC message out to the general public and to the decision-makers we are trying to influence. Always keep these ten tips in mind:

- 1) **Know your media.** Figure out your points of access. Research (it's not that hard). Listen to the radio (including talk radio), watch TV news, read your local newspapers, look online, find out editorial policies, discover who you and others in your group may know who are already involved with the media. Develop your professional relationships with media persons.
- 2) **Know your audience.** Tailor your message according to whom you are trying to reach through a particular media venue. For instance, you may be targeting women only with your message or both women and men. How you present that message in and to the media will likely differ according to your audience.
- 3) **What's your hook?** Why is your story/news particularly compelling? Understand what reporters need, so that when you "pitch" a story to them, yours stands out. Be creative, just a bit different from the standard. Often if something has happened nationally on an issue, this can serve as the hook for a local story; let local media know the local angle to a national story.
- 4) **Explain succinctly so that the public can understand your message.** Be prepared to answer questions and be brief in your answers. If possible, tell a quick story. Make sure that your explanation will play to a regular audience. Deliver an emotional punch, but then be able to explain rationally and reasonably why you believe what you do.
- 5) **Be truthful.** Your job is to tell the truth and to figure out how you can most clearly communicate that truth. Stick to the facts. Don't exaggerate or make things up or try to create a situation that isn't true. Do not jeopardize WAPC's and your own credibility.
- 6) **Localize and personalize.** Local newspaper stories are much more effective in your community than those in *The New York Times*. And the fact that you're concerned about cancer is not news! But the story of your family's bout with prostate cancer **can** become news in your community. And numerous residents of a particular community taking an action to ensure that men are screened for prostate cancer may be news, too.

- 7) **Be available.** You must be responsive to media's needs; they are not likely to be very responsive to yours. If you initiate a news release or media advisory, the media must be able to contact you and speak to you on their schedule (often governed by the news cycle and deadlines).
- 8) **Say only what you are comfortable having quoted.** This applies particularly to interviews. Do not say anything that you would not want to find in print or on the news. With reporters, act as if all conversations are on-the-record and that the microphone is always on.
- 9) **Do not use insider or technical language** and don't use acronyms. People will neither understand the point you are making nor be impressed. Instead, they will most likely be put off.
- 10) **Hammer your message home.** Though you may see your story one way, reporters often want to report it another way. While you must "pitch" your story so that they will want to speak to you and run the story, you also want to stay on your message and make sure *that* gets reported. Be very clear ahead of time of what you are trying to communicate. Hit it at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Make sure that your message can't be missed, even after editing.

## **II. Working with Print and Broadcast Media**

In today's world there are numerous media outlets through which to deliver the WAPC message. Generally, these include print, broadcast, and internet. Already, many WAPC members are using the internet as an effective communication tool to tell their story and provide assistance to others.

The following section deals with ways in which to develop your and our message through the more traditional vehicles of print and broadcast media. Remember that with both, you may be dealing with overworked people who are pitched hundreds of stories a day and have to make decisions as to what will best fly in the public domain. Fortunately for us, most media increasingly look for the human/personal angles in a story.

- **Letters-to-the-editor.** Letters from regular readers/residents in your local newspaper remain one of the most tried-and-true ways to deliver your message. The letters-to-the-editor section is one of *the* most widely read sections of any newspaper. And congressional offices in Washington, DC clip all letters-to-the-editor from newspapers back home. These are taken seriously, so do them properly in order to get published.

Most newspapers today allow and prefer to have letters submitted via email or an online form on their website. Go to your newspaper's website and search for the guidelines for submission, which are usually found, too, on the editorial pages of your newspaper. Follow the guidelines precisely.

Keep the letter very short. Three or four pithy paragraphs should be enough, and if accepted, expect it to be redacted further. Reading other letters that have been

published will give you a good idea of acceptable length, as well as the types of letters typically published by your newspaper. You need not present everything you want to say in one letter. And even though you want attention, do **not** make outrageous claims. Instead, try to present a uniquely worded, rational argument appealing to reason and (possibly) emotion. While you may want to encourage lawmakers by name to take a certain action or you may write about your disagreement with something they did, **never** berate or try to humiliate them in your letter. While this may get you published, it will also close the door to that elected official's office...and probably all the rest of them as well.

Write particularly if the issue is hot because of legislation or something in the news and/or it is being discussed locally. Identify your "relationship" to prostate cancer and any expertise you might have (which is helpful to editors and readers) – and, of course, keep to your message. Remember, too, that people enjoy seeing their name in print, so consider alternating responsibilities for submissions of letters-to-the-editor among your entire WAPC chapter.

- **Writing an op-ed.** Op-eds (or opinion-editorials) are the "guest" pieces found on the editorial pages, usually written by experts in the field or people with a leadership role or particular stake in an issue. Therefore, try to have an expert or high-profile person with expertise, e.g., a physician and/or researcher, be the author of the op-ed, even if you do much of the ghost-writing. If possible, contact the editor in advance to pitch the op-ed, its author, and its relevance to what is going on. Keep within the guidelines of the newspaper (usually 600-900 words), and develop the argument for your position, while always staying on message and trying to find creative ways to bring people to your side.
- **Meeting with editorial boards.** Somewhat similar to meeting with lawmakers, a meeting with the editorial board of the newspaper is to convince them of the timeliness and community impact of prostate cancer and the need for them to editorialize with the WAPC message. It makes most sense to meet with an editorial board prior to prostate cancer events or observances, e.g., Prostate Cancer Awareness Month, or due to legislation that may be pending. Such meetings are great ways of establishing your credibility and working relationship. Hopefully, these people will become primary media contacts for you.

You will want to meet with as many of the following as possible: the publisher, editor-in-chief, managing editor, editorial page editor, health editor (or equivalent), community editor (or equivalent), and editorial writers. Generally, you should try to schedule the meeting through the editorial page editor's office. Research the newspaper's position on the issue or similar issues ahead of time. Determine exactly why they should be writing about prostate cancer, i.e., develop your talking points for this audience. Prepare a media kit (described below) that represents the best information on the issue. And by all means, don't forget to ask specifically for what you want them to do!

- **Events and News Conferences.** There are two basic event "vehicles" you can use to get media attention: 1) a community event with public participation that you believe is worthy of media attention and coverage, and 2) a news – or, press – conference.

Though different animals, they are similar in how you “dress them up” to boost media interest. In both cases, you will want to prepare a media advisory, a news release, and a media kit (all of which are discussed in more detail below).

The media advisory will sell your event or press conference. The media wants to know briefly why it’s important and even more, who is taking part. Get your event or press conference listed in the “daybooks” of media outlets. These are basically community calendars that inform their own reporters, as well as the public, of upcoming newsworthy happenings. Your media advisory, with a follow-up phone call, should be enough to get in the daybook.

News conferences should not be overused. Rather, hold a press conference only when you have a major, newsworthy announcement. For instance, it may be a celebrity or expert who is in town to give credence to the issue, or you may be revealing the results of a new study. If you hold many press conferences and the news media don’t find new stories in them, you will quickly lose your credibility and they will stop attending. Then, when you *do* have something important to say, you may find there is no longer anyone to listen.

WAPC staff can help you in the preparation of news conferences, as well as give advice regarding the newsworthiness and timeliness of stories and events.

- **Media advisories and news releases.** Both are effective tools. The first sets the stage and informs media that they may want to check out an event or news conference; the latter provides the meat of the story being communicated by the event or news conference. Samples of each are included in this toolkit.

Media advisories should include a headline of what is happening and up to one paragraph of explanation of what the news conference or event intends to accomplish. Then it should list the key participants who might pique a reporter’s interest and **all** of the information about when and where. This is merely to get you on the radar screen. You should follow up media advisories with phone calls to remind reporters to attend (and to show them that you are serious).

News releases should tell the entire story exactly as you would like to see it reported. In fact, it is best if you can write the release as if it is being published verbatim (sometimes in smaller newspapers, they will be!). You will want to weave quotes from key figures into the story (use something they actually said, or write the quote and obtain their permission) and show why this information supports your position. Follow up press releases, too, with phone calls to the reporters.

- **Media kits.** Media kits can serve many purposes, but generally they are used to package your issue in a substantive way for the media. This is the information about WAPC, your chapter, and prostate cancer that you most want journalists to have. You will want to make the kits available at events and press conferences and to present them in all meetings with media representatives.

Components will vary according to need, but usually you should include the following:

- The particular press release for your event (or for a meeting, recent press releases);
- One page of your talking points, your most cogent arguments on the issue;
- One page description of WAPC as the sponsoring organization and/or the coalition of organizations involved;
- Perhaps, two (no more than three) short pieces with background information on particular aspects of the issue;
- Text of any speeches (if a press conference);
- Contact information; and even
- A short DVD, if you have one and it's applicable to your talking points.

The media kit and its contents should be nicely packaged in a folder.

- 1) **Public service announcements (PSA's).** Some media are required to run a defined amount of programming in the public interest, and PSA's (no, *not* the prostate specific antigen!) serve much of that function. Media outlets are unlikely to air a PSA if they consider it to be controversial or political, so that actually gives WAPC an advantage: Our messages about prostate cancer are always in the public interest. Check locally to see if media are willing to run PSA's for you. If they say yes, check carefully with them on format, and talk to WAPC staff about what might be available or what can be tailored for local use.
- **Radio and TV talk shows.** Except for PSA's, radio and television tend to love controversy and human interest stories. WAPC does want to stir some controversy, e.g., the lack of attention, funding and education on prostate cancer. More importantly, however, the personal stories of how prostate cancer is handled in families and the importance of it being dealt with speedily and properly, can provide compelling segments for local talk shows. If there is a higher-profile person in town (perhaps for an event or news conference), this may increase your chances of having radio and television accommodating your request to appear. If you do make controversial claims, however, be prepared for the producers and hosts to want to present the other side, too.
  - **Television or radio interviews.** It's not that hard...really! Practice first, if possible with a real video camera and with people who can give you informed feedback. Re-read the ten tips found at the beginning of the Media Advocacy section. Remember to be pleasant and gently guide the conversation back to your message, when necessary. Determine ahead of time what sentence or two is a likely "sound bite" that the reporter will want to use in his or her report. Make sure you communicate that. Since your interview will be edited to fit with what they want, do your utmost to make sure they will air the "bite" that contains a succinct expression of your message. And with a little practice, you might even start feeling comfortable on camera.

### **III. Other Methods for Communicating Your Message Locally**

In addition to the internet and the methods above, there are a few other communication tools worth mentioning. All can be used successfully for getting your message out to a wider audience and expanding your base of support locally.

- **Community meetings/events/forums.** Speaking at hospitals, support groups, community clubs like Rotary and Kiwanis, religious institutions, universities, or other gatherings can have a major impact. Find the person in your WAPC chapter who is willing, available and effective in such settings. If you're the speaker, try to be relatively brief in the talk (no more than the time allotted), focus on your story, include things that not only might make people cry but also will make them laugh, and be sure to leave them with hope and a clear message about what they are expected to do.
- **Fliers.** These can be used to inform the general public and as an effective way of developing your base of support by finding interested people. Fliers should be kept simple, be eye-catching, and be clear about how people can be involved.
- **Petitions.** Petition drives are not the advocacy tool that will change public policy on an issue (unless you happen to have tens of millions of signatures), but they can be a good organizing and communications tool. Having people collect signatures puts the issue in the face of every shopper (or wherever petitioners may be stationed). And the names collected on petitions represent potential volunteers/supporters to whom you can turn again.
- **Your Own Event.** Throughout this section, we have discussed ways to enhance events, and indeed events are wonderful ways to recruit new people and to build energy among those you already have. The planning, the camaraderie, the sense of accomplishment, and the public exposure all make them part of any prostate cancer advocate's toolkit.

On the other hand, don't forget that events require much energy and logistical organizing to ensure that they happen properly. And if you are going to hold a public event, you definitely want it to be a good one! So, think carefully in your planning process as to whether public events (and what kind) will be effective tactics to help you accomplish your goals and whether you have the resources to pull off a really good event. People in your group will often propose events,...but not all ideas have to be implemented all the time!

Prepared August 2008 for Women Against Prostate Cancer  
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