

Media relations and social media outreach basics

You may decide to reach out to news media outlets or use social media platforms as part of your personal communications strategy. Or, you may be approached by a news reporter who wants to interview you about a health care topic.

Initial considerations

- Do the audiences you want to reach receive their information through the news media outlet(s) or the social media platform(s) you plan to use?
- Does your employer have policies for social media use or for appearing in traditional news media that would affect you?
- What steps must you take to be crystal clear about whether you are speaking on your own behalf or as a spokesperson for an organization with which you are affiliated or employed?

News media and social media

News media have evolved from broadcast and print to include online publications and social media, each with independent and often highly engaged audiences. Some news media are online-only outlets and some blogs and podcasts with large followings are considered news media outlets. The line between news media and social media further blurred because most news outlets and their reporters also are active on social media, particularly on Twitter. Media outlets and reporters use social media to disseminate news, as well as to gather news.

What is newsworthy?

If your objective is to build public awareness of a health care issue, or you wish to join ongoing public debate about a health care policy, you may want to generate media attention for yourself, your organization and/or your policy position. Or, if you are trying to showcase an important health care initiative in your community, you may want to encourage media to develop stories about that initiative.

Keep in mind that reporters and editors are looking for what they consider to be new – therefore it's news. This means you need to identify how to showcase your information in ways that reporters and editors believe is different from what already has been covered. Does your story represent the first, the only, the largest or is your story or point of view singularly unique in some other way? Does your story fit with the audience and the focus of the media outlet?

Three general ways to generate news media coverage for your story or policy position are:

- News media interview and story: A reporter interviews you and writes or broadcasts a story that features you, and possibly others, and includes direct quotes from you and others. You can reach out to reporters and suggest story ideas, on which they may or may not follow up.

- Letter to the editor or opinion piece: You write a letter to the editor or write a guest column expressing an opinion and submit it to the news media outlet, following the guidelines required by the media outlet. The news outlet may choose to publish your piece.
- User-generated content: Many media outlets – including professional journals and newspapers – accept news or feature articles carrying your byline, which you write. Check with a media outlet to determine whether it accepts bylined articles and what guidelines you must meet.

Social media outreach

Social media is ubiquitous, and many millions of people use it for personal communications. You may be active on one or more social media platforms in your personal life, and you may wish to determine if using social media for your professional communications strategy can be effective. You will need to assess each channel (for example, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram) and determine whether it can help you achieve your communications goals and reaches your most important audiences. You also may choose to start a blog or look for opportunities to contribute as a guest blogger to popular blogs that reach your target audience.

With any social media outlet, you need to build your audience of followers and post interesting content frequently enough that those followers pay attention and forward your social media posts to their followers.

Transparency and collaboration

Before you engage in any outreach to news media or use social media to engage in the public forum, it is a good idea to consult with the communications professionals at your place of employment and at other organizations or associations where you have a leadership role. First, you want to make sure that you are not violating any policies governing media and social media. In addition, the communications professionals can help you be more successful in your media and social media outreach. Also, you may be able to collaborate with your employer or with an organization to which you belong, which could strengthen your message and extend your reach.