

Using the Media to Shine a Spotlight on Partnership Programs

BY KATHRYN UTAN

One of the most difficult tasks faced by any business or institution is how to establish a meaningful relationship with its target community—a relationship that benefits both the organization and those it seeks to serve. While many perceive medicine as existing on a higher level, more noble and altruistic than other commercial enterprises, those involved in the art of healing can learn some valuable lessons in self-promotion from the world of business. After all, the best treatments and programs are of no use to patients who don't even know they exist. That's where public relations and media planning become an important part of the equation.

According to Svitlana Posokhova, director of the Women's Wellness Center at Odessa Oblast Clinical Hospital, there are a wide variety of reasons AIHA-sponsored programs should actively engage in public relations and media planning. First and foremost, Posokhova says, are to advertise the services offered by the program and to attract patients.

Other equally important reasons to make use of public relations techniques include the needs

- to disseminate both the mission and message of the program,



Celebrities draw media attention to events. In November 1997, Uzbek First Lady Tatiana Karimova and US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton cut a ribbon at the official opening of the TASHMI II Women's Wellness Center located in Tashkent. Such events are usually covered by local, national, and international media, increasing the number of people who hear about an event.

- to educate the population,
- to attract sponsors and patrons to support the program,
- to establish contacts and relationships with other clinics and non-governmental organizations, and
- to create public "support groups" to help promote the program initiatives.

The Odessa clinic has established certain goals and objectives, Posokhova explains, and "we consider the media as potential partners who play a role in the achievement of these goals and objectives."

This concept of the media as a partner is an important one for both new and established facilities alike—the use of print and broadcast outlets can be a very effective tool for disseminating information to the widest possible audience and increasing the health literacy of the community.

Media Strategies—Getting Started

Ideally, a person or committee responsible for cultivating relationships with the media should be appointed and a comprehensive public relations strategy should be developed well before a facility opens or a program is instituted, but it is never too late to implement media relations techniques. Stick-

Public Relations 101—A Quick Overview

Promotion, advertising, and public relations are all related aspects of an overall communication strategy. Engaging the media—establishing personal contacts with journalists, getting them interested in telling your program's story—is a key element in successful public relations. Following are some other things to keep in mind:

Step 1

Identify your target audience—who are your programs geared toward? If you know who will benefit from your services, you can then determine the best way to reach them.

Step 2

Identify what is unique and important about your programs and services—why should the public be interested?

Step 3

Construct a consistent statement of purpose—explain why your programs and services are meaningful and valuable.

Step 4

Determine the best way to reach your target audience—what is the most effective way to get your message out to the public? Radio, television, printed advertisements, direct meetings with the public at businesses, clubs, schools, etc., and opening your facility to the public are some options. Budget constraints usually determine which path to follow, but keep in mind that if you can generate interest among the media, the publicity that results from the news coverage is virtually free.



ing to a well-planned media campaign and funneling most information through a single person or a small group will help ensure the public receives a strong, cohesive message about the program or facility rather than several—possibly conflicting—messages. (To read about one AIHA partner's successful use of media to promote its activities, refer to "Promoting the Iasi Women's Wellness Center in the Press" on page 30.)

"The staff should be schooled in their roles and responsibilities in this area," Posokhova explains, "all printed materials should be prepared in advance and all media contact should be carefully planned to ensure it goes smoothly."

An integral responsibility of the person in charge of media relations is, of course, establishing personal contacts with the press—especially those most useful in promoting the goals of the facility, Posokhova notes. "Acquaint the journalists with the center's activities, provide them with accurate information, arrange for them to meet with patients, provide them with success stories . . . make them interested."

Wayne L. Pines, president of healthcare at APCO Associates, a worldwide public affairs and strategic communications firm headquartered in Washington, DC, agrees. "It is especially important for new facilities to establish personal contact with members of the press," Pines says. "Call or visit the journalists responsible for covering healthcare or news in that particular region. Think about your information from the perspective of the reporter who will be writing the story—make sure it is relevant to the community serviced by the media outlet; that it is in simple, understandable language, and that it will interest readers," he advises.

Grabbing the Media's Attention—And Keeping It

One way of sparking media interest is to provide press releases detailing the program's services, objectives, and upcoming events, Posokhova says. It is also a good idea to provide background on both the institution and key staff members who are experts in their respective fields and can help verify and explain clinical matters. Other methods include holding news conferences and arranging for personal interviews and guided tours of the facility.

Another extremely effective way of ensuring media interest is arranging to have a public official or religious, community, or cultural leader present at press conferences, opening-day ceremonies, or other special events. Public figures generally draw media attention in their own right, and linking a well-known name to a program or event almost guarantees coverage by the press.

When inviting the media to an event or press conference, be proactive—anticipate what journalists need to know to report an engaging story. Be sure to have on hand an adequate supply of media materials such as news releases, background information on the program, biographical data for key staff members, and a list of additional resources and contacts. Schedule time for a tour of the facility and arrange for interviews with a few of the patients, if possible. Always be aware of opportunities for eye-catching photographs—a demonstration of new equipment or techniques, a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by dignitaries or well-known personalities, or anything else that makes a strong visual statement can be very useful in positioning the program in the minds of the public.

Dr. Svitlana Posokhova's Practical Advice for Dealing With the Media

- Timeliness is a major aspect of journalism—be sure to provide the media with the most current and topical information available and check with journalists or editors about deadlines.
- Never lie.
- The purpose of a media relations program is to provide journalists with accurate information; anticipate the types of questions that may come up, and prepare the answers in advance.
- Always be sure to have adequate quantities of media materials (press releases, hand-outs with background information on the program or facility, biographical information of key staff members, photographs, etc.).
- Inform the staff that all requests for media visits, interviews, photographs, or videotaping should first be approved by management.
- Keep employees up-to-date on upcoming media events and discuss potential problems, difficulties, and adverse reactions.
- If a representative of your organization is scheduled to meet with a well-known person, ask his or her permission before inviting media coverage.
- If a translator or interpreter will be used, brief him or her on the content of the upcoming speech or exchange.
- Do not be offended if a journalist asks "uncomfortable" questions. It is a journalist's job to ask difficult questions—try to answer as honestly as possible. Getting defensive is not appropriate or helpful.
- If the information published by a medium is positive, call to thank the journalist; if the information is negative, call to find out the reason; and if the information is incorrect, call to clarify the error first then follow up with a written explanation.
- Maintain a media archive—include video or tape recordings of all news conferences, copies of press releases and hand-outs, and clippings of relevant newspaper and magazine articles.



Svitlana Posokhova

Photo: AIHA archives.

Guidelines for Writing a Press Release

Any decision, announcement, event, or development that affects the community and may have broader local, regional, or national news value is an opportunity to get publicity. It is generally a good idea to alert the media of an upcoming event first with a telephone call, then follow up with a written press release. A press release should ideally be less than two pages in length and give specific, compelling details about the event—it must highlight the reasons the event is newsworthy.

Following are some guidelines for writing an effective press release:

- Remember to answer the questions a reporter must know to write a story: Who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Write in clear, concise, and easily understandable language—avoid overuse of adjectives and flowery phrases as well as overly technical or clinical jargon.
- Keep journalistic style in mind when preparing a press release—the first paragraph or two should be able to stand alone; place elaborating details in descending order of importance.
- Proofread carefully for accuracy—check not only spelling, but dates, times, places, etc.
- Always include a name and telephone number people can call for more information.
- Prepare a separate attachment (if possible) with more detailed background information on the facility, program, key staff members, etc.

It may also be helpful to follow up by sending journalists some photographs and a post-event press release detailing what happened, who attended, some important remarks, and a reiteration of the goals of the program.

Posokhova notes that public relations is an on-going process that does not end once a center has opened. “Periodic news conferences will ensure that the results and achievements of the center, as well as new medical techniques and treatment options, are covered. This will help remind the public of the center’s existence,” she explains.

By providing the media with relevant publications and articles, inviting journalists to various events, and being both accessible and willing to answer questions, the staff member designated to be the press contact can turn the center into a reliable source of health information—a place reporters can look to for information that is “true, topical, timely, and new,” Posokhova says.

Become a Media Resource

“Maintain professional relations and constantly provide useful and accurate information. Become a resource for the media and always be accessible,” she advises. Identify noteworthy topics and developments that will make interesting news stories and pass this information along to journalists. In this manner a mutually-fulfilling relationship can be forged.

It is this sort of relationship that can help build the credibility of the center, its physicians, staff, and programs. And credibility, according Pines, is far from a given. “Credibility must be earned and actively preserved.” A center can gain credibility with the media by being able to provide journalists with material that is “inherently honest and truthful, scientifically accurate, and does not



Photo: AIHA archives.

Photos that show how something is done or convey an atmosphere draw the attention of viewers.

Above: Dr. Ravshan Umarov, director of the Neonatal Resuscitation Training Center in Tashkent, demonstrates intubation techniques at the opening of the Center in 1997.

Below: Using star power to attract “media attention.” American actress Jane Fonda draws attention to AIHA’s Moscow/Pittsburgh partnership and to women’s reproductive health while on a tour of Savior’s Hospital for Peace and Charity in Moscow.



Photo: AIHA archives.

Tips for Getting Good Photographs

- Avoid busy, cluttered backgrounds—they may detract from your subject.
- Don’t photograph subjects head-on. Photos taken from a slight angle appear more natural.
- Try to get candid shots—they are more interesting than the usual photographs of people’s heads.
- Photograph groups in a natural cluster rather than a stiff, staged row.
- Avoid photographing too many people in a group.
- Obtain a release that includes the following information: subject’s name; subject’s signature; date, time, and place photograph was taken; organization’s name; and a statement granting permission for the photograph to be used for publicity or advertising purposes.



Photo: AIHA archives.

Positioning yourself as a knowledgeable professional whom journalists can come to for answers is one strategy toward developing positive media relations. Here Ludmila Budkina, chief midwife at the Minsk WWC, answers questions for reporters.

over-promise,” Pines says. If the facility can back up its words with actions, “that credibility with the press is translated into credibility with the public.”

The Odessa Women’s Wellness Center works with roughly 12 media outlets—some on a regular basis, according to Posokhova. The staff members responsible for public relations call journalists to invite them to various events or arrange for television appearances or regular features, for example. “A local TV channel broadcasts a live program called ‘Health’ on which we try to talk about problems at least once a month—this approach is very attractive to the public,” she notes. “Another local channel broadcasts two- or three-minute advertisements to promote a healthier lifestyle, and to help prevent STDs, AIDS, and breast cancer.”



Photo: AIHA archives.

Be sure to invite a variety of media to your event. Here television and print journalists record the presence of Dr. Marilyn Pifer, the wife of the US ambassador to Ukraine, at the opening of the Kiev WWC.

Guidelines for Press Conferences and Media Events

News conferences and media events are planned opportunities that help an organization get important messages out to the media. A news conference can be used to explain complex or controversial topics, to highlight a newsworthy event, or to give journalists an opportunity to interview an important person. Generally, a press conference should only be used when the information cannot be adequately conveyed by any other means.

Listed below are some tips for planning press conferences and media events:

- Plan things carefully—invite media representatives far enough in advance for editors to arrange for reporters and photographers to cover the event. Time the conference to accommodate news deadlines, if possible. Prepare adequate quantities of hand-out material in advance and be sure that any visuals will photograph well from any place in the room.
- Call media outlets the day before the event to remind them of the time and place.
- Prepare executives and others who will be interviewed—make sure they understand the topics to be discussed and help them prepare for any difficult questions that may be asked. Advise them to give honest, clear answers in a pleasant and cooperative manner. If they do not know the answers to certain questions, they should say so and offer to find out.
- Try to make the event flow naturally from one stage to the next. Keep it interesting and cordial.

Public Relations—A Continuous Process

Community relations cannot be static—strategies must be constantly evaluated and updated. Look back on an event to discover what approaches proved most successful in garnering media and public interest; finely tune those methods and discard others that were less effective. Be aware of what is happening in the community and how the center’s programs can best serve the needs of the public.

By actively engaging the media in the process of publicizing the activities of AIHA-sponsored partnerships, the process of informing the community becomes much easier. And well-informed people can begin to make intelligent healthcare decisions—to take control of their well-being by making lifestyle changes. Indeed, a relationship of cooperation and understanding between partnerships and the media can benefit both sides but, in the long run, the real winners are the members of the communities served by them.

Kathryn Utan is a staff writer at AIHA.