time to change

let's end mental health discrimination

Using the Media to Reach Your Audience

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In this section:

1. Introduction

When considering the media you are going to approach, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is the audience I am aiming at?
- What media do they watch/listen to/read?
- Does my story fit into the remit of my chosen media outlet? Is it newsworthy to them?
- Is my story of national interest or does it have a purely regional focus?
- Is this a specialist issue or will it appeal to a wider audience?
- What are the chances of getting my story covered in the media outlets I have chosen?

2. Your media plan

Having a media plan will make the media relations for your event or campaign more focused and effective. Below is a step-by-step guide to writing your plan.

Step 1: Introduction

This sets out the scene, outlines what you are doing and why, what is happening and who is involved. The introduction should also place an event or activity in a wider context (e.g. whether it is the result of recent research findings or a national campaign) and it should provide an outline of the media context (including whether you already have existing good media contacts).

Step 2: Aims and objectives

Successful publicity depends on clear aims. What are you setting out to achieve? Thinking this through will make it easier to focus your efforts and assess the effectiveness of your media.

Step 3: The target audience

The target audience is the people or groups of people that you most want your messages to reach. Whilst you may want some people to read/hear about you generally, you may be asking for specific action from others. You also have to be mindful of the perspective of your key audience and tailor your messages and sometimes tone and language accordingly – some you may want to win over or influence, others may already be 'on side'.

Step 4: Target media

Next you need to work out how you are going to reach the target audiences. Generally for a local event there may be little point contacting the national daily media. However, if your service/event is new or pioneering or if your campaign reflects policy change or controversy happening on a national level, it may be worth contacting specialist sections of national media, such as *Guardian Society*.

Step 5: Identify your key messages

Successful campaigns stick to one or two clear messages – the key points you want to get across to the audience. Keep things short and to the point. The messages should flow directly from your aims for doing the publicity. For example, a mental health awareness campaign may concentrate on two messages: that most people who use mental health services are not violent and that mental health problems can affect anyone. The main message is the one that you want to get across the most and you should use this for very short interviews on radio or TV.

- *Target your messages*. In addition to your key messages, you may decide to tailor specific messages for different sectors of the media depending on what you want to say directly to specific audiences, such as other service users and GPs.

- *Anticipate opposing messages*. In an ongoing campaign or when planning a controversial event, it is worth thinking about what other organisations and individuals may say to the press and develop counter arguments.

Step 6: Methods of gaining publicity

Some events are newsworthy in their own right, for example a new service or something that is the first of its kind. To ensure publicity, you will need a 'news hook' that you can use to make the event more attractive and increase the type and quality of coverage you achieve.

Step 7: Spokespeople

You need to identify and prepare one or two spokespeople for your group. A spokesperson is someone who speaks on behalf of the organisation, service or project. Having nominated spokespeople helps prevent the group from making contradictory statements.

Step 8: Personal stories

Journalists like to speak to people directly about their experiences. It is also important, and empowering, for those affected by an issue to have the opportunity to talk about their own personal stories. However, giving your personal story means exposing yourself to the media and, to some extent, losing control of that story. You need to be prepared and find ways of protecting yourself (see section 4 below).

Step 9: Putting it into practice

Once you have completed the above steps

- Write up your media plan and distribute it to all those working on the event/campaign
- Draw up a list of media to be contacted – libraries are a good source of information
- Find out the press days and deadlines of the targeted media
- Prepare a press release, and accompanying information
- Identify and brief your spokespeople

3. Some tips on writing a press release

- ***Do your homework.*** If writing a press release for an event linked to a national campaign or programme (such as Time To Change), find out from their public relations department if there is a standard format or wording that must be used. Make sure the correct logos in terms of size, colour and position are used.

- ***Is your news 'newsworthy'?*** Will the press be interested and do you have something of importance to their readers/listeners/viewers? Try to make your press release timely. Tie it to current events or social issues if possible. Make sure that your story has a good news hook.
- ***Get the timing right.*** Allow plenty of time before your event to inform the media. Bear in mind some journalists on smaller publications may work part time so don't leave it too late. Most press releases are marked 'for immediate release' so can be used straightaway but that's no good if the journalist you're sending it to is on holiday.
- ***Speak to the journalist before sending the press release.*** Making contact prior to sending the press release is important to make sure you have the right person and contact details.
- ***Start strong.*** You only have seconds to grab the readers' attention. Your headline and first paragraph should tell the story. The rest of your press release should provide the detail.
- ***Include your contact details.*** Make sure your contact details are shown in a prominent style in the header.
- ***Remember to date your press release.*** Put a date on, ideally the same date as the day on which you send it.
- ***Choose a relevant headline.*** Don't worry about having the snappiest of headlines. Newspapers and magazines have dedicated staff who summarise the story in a catchy title. You just need to make sure your title is vaguely interesting, makes sense and is noticeable.
- ***Consider the "W" questions.*** Who, what, where, when and why?
- ***Write for the media.*** On occasion, media outlets, especially online media, will pick up your press release and run it in their publications with little or no modification. More commonly, journalists will use your press release as a springboard for a larger feature story. In either case, try to develop a story as you would like to have it told.
- ***Use examples to illustrate.*** Real-life stories that illustrate your point can be very powerful - but keep it short and concise.
- ***Stick to the facts.*** Tell the truth. Avoid fluff, embellishments and exaggerations. If using a quote, state the source.
- ***Beware of jargon.*** The best way to communicate your news is to speak plainly, using everyday language. Jargon is language specific to certain professions or groups and is not appropriate for general readership. Avoid such terms as "sectioning" "care programme approach" and "forensic services."

- ***Avoid the hype.*** The exclamation mark (!) is your enemy. There is no better way to destroy your credibility than to include a bunch of hype. If you must use an exclamation point, use one. Never do this!!!!!!!!!!!
- ***Add visuals where possible.*** Pictures can decide if a story gets used or not, especially if you have a good visual angle.
- ***Include further details as 'Editor's Notes' at the end of your press release.*** Editor's notes are for anything else you want the editor to know, such as links to relevant websites.

4. Protecting yourself

In order to feel safe when working with the media, it is important to seek support and also try to control the process.

Be prepared

- Get all the facts before agreeing to media work, so that you can make an informed decision. What will you be asked to talk about, who else will be involved, do you want to be identified and photographed? The more information you can check in advance the better.
- Think about the media organisation which has requested an interview before you agree. Do you like their overall coverage on mental health? If you are unsure, try and check by looking on the internet, or talking to others who may know of them.
- If you feel that a journalist is trying to manipulate your words or has a very fixed agenda that does not fit with your story, then do not work with them.
- Always consider what doing media work will involve, and whether you are prepared for the consequences. Do you have the time? Are you ready to take part in a stressful process? Do you feel supported enough by friends, colleagues or family?
- If you have been asked to talk about your personal experiences, always consider the implications. Are you prepared to go public with your story?
- Don't be afraid to negotiate with journalists before and during interviews and stories. Once a story has been printed, there is little you can do to change it (unless the information is factually incorrect, in which case you can request that they print an apology or print the corrections).

Get Support

- Before agreeing to do media work, discuss what's involved and the possible risks and benefits, with friends and family or other members of your user group.

- Talk through what you want to say in an interview with friends, family or members of your user group. This will help you to structure your thoughts and decide what you feel comfortable talking about.
- Ask someone to come with you for support during and after an interview. It is just as important to debrief with someone as it is to prepare for media work, to help you go back over what you said, and to provide emotional support, especially if you have been talking about your own experiences.
- If you are talking about someone else in an interview or referring to your user group's work, always make sure that you have their permission to do so.
- Don't be afraid to ask someone more experienced in media work for advice - either a member of a user group who has worked with the media, or contact Open Up for support and advice throughout the whole process.

Deciding whether to reveal your identity

- When you give an interview to a journalist, or even just provide background information, you need to consider if you want to reveal your identity or remain anonymous. Bear in mind that the readers, listeners or viewers may include people who know you – not just friends and family, but employers, clients and acquaintances. Remember also that newspaper articles are often available indefinitely online. Consider carefully how you will feel about having the information you have disclosed publicly available in a year's or even 10 years time.
- If the interview is about your personal story, how much of your personal life do you want to expose publicly and linked to your name? Think about what parts you feel happy talking about and what parts you do not want to disclose.
- You may also need to consider the consequences of linking you or your group's name to a particular story, particularly if the information involved is sensitive or confidential.

Degrees of anonymity

1. *'Off the record' interview.* We strongly advise against this, because you have no guarantee that a journalist will stick to your request unless you have a good and trusting relationship with them.
2. *Written case history.* You can provide an anonymous written statement or account with a changed name and note to say that the name has been changed to protect your identity. You need to ensure that there are no identifying details, which give away your address, specific services or individuals you are in contact with.

3. *Anonymous interview.* This is easiest with the press as they only need to change your name and use a library picture if necessary. Again make sure you do not inadvertently give identifying details. It is also quite easy to be anonymous on radio, where the station would either use an actor's voice or apply a mechanical distortion to your voice. For TV, producers can use silhouette, out-of-focus images, hats or close-ups to visually conceal your identity – although this is sometimes not very convincing. You can be identified by your voice, so make sure they use an actors' voice or distortion. Make sure you are happy with what they offer and even get it in writing, before you go ahead.
4. *Spokesperson interview.* In press interviews, you can give the opinion of your group but not be named, and instead be quoted as 'a spokesperson for X group says…'.
5. *Unattributed interview.* This derives from the parliamentary lobby system, which uses phrases such as 'sources close to the Prime Minister'. The equivalent would be 'a source said', or 'a user group who preferred to remain anonymous said'.
6. *Named interview.* With good preparation this enables you to promote your groups' message with confidence and plug the name of your group. Make sure you've got agreement from the producer or journalist on how you will be titled.

5. Working with journalists

The key to effective media work is having good working relationships with journalists. The best way to do this is to understand how they work and what they need. Here are some guidelines.

Treat journalists in an open manner

Like most people, journalists do not like other people to make assumptions about them. It is best to approach them in a neutral way. Do not assume that the journalist is automatically going to stitch you up. Be cautious, but be friendly and helpful.

Many journalists are generalists

Most journalists, including health and social affairs specialists, work on a wide range of stories. Only those working specifically on mental health stories will be aware of some of the issues you understand fully. Be prepared to explain basic background information from the start.

Journalists need contacts

Journalists rely on a network of people for information and quotes. Generally journalists will work hard to maintain a relationship with someone they consider to be a good contact. For instance, if

you are unable or unprepared to respond to a request, a journalist will always be grateful if you can help them to find another spokesperson. Be sure to get that person's permission before you pass on their contact details though!

Journalists work to deadlines

Journalists are usually working to tight deadlines. Sometimes they have only 1 or 2 hours to put together a story. There is no point talking to a journalist if it is 5pm on the day their publication goes to press or shortly before the programme they are working on is due to be broadcasted.

Journalists get edited

Individual journalists have much less control over the things they write then one might expect. News and Feature editors basically tell journalists what to write about and how it should be written. Sub editors edit articles and write headlines and introductions. Be aware that a journalist's sympathetic piece about your group may be completely changed by the sub-editor.

Are all journalists thoughtless and insensitive?

Journalists who produce stories which present users and survivors in a negative light are more likely to be ignorant and in a hurry rather than actively prejudiced (unless it is a deliberate editorial decision). Given new information about an issue, they may be surprisingly willing to include a different perspective in future articles.

Journalists need groups to respond quickly

It is no good telling a journalist you will get back to them once your steering group has met and discussed the issue. Make sure your delegated spokespeople have a good understanding of what the group thinks on most issues so that they can respond quickly to a journalist's request.

Learn to speak in sound bites

Complex issues can be conveyed in simple, easily understandable phrases which stick in the mind, known as 'sound bites'. Who can forget Tony Blair's "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime"? Think about condensing your main message into a sound bite in advance.

Don't promise more than you can give

Try to deliver what you promise to journalists. If you say you'll do something and then can't, apologise and explain your reasons.

Expect to be edited

News requires only a sound bite, which could be as small as a phrase or two sentences lasting a few seconds for broadcast news. Likewise press journalists will include anything from a phrase to two sentences in news reports. Broadcast documentaries, live interviews, debates and press features will use more of your interview but will still edit to pull out your strongest comment on the angle of their story. You may find that 99 per cent of the opinion you gave is sacrificed for the one per cent experience. If you don't want this to happen, make sure you don't give any personal experience unless you've put across your opinion with it.

Negotiate for some editorial control

Journalists are under no obligation to let you see or hear the broadcast item before it is transmitted, nor print journalists to let you see their copy. However, it is often possible for them to let you know which quotes they have used, and occasionally they may let you see the article or even let you sit in on a broadcast edit. Most journalists have no problem with you asking for your quotes to be read back to you. You can ask if you can read the article before it goes to print; although in most cases this request will be met by a 'no', some journalists may agree. It is well worth trying to negotiate more control over your contribution by explaining how service users have been misrepresented in the past.

Holding events with journalists present

If you are holding an event at which journalists and/or a photographer are going to be attending, brief people if possible in advance or announce first thing at the event itself so that people are aware of their presence. Make it clear that people don't have to talk to journalists and can refuse to have their photograph taken.

6. Preparing for a media interview

An interview gives you an excellent opportunity to communicate your message. Being well prepared will help you feel comfortable during the interview, and will also enable you to focus your mind on what you want to say and to stick to it. The list below will help you to prepare for an interview.

What's the story?

You need to find out whether the interview will be for a news story or a feature. News interviews are generally shorter and require just one or two quotes, whereas interviews for features are usually more probing and rely a lot more on you talking about your personal experiences.

What's the angle?

Find out the journalist's angle on the story. The journalist may just say something very general, such as "It's about the opening of a new mental health service". Try and find out more if you can, and what they think is interesting about the story. Will the story focus on how services will improve life for local service users, or on opposition to its opening from local residents?

Why me?

Find out what the journalist wants you to talk about. They could be looking for:

- *Factual information* of the "who, where, how, why" variety. If so, your own contribution should be acknowledged but it will be quoted in the third person for the broadcast/article.
- *Your opinion*, in which case you will probably be allowed to speak directly/be quoted directly. Before you give your opinion, establish if you are expected to speak as an individual or as a spokesperson for your group. As a spokesperson, you need to get the agreement of your group before speaking on their behalf. You may wish to issue a statement for the group rather than give an interview.
- If you are being asked to comment on a third person's views, think about the likely consequences of your comments, especially if they have an impact on your group (e.g. they provide funding).
- *Human interest*. This is the most common reason for journalists to contact people who have direct experience of mental health issues. Remember to use your experiences to reinforce your key messages. Clearly define your boundaries and stick to these.

Who else?

You need to establish the context of the article/broadcast item your comments are going to be placed in. Ask if they are interviewing anyone else. If someone has already commented, ask what they have said and write their comments down. Anticipate possible opposing viewpoints and answer them in your comments.

Practicalities

Before the interview, make sure you know the answers to these basic questions:

- *Who?* Name of interviewer, name of the media organisation they work for, his/her contact details and title within the media organisation. It is worth knowing what field the journalist covers. If they are freelance, identify who they are approaching with the story. Be aware that for broadcast items, a camera crew and others will be present at the interview.
- *When?* When is the interview? When is the deadline? When will the piece be printed/broadcast? For news articles/reports, the interview may be very soon after the initial contact between you and the journalist, unless you have informed the journalist in advance of an event. This is especially the case for a telephone interview. For features, there is usually more time.
- *Where?* Where will it take place – in a studio, on location, or on the telephone? Try and choose somewhere where you feel comfortable. For phone interviews, you may want to make notes of what you say so you can ring back and amend something.
- *What's the format?* Will it be live or pre-recorded? If the interview is pre-recorded, ask how long the interview will last and what length the clip to be used will be (this will help you to tailor the length and detail of your response). You can expect a 45 minute interview to be reduced to a 30 second broadcast.

Your visual image – top tips for television interviews

- Darker colours suggest authority
- Avoid black or all white
- Lighter colours suggest light subject
- Bangles can jangle!
- Thin stripes and small dots can cause 'strobing'
- Wear plain ties
- Keep hair tidy and off face
- Have a shave (if applicable!)
- "Costumes" such as straight-jackets (!) don't help unless part of a very carefully considered campaign photoshoot

Before the interview

- Check that what you want to say is factually correct.

- Practise saying aloud your key messages confidently to someone or in front of a mirror. Remember, for TV, body language is important.
- Practise answering any difficult questions that may come up
- Arrive well in time for the interview, as this will help to settle your nerves
- If you are suffering from nerves, there are many techniques to help you unwind. One suggestion is to focus outwards rather than inwards. Rather than focusing on internal anxieties about how you will perform, try focusing on the environment around you and on the interviewer. Some people also find deep breathing from the diaphragm to be calming.
- If it helps, ask if you can bring along a friend for moral support
- You could ask for a list of questions before the interview and practice answers beforehand. Some journalists may brief you before the interview, some may give you questions in advance but others will do neither.
- For television, and to a lesser extent, radio, it will not only be what you say that determines how viewers respond to you, but how you look and speak. Some media research has indicated that the image you present and how you deliver your message is noticed and judged considerably more that what you actually say!

During the Interview

- Re-state your boundaries.
- Be polite and friendly, but cautious. Never show annoyance, even if asked annoying or loaded questions.
- Start with a key message and end with a key message if possible. Use every opportunity to reiterate your own key messages in different ways. This will maximise the chances of some of them being used.
- Speak clearly at a measured pace. This may be difficult if you are nervous. Try speaking from your diaphragm rather than your throat. Slow down when delivering your key messages, to ensure that they come across clearly.
- Listen carefully to the question you are being asked. Remember, the most important question may be left to last, even after the interview appears to be over. Or the journalist may keep returning to the same question again and again.
- Be prepared to explain any terms you use.
- Use short quotes or soundbites if you can – these are likely to be used even if all else is edited.

- Don’t attempt to answer questions you don’t know the answer to.
- Although it may sound obvious, remember that the journalist is not your friend or your therapist, even though they may sound friendly – this is deliberately done in order to elicit further information from you. Anything you say may reach the wider audience.
- Try to avoid absolutes such as “never”. This will make it more difficult to challenge your statements.
- Try and end on a positive note.

After the interview

- Some people find it very useful to be able to talk about how the interview went to a friend they can trust. This is especially so if you were asked a lot of personal questions which brought up memories or difficult feelings.
- Think of your interview as having been a learning experience. If you encountered any problems, it would be worth thinking about how they could be avoided next time.
- Don’t be disheartened if the interview is heavily edited. This is to be expected. Don’t be too disheartened if your interview is not used at all. There are 101 reasons why this might be so. Think of it as valuable experience which can help you in the future.

You can find an excellent resource about being interviewed by the press on the Rethink website.