

How to Work with the Media



multiple sclerosis
international federation

Multiple Sclerosis International Federation

MSIF is a unique collaboration of national MS societies and the international scientific community. It leads the global MS movement in sharing best practice to significantly improve the quality of life of people affected by MS and in stimulating research into the understanding and treatment of the condition.

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Foreword

This booklet has been designed to help people working and volunteering for national MS Societies to develop positive and constructive relationships with the media, on the local, regional and national level.

Staff and volunteers from national MS Societies in different countries will relate to the booklet in different ways, depending on their experience of working with the media and their unique cultural setting. However, we believe this booklet 'has something for everyone' and will be a useful guide on how to work with the media for both the newcomer and the experienced.

Introduction

This booklet gives guidance to working and volunteering in national MS Societies, their branches and chapters, on developing effective media communications at both national and local level. It has been produced in response to an MSIF review, which highlighted a clear role for MSIF to provide national MS Societies with guidance on best practice in media communications.

MS Societies share a common goal with the media – both want and need to communicate accurate and timely information. It therefore makes sense for the people working within MS Societies to establish themselves as a colleague in this effort, not an adversary.

Some definitions

The **media** may be broadly defined as the business of conveying information, although the term generally refers to the mass communication of publications and broadcast (including newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the internet).

An **editor** is a person responsible for the editorial aspects of a newspaper, magazine or television broadcast.

Reporters or journalists discover information about news events and either describe or write about them for a newspaper or magazine or for radio or television.

A **press officer** is a person working within an organization whose specific role is to deal with the media.

Developing a relationship with the media

The first rule in establishing a relationship with the media is that your communication must always qualify as 'news'. It is important that your news meets some or all of the following criteria:

- Information – does it contain something that listeners, viewers or readers don't already know?
- Timeliness – is the information being provided well enough in advance to allow it to be taken advantage of within the season, schedule or calendar?
- Accuracy – will factual information help people understand something better or in an unbiased way?
- Significance – will it affect the lives of listeners, viewers or readers?
- Scope – does it have an impact on the majority of the community?
- Interest – is it intrinsically able to attract and hold public attention?
- Uniqueness – is it unlike any other information, or if similar, has it an element that makes it stand out?
- Human Interest – is it relevant on a personal level to many people because of a home town or family aspect?
- Relevance – it is a topic that enhances public understanding of a constant, or pressing local issue?

Although the media is generally driven by unanticipated events, it still provides a powerful and far-reaching opportunity to communicate MS Society messages. An MS Society's identity is best communicated to journalists through a strong, cooperative relationship.

Communicating the MS Society and the MS movement to the media

There are several ways in which you can create and enhance your relationship with those working in the media and convey a positive impression about your MS Society.

Following the suggestions below will help your MS Society gain the most from the media:

- Develop a list of media contacts that includes editors, reporters and journalists who cover health issues and keep them informed of important activities of your MS Society. The following suggestions will help you develop a media contacts list:
 - Identify publications that cover the types of news relevant to your MS Society;
 - Familiarise yourself with these publications;
 - When you first call, ask whether it is a good time, or if they would like to be contacted later;
 - Ask how they would like to receive information (fax, email, phone etc);
 - Ask what kind of stories interest them;
 - Make sure you get their direct phone line, fax and/or email;
 - Keep a note of reporter responses – it may be worth opening a file in which you keep notes of what has been discussed each time contact is made;
 - When you subsequently call, remind the reporter of what was discussed before, for example 'you might remember we spoke about our fundraising marathon a few weeks ago'. This helps build a relationship.

- Invite them to any event your organization may have. They are more likely to remember you after a face-to-face meeting.
- Answer all media enquiries promptly, fully, accurately and courteously. If you do not know the answer, find it and get back to the reporter immediately or refer the reporter to another appropriate source for the information such as the Multiple Sclerosis International Federation or another national MS Society. In this way, you can establish your MS Society as a valuable and helpful information resource and develop a valuable relationship to secure balanced, consistent and frequent coverage in the future.
- All reporters work by deadlines. Your first question must always be 'What is your deadline?'. You must provide the information quickly so that the reporter meets that deadline. If you do not provide the information in time, your side of the story will not be told. Furthermore, that reporter will not come back to you on other stories.
- Stress facts and keep to the main story. Many reporters react against attempts at self-promotion. At the same time, use your contact with the reporter to explain your MS Society and how it works. There might be future story possibilities if that reporter understands the MS Society in context, beyond the particular aspect or service in which he/she is currently interested.
- Ensure you give all reporters equal access to information. Favouring one reporter can be extremely damaging to your relationships with others. However, if a reporter contacts

you for a story, their initiative should be respected; there is no obligation to call other reporters.

- When dealing with reporters that appear hostile, sceptical or disinterested, do not react emotionally. Discuss issues calmly and back-up statements with facts. Do not lose your temper or act defensively, as this can easily result in an uncomplimentary story.
- It is not worth approaching the media with a story unless it is newsworthy. Appearing desperate and wasting reporters' time will result in your MS Society being ignored.

The interview

Always ensure the relevant person is available for an interview with the media. This may be a 'press officer' working for the MS Society or selected spokesperson that will represent the MS Society. Below are some suggestions that will help ensure a successful interview:

- Be warm and caring, yet professional.
- Use clear language that is easy to understand. Try not to use specific terminology or sound like you are quoting complex medical documents. Neither reporters nor the audience can relate to something they do not understand.
- Have a positive attitude. Welcome the interviewer and questions.
- Try to find out who else is being interviewed for the story.
- Be prepared. Make sure you have all the facts ready to support your story and that they come to mind easily. Do not exaggerate or make claims that you can't back up.
- Anticipate questions that might be asked and think how you will respond. You may even ask for a list of questions in advance so you can prepare answers.
- Take the point of view of the public interest. Put yourself and the MS Society squarely on the side of the people.
- If asked a direct question, give a direct answer.
- Answer one question at a time. If more than one question is asked at a time, answer your favourite first. Ensure you have finished answering the first before moving on and answering subsequent questions.
- Support answers with human interest stories that are relevant to the issue being discussed. This not only backs up your statement, but also ensures your MS Society is seen as being on the side of those in need.

- Never speculate. Only give factual information that you can verify.
- If a question contains incorrect information or inappropriate language, do not repeat it, even to deny it. You may answer the question, but repeating any defamatory question may result in a misquote.
- Always tell the truth, even if it is unpleasant. If there is bad news, the MS Society should be the first to tell it. The public trust and credibility of the MS Society relies on its integrity. It is important not to be seen to be hiding anything.
- Avoid 'off the record' discussion, do not make a statement unless you want it quoted.
- Consider possible follow up to the interview. Keep a note of the points the interviewer was particularly interested in or misinformed about, and provide detailed information on them immediately.

Media spokespersons

Below are some suggestions to help those representing the MS Society prepare for an interview:

- Ensure the chosen spokesperson feels comfortable talking with the media and has some human interest stories to tell.
- Identify a spokesperson ahead of time. If possible select one spokesperson for each topic who can speak on that subject with credibility.
- Work with the spokesperson in advance, making sure they understand all the key points and how they may emphasize them effectively.
- Keep spokespeople informed with all the latest news in the field of the expertise.
- Conduct practice interviews.

The press conference/briefing

The difference between a press conference and a press briefing relates to the value of the news. The press conference makes an announcement, or delivers information that is of a critical nature. The press briefing is less formal, and is used to provide an overview or background information on something that is of interest to the public or the press. Both are 'on the record'.

A press conference or briefing provides an opportunity to present detailed facts, to clarify confusing issues, and to answer questions from reporters. Press conferences are not recommended. They should only be used when the story really warrants it or as a damage limitation exercise. Reporters do not want to waste their valuable time.

Press briefings are generally less formal and cameras are not present. They may therefore be held in an ordinary meeting room. A press conference will however require special arrangements, and the following suggestions should be considered:

- Fix a time that is appropriate both for the MS Society and media, bearing in mind reporter's deadlines.
- Identify a location that is convenient for the media. Avoid rooms with windows or mirrors as these can cause problems for cameras.
- Prepare an agenda that provides details of each presentation and those taking part.
- Invite reporters several days in advance, and follow up with telephone calls.
- Provide a lectern (a stand for the spokesperson) with a microphone for speakers, as well as a space for reporter microphones.

- Ensure that all materials and the lectern are appropriately branded with the MS Society's logo.
- Arrive in advance to check the room is in order and that everything is in place and to test the equipment.
- Start promptly; do not waste reporters' valuable time.
- Have a well prepared opening presentation that does not last more than 5 minutes (if you can't say it in five minutes look at your presentation again and edit it). The presentation should be followed by a question and answer session.
- Provide press kits for reporters that should include: news release; copy of opening presentation; photographs of those involved in the story; charts and fact sheets; and any other relevant information. This could also be available on a CD or DVD.
- Ensure the MS Society has someone on duty to answer any follow up phone calls.

The written media

Writing a press release

The press release is the most common method of drawing media attention to a particular item of news. The focal point or subject matter may differ from culture to culture, but the basic structure of a press release is the same.

The most important aspect of a press release is the lead (first paragraph) which must contain the essential elements (see Box). The lead serves two purposes:

- to provide the most important facts; and
- to gain the attention of readers, so they will want to know more.

The 5 W's of the story:

Who?

What?

Why?

When?

Where?

A press release should then proceed to give a more detailed account, but with each subsequent paragraph containing facts of lesser importance than the previous one. If editors have to cut text due to limited space for a story, they tend to cut from the bottom.

All news editors will want the facts in a readable and orally comprehensible format. Avoid unnecessary adjectives, adverbs or editorial opinions. If an opinion is an essential part of the story, write it as a direct quote from the relevant person.

Ensure the press release is concise. Remember to keep it short and simple.

Once you have sent a press release to your media contacts, follow it up with a telephone call.

As a press release is considered an invite to a reporter to investigate or to a journalist to write an article, ensure that the appropriate people (press officer, spokesperson etc.) are available to answer their questions. If they are busy with another journalist, try to have a further person who can manage an 'interview' schedule and arrange an exact time at which an interview can be conducted or call can be returned.

Types of stories

There are two types of stories with the media:

- *News stories:* are generally reported in many media outlets (newspapers, magazines, television, radio and internet). The resulting story generally presents information provided in a press release. To place a news story, MS Societies must send press releases to many media outlets.
- *Feature stories:* are offered with the expectation of a major story, often accompanied by photos. Such features are written by a journalist assigned to the story by the newspapers, magazine, radio or television station. This journalist will conduct one or more interviews, often in the subject's home or place of business. To place such a feature story MS Societies must send a 'pitch letter' to sell the story, to just one journalist at a time.

The feature story

A feature story is a very effective way of developing the identity of an organization and furthering public understanding of an issue. Unlike a straight news item, a feature story allows some in depth examination of a particular aspect of an MS Society's work and must be people focused. The writer will have much greater scope for descriptions, explanations, human interest anecdotes (or case studies) and examples that appeal to the audiences' emotions.

When thinking of a feature story, first identify the target audience. Where does public understanding need to be enhanced? Are there any negative rumours that persist about MS or your organisation? A single positive feature can do more to enhance the image of the MS movement than a dozen factual reports.

A feature is an excellent way in which to deal with an issue. Try describing the work of a volunteer who has a special training or skill or focus on someone whose quality of life has been greatly changed and improved by your MS Society. Discuss with the editor ideas that may make an interesting feature which would appeal to their audience.

Electronic media

The great majority of people will have access to both television and radio, which are two of the most effective tools for communicating the message of the MS movement. In addition they may have access to the internet.

Radio

Despite the growth of television, radio remains popular. People listen to the radio in their cars, while working around the house, when walking and exercising. The programming range and number of channels make radio a highly accessible and effective way to communicate your MS Society's message. The overall radio audience is large and varied, but by targeting a particular programme or channel you may reach a particular group in terms of age, gender and area of interest.

Tips for radio interviews:

In addition to following the general tips suggested for interviews the following are specific to radio interviews:

- Maintain a distance of 14–20cm (6–8in) from the microphone.
- Talk normally. Microphones are very sensitive and volume will be adjusted accordingly during transmission.
- Avoid shuffling papers etc.
- Assume the microphone is 'live' and you are on air, unless told otherwise. Save any personal remarks for when you are certain the microphone is off.
- Ask for a brief rehearsal, though rarely will this be possible.

Television

The visual advantage of television is obvious. In many countries it offers the best opportunity to get the message through to the greatest numbers in the shortest time. It may target particular sectors of the population including opinion leaders, major donors and government officials.

There are various types of programmes that can convey the message of the MS Society: news, talk shows and documentaries etc. However, the primary requirement that newspapers and radio do not have – the information must be visual. Suggestions to ensure good television coverage:

- Ensure your story is newsworthy. Extensive resources are used in covering a news story for television. If a station is disappointed they may be reluctant to cover future stories.
- Telephone news directors of stations well in advance, do not rely on a press release alone.
- Ensure you have good visuals. Television needs an interesting scene, voice, face or some other way of visualizing your story.
- Check out the location and ensure adequate electrical outlets are available for equipment (you may wish to enquire about requirements in advance).
- If there are speeches or prepared statements ensure you have printed copies to give reporters, possibly as part of a Press Pack.
- Schedule the event in the morning to give plenty of time to prepare the final item for the evening news.

You may also wish to enhance the image of the MS Society by:

- Ensuring your logo is clearly visible

- Having a person with MS or member of staff tell your story – the most interesting aspect of television is about people.
- If appropriate, showing the MS Society in action (even if in the background) to make the shot ‘real’.

Tips for top interviews on camera

Preparation for television, especially when ‘live’, requires particular preparation and skills:

- Approach an interview as an important opportunity to get across the messages important to your MS Society, not just to respond to questions.
- Prepare carefully. Determine which are the three most important points you want to make and repeat them often. Use anecdotal examples to add colour and credibility to every assertion.
- Find the focus of the interview well enough in advance to anticipate the questions.
- Know the format and style of the interviewer or reporter.
- Provide the reporter with background material in advance.
- Arrive early so you can become accustomed to the setting and have a chat with the interviewer.
- Dress appropriately and remember your body language.
- Look, listen and speak to the person talking to you, not at the camera or yourself on the monitor.
- Say the most important information first and don't get lost in the details.
 - Do not discuss as it will make you sound equivocal.
 - Do not defend in such a way to make you sound defensive.
 - Do not debate!
- Challenge any effort to put words in your mouth.

- Once filming begins assume you are on air until told otherwise.

The 3 C's of an interview

- Confidence – Be confident in your knowledge, you know your subject better than the journalist
- Clarity – Use clear, conversational style and avoid jargon.
- Control – Take charge of the interview. Preparation is key. There is no such thing as a wrong question, only a wrong answer.

Internet

Your website is frequently the first communication a person sees on your MS Society. The front page of your website is therefore of primary importance. Many non-profit organizations have established web press rooms on their websites to provide immediate information to journalists, at least at the 'first pass' level. But to capture a journalist's interest and answer questions, a directory of press releases (which is what most non-profit press rooms are) just isn't enough.

Press room

A press room is an electronic media centre on your website including information e.g. on the history of the MS Society, background information, financial data, news and various contact information.

Many non-profit organizations now include 'virtual press kits,' which aren't a substitute for the traditional paper version (you don't want to tell journalists to 'just go to our website' or even 'it's all on this CD' when they take the time to show up at your press conference or event). A virtual press kit should provide what's in the paper version with further information like:

- The absolute latest news. Journalists who have come to expect the most up-to-the-minute information from your site will seek out your virtual press kit; it is a matter of consistently fulfilling expectations.
- Downloadable, high-resolution pictures to accompany stories.
- A directory of your experts. Make it easy for journalists to get to the expert on the particular subject they are covering.
- Backgrounders. Make sure the information in your backgrounders is relevant to the latest news you're pitching. Some backgrounders are too generic and simplistic to fill journalists' needs.
- Up-to-the-minute event calendars and timelines, updated daily if necessary. You want journalists to keep coming back for all the latest information. Nothing is less impressive than an outdated listing.
- Guidelines on writing and reporting on the topics or issue areas which are the focus on your MS Society.
- Audio and/or video clips. Definitely include multimedia if possible and transcripts for time-starved reporters.

Of course the more relevant information, the better. Resist flooding the press kit with useless content. Above all, avoid going overboard with hype or flashy presentations.

More tips for your online press room

- Feature a highly-visible link to your press room on your home page.
- Include clear contact information for your MS Society's primary media contact, and the back-up.
- Offer brief biographies of your MS Society's leaders and experts, to provide a context for quotes or coverage.

Photography

'A picture is worth a thousand words.' Napoleon Bonaparte
(French general, politician and emperor (1769–1821))

Despite Napoleon's famous observation, only a 'good' picture is worth a thousand words. Indeed, pictures can make all the difference and are one of the most dramatic ways of enforcing a story. Furthermore, a story is more likely to get printed with a good picture. However, MS is a very difficult subject to photograph. Many people do not like pictures that deal with the reality of MS related disabilities. You will need to think hard about how to convey your message within a picture that will really grab the readers' attention, drive their curiosity and make them want to read more.

Tips for good photography:

- Think what the picture says.
- Take people centred pictures, people are what the MS Society is here for.
- Ensure the logo is clearly visible, but not anywhere it would not naturally be placed (you do not wish the picture to look faked).
- Gear the photo to the theme. For example, show people in action.
- Faces speak for themselves so highlight them, particularly interaction between people.
- Make the scene interesting, do not just show a face but include some action or the environment in the background.
- If your photo depicts celebrities, try to seek out opportunities when they are doing something or at least interacting with others.

- Ban pictures of photo donations (usually cheques) and force photography to be more creative.
- Do not have more than four people in one photograph (unless aiming to show a crowd in which case ensure the MS Society is visibly within it).
- Avoid dark backgrounds.
- Obtain permission, in writing, from the people you are photographing and ensure you comply with national photography laws.

It is worth considering building up a picture library for your MS Society. To do this you will need to know some good photographers with appropriate experience.

A final note

It is crucial that your media efforts are fully integrated into your marketing and communications plan, timetable and budget.

Good Luck!

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