

## Chapter 8

### PUBLIC OUTREACH

*This chapter addresses the following topics:*

- Overview
- Public Outreach
- How to Get Your Message Across
- How to Issue a Press Release
- Being Interviewed
- Ideas for Generating News—Creating Opportunities

## OVERVIEW

The broader the scope of your chapter's influence, the more effective it will be. Influence comes through understanding. You strengthen your chapter and enhance the value of membership by:

- Creating awareness of the issues of concern to your members
- Taking a stand on legislation or regulations that will affect your members and their employers
- Ensuring that the public in your community understands that effective health care engineering and facility management is related to reducing rising medical costs and improving the quality of patient care.

For these reasons, public relations—outreach to identify non-legislative audiences of importance to your organization—and government relations/advocacy—outreach to public policy audiences—should be viewed in concert. They are two sides of the same coin and work best when they are done together.

## PUBLIC OUTREACH

For most people, the link between advocacy and public relations isn't as clear as it should be. Part of the problem lies in the way people traditionally view public relations—slick, somewhat superficial, and designed to put the best spin on a problem—and the way they view public affairs—often as manipulative and only focused on self-interest. After all, why else would they call PR guys “spin doctors,” and why would the term “lobbyist” have gained such a negative connotation? Those negative labels still apply in many organizations, but more enlightened groups look at public relations and advocacy as ways to tell their story and influence opinion in an ongoing, open, and strategic way. That means being honest, talking about what works and what doesn't, not saying “no comment,” and positioning messages to specific, highly targeted audiences instead of trying to influence the entire universe as we know it.

Advocacy is usually geared not to the general public or the general media, but to lawmakers and regulators, and it is usually focused on a specific set of issues. Advocacy is calling on your local or state legislator to voice your support of or opposition to an issue. The two disciplines overlap in that the effective use of public relations can raise awareness of your issues to the point that public opinion helps you win your advocacy efforts.

### Defining Your Audience

Whether it's public relations or advocacy, the first and most important step is to identify the audience you want to reach. After all, since the real purpose of communications is to maintain or change the behavior of an individual or a group, you first have to figure out whose behavior needs to be modified. An audience is as an individual or group whose opinions have a significant impact on your organization and whom you want to influence in some way.

Typical audiences for your chapter might include:

- Current members
- Suppliers/vendors
- Potential members
- Hospital administrators and CEOs
- Legislators (local, state, national)
- Regulators (local, state, national)
- Other professional organizations
- General public
- Opinion leaders (members of hospital boards, governing councils, public health agencies, etc.)
- Local media

Once you've defined the audience, you need to establish priorities. You are unlikely to have sufficient resources to reach all audiences with the same amount of energy, so pick your key targets carefully. Once you've done that,

examine where they stand on the issue in question and how you'd like them to think about it. The following chart might be a useful guide for determining this information.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Current Thinking/ Understanding of the Issue</b>	<b>What We'd Like Them to Think</b>
Hospital administrators	Don't really appreciate the growing complexity of the role of facility management	Better understand the contribution we make to keeping down costs and why investment in basics will pay off in the long run
Health care media	Focused on health care reform but little coverage of the role of facility management in controlling costs	Include our perspective in articles to balance out negative coverage of high cost of physical plants and over-building nationally

This grid format can be adapted as needed, but the idea is to identify the audiences, then contrast the current and desired perspectives. By doing this, you've begun the important next step—crafting messages that address these concerns.

### **What Do We Want Them to Know?**

Your message may be as simple as reminding members of an upcoming chapter meeting or as complex as creating understanding by the C-level of facility management's contribution to health care delivery. Whichever the case, specificity is the key. Make sure you consider what your audience needs to know to make a decision, take action, or make a commitment. Remember that your overall objective is to create a positive response to your chapter, and to have the audience value what you have to say.

Once you've decided on your message, don't be tempted to fall into traditional traps. Don't tell anyone—whether press or government official—something off the record. If you don't want your comments to come back to haunt you, presume everything you say could be on the front page of the local paper tomorrow. When in doubt, err on the side of discretion. You also need to be consistent in what you say, giving the same message each time, even if the words or the twist is different. For instance, don't tell the press you aren't interested in a piece of legislation and then lobby for its passage. Don't tell members something different than you tell the media. That doesn't mean you have to use the same words—you just have to send the same message.

### **How Much Can I Spend?**

While public relations and advocacy efforts aren't paid advertising, they aren't free either. There are direct costs—for example, photos, printing, mailing, creative support if you are using graphics, and travel expenses. There are also indirect costs, for example, your volunteer time and the goodwill value of what you are undertaking. Your chapter will need to establish a budget for how much it makes sense to spend.

## HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

You can choose from numerous approaches. When you are thinking about media, be creative. Media means more than newspapers, magazines, and newsletters. It also includes radio and television. And don't forget local cable channels, many of which are hungry for information. There are also community groups, membership organizations, speaking and teaching opportunities, and much more. Remember, you are seeking exposure for your idea or position, so the more opportunities you have to present your thoughts, the better .

Following are some techniques to consider.

### **The Press Release**

The basic staple of public relations, press releases are brief statements designed to position your chapter on an issue. Press releases are sent to a predetermined media list (not everyone on your list will get the same information every time—be aware of the value of segmenting how you distribute information). Make sure a copy of your release is also sent to the state senator or representative you want to influence (if appropriate). Your local press club will have a distribution rack for this kind of information, as will the state capital media office. Add both to your distribution list to maximize the distribution and exposure of your press release.

Press releases need to be simple, clear, and to the point. Avoid the use of jargon, don't presume an extensive understanding of the technicalities of your field, and don't assume that just because you sent it, it will get printed. You'll increase the likelihood of press coverage if the message is tailored to the style of the publication you sent it to. For instance, if the local paper doesn't carry meeting announcements, don't send an announcement of your meeting. You may, however, want to talk with the reporter who covers your area and invite him to attend the next session to hear a particularly dynamic speaker.

### **Letters to the Editor**

Pay close attention to editorials that run on issues of interest to your chapter, and don't hesitate to draft a response—either in support of an editorial or pointing out why you disagree. In rebuttals, taking care to be objective, non-threatening, and rational will increase the likelihood it will be printed.

### **Newsletter Distribution**

If your chapter produces a newsletter that covers more than simply what is going on with chapter members, consider adding reporters, regulators, and legislators to the mailing list. But only do this if you are sure the content will be viewed as meaningful.

### **Personal Contact and Visits**

A visit is a great way to tell your story, whether to the regulator who is devising new codes and standards or to the reporter who covers health care. However, never show up unannounced. While getting an appointment may be tough, it is easier than restoring your credibility if you come unannounced and uninvited.

Get to know the people whose actions affect your industry. If Senator Smith knows who you are, you are more likely to secure an appointment and he is more likely to listen carefully to what you have to say when you get there. You can establish rapport through correspondence and phone calls and by developing a reputation as a source of valuable, unbiased information.

### **Testimony**

The next best way to tell your story is through formal testimony that gets read into the official state record. These invitations are often hard to come by, but many bodies that develop codes and regulations announce hearings and invite people to present differing opinions for consideration. You'll increase your chances of being asked back if you are objective and articulate in your response. Take advantage of this to issue a release on your position, along with a copy of your official statement. Let your members and other key audiences know you've contributed to the process.

### **Coalitions**

You can double or triple your impact by teaming up with other organizations that share your views on an issue. Coalitions are a great opportunity to strengthen your position and represent an even larger constituency. Don't hesitate to tell the media you are part of a coalition, and use the synergy of the group to strengthen the position of all participants.

## **HOW TO ISSUE A PRESS RELEASE**

Remember, a press release can have multiple destinations, so make it as complete as possible while keeping it concise. Here are some hints.

### **Format**

Type the release on your chapter letterhead. Always double space and print on one side only. Include the date of the release and your name and phone number as a reference for those who want more information.

### **Content**

Always include the who, what, why, when, how, and how much in your release. If appropriate, include a brief quote from someone named in the release, such as the chapter chairman, the conference keynote speaker, or a committee member. And make sure you develop a boilerplate description of your chapter's mission and purpose. This boilerplate runs at the end of every release. If the release is more than one page, number each page, place the word "MORE" at the bottom of each page, and indicate the end of the release by typing "-###-" centered under the last sentence of information.

### **Photos**

If you send pictures with your release, make sure they were taken by a professional photographer. Don't send instant pictures, don't send color snapshots, and don't write on the photo. Do send a glossy black and white photo, in focus, of a small group (no more than four people) and attach a caption that you've typed out separately and taped to the back of the photo.

### **Timing**

Learn the deadlines of the publications and stations to which you are sending information. When a reporter receives good material on deadline, the material is less likely to be used. And if you call a reporter on deadline, don't be surprised if they won't talk with you. This is a stress-filled time, and the reporter has other things to worry about.

### **Logistics**

Keep a file of all the releases you issue, and post them to your website. Don't forget to let ASHE know when you make a particularly strong contact or placement. Don't call reporters to ask if they got your release. You may want to follow up with a phone call, fax, or e-mail message a week or so after sending it with a related item, but if the reporter got your release and is interested, they will call you.

Send your releases by first-class mail. E-mail and fax are also acceptable. This is especially important for releases announcing something about to happen. Allow sufficient time between when you send it and the date of the event so that the reporter can plan to attend, announce the event, or both, if appropriate.

## **BEING INTERVIEWED**

While the results are somewhat different, the approach to a media interview is very similar to a face-to-face meeting with a legislator you want to hear your viewpoint. The following rules apply in both situations:

### **Talk from the viewpoint of the public, not the organization.**

You are looking for the public value in your position, not just the personal benefit to your members, so make sure you encompass a wide group in your worldview.

### **If you don't want to be quoted, don't say it.**

Remember that there is really no such thing as off the record.

**Get your most important points in first.**

You may not have a lot of time, so know in advance the most critical things to emphasize. Ask yourself, “If I could only make one point, what would it be? If I could only make two points, which are most important?” Work through that process to maximize the value of the time. In most cases, you only want to get two to three points across in any one session.

**Don’t lose your composure or get into an argument.**

If the reporter or the legislator doesn’t agree with you, you can have a discussion, but you won’t win a debate. Be careful about being baited to make a more interesting story.

**Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”**

This is the right answer. Under no circumstances should you try to fake information. It is a sure way to lose both credibility and respect.

**Tell the truth always.**

Never exaggerate, never embellish, and never misrepresent. Sooner or later, someone will find out. Be brutally honest.

**Watch out for traps.**

Reporters often use questions that have no right answers, questions that put words in your mouth and produce negative answers, no matter what you say. —The press calls this technique “when did you stop beating your dog.” Watch for these questions, and always, always, always think carefully before answering.

**Don’t presume you are buddies.**

Reporters and politicians get what they need by making people feel comfortable with them. Remember that this is an important exchange. Keep it on a professional level.

## **IDEAS FOR GENERATING NEWS—CREATING OPPORTUNITIES**

There are lots of ways to tell your story. Here are just a few to get you thinking:

Share your publications with the media and send clips from ASHE material to your local contacts along with your observations and thoughts.

Issue releases on newsworthy stories appearing in your publications.

Build programs around awards, appointments, and scholarships—both to strengthen the chapter and for the exposure it yields.

Create releases for members who attend educational or meeting activities.

Issue personalized releases for members who receive certification or other special professional recognition.

Use your annual meeting or trade show to generate publicity.

Use your ongoing educational program or seminars to generate local/regional coverage, depending on the topics.

Develop regional experts who can talk with the press as national stories develop—people who can provide a local angle and who are on call.

Get your media accustomed to relying on you for input.

Create special research activities to support your concerns.

Arrange local interviews for ASHE spokespersons who are speaking at a chapter meeting, or who are in town on other ASHE business.

## Ways Public Relations Contributes to the Bottom Line

STRATEGY	TACTICS	OUTCOMES
Awareness and Information	Publicity, promotion, audience targeting	Pave the way for sales, fundraising, stock offers, etc.
Organizational motivation	Internal relations and communication; OD interventions	Build morale, teamwork, productivity, corporate culture; work toward one clear voice outreach
Issue anticipation	Research; liaison with all publics	Early warning of issues, social-political change, constituency unrest
Opportunity identification	Interaction with internal and external audiences	Discover new markets, services, products, methods, allies, positive issues
Crisis management	Respond to OR blanket issues, disasters, attacks; build coalitions	Protect position, retain allies and constituents, keep normal operations going despite battles
Overcoming executive isolation	Counseling senior managers about what's really happening; research	Realistic, competitive enlightened decisions; knowledge of the human climate
Change agency	OD, QWL, corporate culture, similar techniques; research	Ease resistance to change, promote smooth transition, reassure affected constituencies
Social responsibility	Social accountancy, research, mount public interest projects and tie-ins, volunteerism, strategic philanthropy	Create reputation, enhance economic success through "double bottom line," earn trust, attract like-minded supporters and customers
Public policy activities	Constituency relations; coalition building, lobbying, grassroots campaigns	Public consent to activities, products, policies; removal of political barriers

