

# Getting Your Message on the Air

## *A Guidebook for Community Organizations*

*Compiled by NAB and provided by Kansas Association of Broadcasters as a public service.*



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# INTRODUCTION

As a nonprofit organization, you know how important it is to be visible in your community. You want people to be aware of all the great things your organization is doing and, more importantly, you want people to understand how they can help.

Broadcasters in your community can be a key resource and a partner in your efforts to build awareness of your organization and its issues. How can broadcasters help?

- By promoting and reporting on your organization's community events;
- By helping you raise funds, recruit volunteers and collect in-kind contributions; and
- By drawing attention to your issues in news and public service programming;

But in order to partner successfully with local broadcasters, you have to understand how they work and what guides their decisions about what gets on the air. Radio and television stations face a wide variety of competing demands for valuable airtime. How much airtime you get will depend to a large degree on the extent to which your organization is prepared—with reliable and timely information, a good and compelling story, and high-quality materials.

## “A Community Service”

Radio and television stations offer airtime to organizations like yours as a community service. Surveys by the National Association of Broadcasters show that local stations throughout the country provide their communities with an unrivalled amount of public services free of charge. The following are some of the public services broadcasters provide:

- **Public service announcements** that are broadcast free of charge and that highlight important issues and what people can do to address them.

- **News coverage** providing information about the issues and drawing attention to important causes and community events.
- **Public affairs and talk programs** providing in-depth discussion of local issues and goings-on.
- **“Community Bulletin Boards”** providing information about upcoming community events.

Local radio and television stations and their employees also participate in community clean-ups, walk-a-thons, fund raisers and more. The challenge for your organization is to figure out how your local stations can help you the most, and then to approach them with ideas and materials and whatever else they need to tell your story.

# IDENTIFYING YOUR MESSAGE AND AUDIENCE

Before you approach your local stations, it's important to think about both the message you want to convey and exactly whom you want to reach.

**Your Message.** Simply raising visibility for your organization and its cause is obviously important. But it's not enough. Whether you're proposing a news story or producing a public service announcement, it's important to think about the message you want to convey to people. And it's important to give them an “action step.”

Do you want people to send you money? To volunteer for your organization? To attend a community event? Or is the message a broader one, calling on people to do something to address an important issue—for example, by talking to their doctor about cancer, by reading to their children, or by taking the keys if someone's drunk.

The rule of thumb in developing your message is this: the more targeted and precise the action step, the better. Think about the issues you're working

on and the causes you're supporting and ask yourself the question, "What do I want people to do about it?" Remember: A story idea or PSA that offers simply defined, practical steps people can take to address an issue has a much better chance of making it on the air than a self-serving overview of your organization or a plea for funds.

**Your Audience.** Another important thing to think about as you consider how best to work with local broadcasters is your audience. Many broadcasters—especially radio stations—have very clearly defined audiences for whom your message may or may not be appropriate. An obvious example: If you want to reach older residents with a message about preventing heart disease, it's not a good idea to approach a rock station with a teen audience. Similarly, if you're trying to reach school-age children, a Saturday morning PSA is probably a better bet than a feature on the six o'clock TV news.

The key questions to ask yourself are these: Who are you trying to reach? And which local broadcasters can best connect you to your target audience? Pinning down who your audience is also will help you focus your message for maximum effect.

## THE RIGHT KIND OF AIRTIME FOR YOU

Local radio and television stations offer a variety of opportunities for nonprofit organizations to get their news and their message on the air. The right kind of airtime for your organization depends on what you have to offer, and on your local stations' policies and programming practices.

Generally, the airtime available to local nonprofits falls into one of two categories: public service, including community bulletin boards; and news and public affairs programming.

**PUBLIC SERVICE.** Public service airtime is time that is made available free of charge to nonprofit organizations for the promotion of an

event or to provide information that is in the public interest. A television or radio station's public service airtime usually is dominated by *public service announcements, or PSAs*. These are 10- to 60-second messages offered in partnership with broadcasters by local, state and national nonprofit organizations. PSAs generally offer the viewing or listening audience information and guidance on pressing issues from preventing disease to protecting the environment and insuring a quality education for children.

Many radio and television stations also produce *community bulletin boards* as a public service. These are short calendar items that highlight local events from bake sales and car washes to benefit concerts and park clean-ups.

### What's It Take to Get a PSA on the Air?

At any given time, broadcasters in your area may be confronted with 50 or more PSA campaigns competing for their attention. What makes the difference between a PSA that makes it on the air and one that doesn't is the broadcaster's judgment of the *relevance and timeliness* of the issue.

The key question: Is this a topic that affects a significant number of people in the community, especially members of the station's listening/viewing audience?

Broadcasters also will be taking a critical look at the message in your PSA. As explained above, it's important for a PSA to carry an "action step" that gives people something to do to address the issue you're talking about. Often, it helps to work with a professional marketing or advertising agency to develop a concise and compelling message and script. Many of these firms will offer their services free of charge or at a significant discount to local nonprofits as a community service and as a way of marketing themselves.

If your organization doesn't have enough of a budget to produce a PSA independently, don't despair. Often, radio and television stations will produce PSAs for local nonprofits, in addition to

airing them. In these instances, the key is to come to the station with a well developed concept and script for the spots.

Another important thing to keep in mind as you develop your pre-recorded PSAs or scripts is to be flexible. Offering PSAs and scripts in a variety of lengths – from 10 seconds to a minute – should increase your chances of getting something on the air.

Remember: Your job is to “sell” your public service campaign. Your chances of getting something on the air depend on two things: (1) crafting a compelling, timely and relevant message that will resonate with the station’s audience; and (2) understanding and responding to the each station’s interests and needs.

**NEWS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.** Most television and radio stations broadcast news programming, although the amount of news carried by individual stations varies widely. Some local television stations, for example, may broadcast a half hour to an hour of evening news every day, while others, mainly in larger metropolitan areas, put as many as three to four hours of news on the air. Similarly, some radio stations consider themselves “all news” stations and broadcast a steady diet of news and talk programs, while others break into music and other programming with headline news on the hour.

Obviously, your chances of getting your news on a particular station depend in large measure on that station’s “news budget.” In other words, it may be easier to get your story on the air at a news-oriented station than at a station whose programming is dominated by other programming such as music. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try. The important thing is to know the stations you are dealing with – and to understand that many of them simply may not have the time or the resources to cover your news.

Many television and radio stations also broadcast *public affairs programming* that focuses in a more in-depth way on important issues facing

your community. This programming generally consists of talk shows and “magazine-type” feature programs. Again, the key is to know which stations in your area broadcast these types of programs, and then to approach the appropriate people at those stations with your ideas.

### **How Can We Get Our Story in the News?**

As with PSAs, television and radio stations continually face requests from countless individuals and organizations to devote news coverage to specific happenings in the local community. What makes these happenings *newsworthy* depends on a variety of factors, including the subjective judgment of each station’s news personnel. A story that doesn’t make it on the air on one station may lead the news on a cross-town rival. Nevertheless, there *are* certain standards stations use to judge what’s news. Here is a checklist that will help you decide how your story rates on the news scale:

- *New Information:* Is it something the station’s listeners/viewers don’t already know?
- *Timeliness:* Does it relate to something that is happening now, or will be happening in the very near future?
- *Significance and Scope:* Does it affect the lives of large numbers of local residents?
- *Human Interest:* Is it a compelling story – one that will hold people’s interest? Will the story relate to people on an emotional level?
- *Uniqueness:* Is there a unique angle on the story—something that makes it special and unexpected?
- *Relevance:* Does the story relate to an important issue facing the community and its residents?

Of course, every story doesn’t have to meet every one of these qualifications, but the more you can tailor your story to accepted standards of what’s news, the better your chances of getting it on the air. The same goes for talk show interviews. A show’s producers will be interested in a topic to the extent they think that it is timely and that the

discussion will offer information of interest to a large proportion of the audience.

Also important to keep in mind is what you can do to make it as easy as possible for a local radio or television station to run with your story. That means putting together a concise and compelling news release (see sample), offering names and telephone numbers for possible interviews, and responding as quickly and as efficiently as possible to media requests for additional information.

## MAKING CONTACT

Don't be intimidated by contacting a broadcaster about a PSA or an idea for a news story, talk show or magazine feature. You're doing broadcasters a service by alerting them to important goings-on in the community. They will appreciate your ideas and your input. Whom you should contact at a station depends on what you're contacting the station about.

**Public Service Announcements.** Many larger stations have public service or community affairs directors whose job is to act as a liaison with community groups and to coordinate the station's efforts to draw attention to important local issues and goings-on. At smaller stations, this responsibility usually is handled by the station manager or the news or advertising director.

The best approach if you're contacting the station about a PSA campaign is to find out who schedules public service announcements and to speak directly to that person. Here are a few things you should be sure to mention:

- *The name of your organization.* Be sure to specify that you represent a nonprofit organization. If your group has 501(c)(3) status, say so.
- *The purpose of the campaign.* You should be able to say in one sentence exactly what your campaign is about—your issue, your goal and your message.

- *The length and number of spots you have available.* Do you have prerecorded spots or scripts? If they are prerecorded, where were they produced and by whom? If the PSAs are from a national organization, make sure to note whether space is available for a "tag" that identifies local contacts on the issue.

Try to keep the conversation to a maximum of two minutes, and offer to have the materials delivered to the station's reception desk. And, as hard as it may be to resist, don't push for an up-front commitment from the station to run the spots. It's rare for broadcasters to be able to make advance scheduling commitments, especially if they haven't seen the materials you have to offer.

Note: If you can't get through right away, a good approach is to leave a message that you're delivering the materials. (If you're delivering videotape, you'll need to know what format the station requires.) Then, you can call the following week to make sure the right people received your package and to find out what they thought.

**Calendar Listings.** To get a calendar listing on the air, find out what type of calendar the station produces, if any, and ask who runs it. Then send in a short write-up of your event noting what's happening, along with the date, time and location, and identifying someone people can call for additional information. Allow for plenty of advance time—as much as 2-3 weeks—both to make the calendar in time and to allow for repeat mentions in the days leading up to your event.

**News and Public Affairs Ideas.** Most television and radio stations have a news department, although these departments vary greatly in size and resources depending on the size and the focus of the station. At some radio stations, the news department may be just one person, while at others it may be a many-member team of producers, writers and reporters. In the world of television, the size of the news department

generally depends on how much local news the station produces each day.

Before contacting a station with an idea for a news story, be sure to know what type of news division you're dealing with. Listen to or watch the station. If it's a radio station that broadcasts mostly music along with national and international headlines every hour, then there's a good chance your story won't fit. The key is to focus your attention on those stations with dedicated time for local news coverage.

Once you've narrowed your list of stations, find out what reporters might cover your organization and its issues. At larger stations, reporters may be assigned to "beats" such as government, crime and education. You should be able to find out who's doing what simply by watching or listening to the news. Knowing what an individual reporter has been covering will help you shape your own story – for example, by offering a new angle on a topic he or she has covered in the past.

Next, call the reporter, introduce yourself, and offer a short and compelling summary of your story. At smaller stations or when it's not clear who the reporter would be, ask for the news director or assignment editor. Offer to send a news release, together with a few pages at most of contact and background information. If you haven't heard back after a few days, call back. Maybe your story got lost in the shuffle. But don't keep calling once you've left a message. After they've talked to you and they have your materials, they'll get back to you if they want to do something. And, if they don't, don't take them off your list. Maybe they'll cover your next story, or the one after that.

What about talk shows and public affairs? If you're contacting a station with an idea for a topic for a talk or public affairs program, your approach should be much the same. Ask for the producer of the program, make your pitch, and send in your materials.

## News Release Pointers

- Identify your organization at the top of the page, with your address, phone, fax, e-mail and web site (if appropriate).
- Identify a contact person who will be available to answer media questions, and provide a phone number and e-mail address.
- Don't forget to include the date.
- Write the release like a news story - who, what, when, where, and why - complete with a headline, a compelling lead and quotes (if appropriate).
- Identify candidates for interviews and make sure they are willing and able to respond ASAP to media inquiries.
- Use the closing paragraph to provide information about your organization—its mission, membership and key activities.
- Keep the release to one page in length.

## TIPS FOR BROADCASTER CONTACTS

The following are additional tips provided by local broadcasters throughout the country that will help you get your organization and its message on the air.

- Be concise. Whether you're pitching a news story or a public service announcement, you should be able to sum up your message and goals in one or two sentences.
- Target those stations with the type of audience that most closely matches the group you are trying to reach.
- Don't schedule a news conference unless you have a really big announcement. The best strategy generally is to issue a news release and deal one-on-one with stations.
- If you're organizing an event, make sure it's interesting for television – with a compelling backdrop and prominent, recognizable spokespeople.
- Find out if the station has an existing public service focus that relates to your issues.

Many stations build ongoing campaigns around issues such as children and health.

- The best time to call: Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday morning. Never call after 3:00 PM on Friday or just before a holiday weekend.
- Make sure you're available to return calls promptly; give reporters your home phone number if necessary.
- If you're giving an interview or appearing on a talk show, make sure you're well versed in the subject, arrive on time, and keep your answers short and concise without simply saying "yes" or "no."
- Think about what else is in the news before you pick up the phone. For example, don't call the newsroom on election day or when another major story is probably taking up everyone's time.
- Understand that broadcasters can only put a finite amount of news and information on the air. If they don't cover your story this time, don't give up.
- Keep in touch. Instead of contacting broadcasters once a year about your annual fund-raiser, keep them informed about what you're doing all year long.
- Consider how your issues relate to top news stories. Be proactive in suggesting story angles and ideas for interviews on key news topics.
- Consider finding a local sponsor to underwrite paid commercial spots highlighting your event or issues. This will guarantee you're on the air when you want to be.
- After you've gotten your story on the air, send a formal acknowledgment of the station's help – e.g., a thank you note or plaque. Also: be sure to mention what the station is doing to help your organization in presentations in the community and in conversations with elected officials and others.

### Extending the Partnership

Building a relationship with broadcasters in your community is about more than simply calling when you have news or a PSA to offer. It's also

about gaining credibility for you and your organization as a trusted source of information, ideas and more. And it's about involving broadcasters more actively in everything you're doing.

Consider the following steps as ways to broaden your partnership with local broadcasters:

- Appoint station owners, senior management, or news and community affairs staff to your organization's board and special task forces on communications or community issues.
- Invite reporters, editors, program producers and community affairs staff to take part in discussions and community meetings—not necessarily to cover the events but to learn more about the issues and what you're doing to address them.

Local television and radio stations are among the most visible and influential institutions in your community. Their owners and staff have unique and valuable perspectives on what's going on in the community, what local residents care about most, and how best to inform the community about important issues. With broadcasters as active partners in your organization's work, you'll be able to do more than get your message on the air. You'll become a more effective organization with better communications capabilities and an even stronger connection to your community.



Bringing Community Service Home

**\$ 134 million** That's the value of the community service provided in 2003 by local radio and television stations to communities across Kansas.

# Sample PSA Scripts

All of these scripts were produced as part on the National Association of Broadcasters' ongoing STAR Campaign. STAR stands for Stations Target Alcohol Abuse Reduction.

(00:30) Do you use alcohol to calm your nerves, forget your worries or fight depression? Are you drinking alone more often than you have in the past? Have you hurt yourself, or someone else, as a result of your drinking? If so, maybe it's time to face the facts and get help. Call (local treatment resource) for more information. Make a commitment to start living again today. This is a message from this station and (local sponsor).

(00:30) Who will I go with? What will I wear? For high school seniors, these are some of the question you might be thinking about as you plan your prom and graduation celebrations. But there's another question you ought to be thinking about that's even more important, and that's this: How will I make sure not to ruin it all by drinking? The answer is easy. Make the smart move this prom/graduation season. Leave alcohol out. This is a message from this station and (local sponsor).

(00:10) To you, drinking's a pleasure. To your baby it's poison. Remember: Your baby drinks what you drink so don't drink while you're pregnant. This is a message from this station and (local sponsor).

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# Sample NEWS Release

For Immediate Release:  
(DATE)

Contact: (NAME)  
(PHONE AND E-MAIL)

## **“Community Spirit” Is Focus of OURTOWN Crime Prevention Month**

Calling on citizens to pledge to reduce violence in their homes, schools and neighborhoods throughout the year, OURTOWN Mayor (NAME) today proclaimed October as OURTOWN Crime Prevention Month.

“The adverse impact of crime and violence in our community is an issue we can no longer ignore,” said (NAME). “Now is the time to come together as a community and to focus on how we all can make a difference in making OURTOWN a safer place to live, work and grow up.”

During October, activities will honor individual, school and community efforts to fight crime, recruit young people and adults for community improvement projects, and raise awareness of the pivotal role grassroots action plays in reducing violence. The month-long program of events includes a Fun Run on (DATE), a Crime Prevention Fair at the OURTOWN Mall, a poster contest for children, and a weekend retreat for families sponsored by OURTOWN Industries, Inc. Special displays at libraries, schools, businesses, community centers and hospitals—plus materials from bookmarks to posters—will keep violence prevention in the public eye while offering practical information about preventing burglary, sexual assault and other crimes.

Crime Prevention Month is celebrated nationwide each year. It is sponsored by the Crime Prevention Coalition, which includes more than 120 national, federal and state groups dedicated to building safer, more caring communities. Local contacts for the effort include (NAMES and ORGANIZATIONS). All are available for media interviews about Crime Prevention Month and activities in OURTOWN.