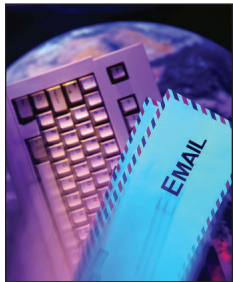


Often a reporter uses “experts” to put a story into context. Experts can provide numbers and an overview of a story. For example, an expert on the public welfare system can provide statistics and examples of the administrative challenges in the system and the history that brought about the current frustrations.

NASW is currently recruiting social workers from across the country to help tell the story of the profession to journalists and media outlets. As a professional social worker, it’s likely that at some point in your career, you will be considered an expert on a topic that’s being heavily reported in the news. If you are interested in speaking with the media, contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org. NASW has been able to place social workers in stories in outlets such as *CNN*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Oprah & Friends on XM Satellite Radio* to speak on issues important to the profession and social workers.

HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE HEARD



Targeting reporters by e-mail

Today, it’s so much easier to send e-mail than to pick up the phone or compose a letter. In fact, a majority of reporters prefer e-mail to phone and fax pitches. In order to get a reporter to pay attention to your e-mail, though, there are specific things you must do:

- When sending a press release to more than one reporter, *always* put the reporters’ e-mail addresses in the “blind courtesy copy” or “BCC” window. When possible, personalize individual e-mails with notes to specific reporters—this helps build relationships.
- Be specific in the subject line. Do not use social work jargon, and get right to the point.
- Send only one e-mail screen of copy. Be clear and concise in your message. Do not pitch a story unless you can clearly state the significance of that story to a reporter’s readers, and how that idea ties into a larger trend.
- If you have a lot of information, provide links in your e-mail so that reporters can go directly to the background or supporting facts on your Web site. This also helps ensure that the e-mail’s content is concise and easily accessible.
- Add contact sources, and note the information those contacts can provide. For example, if a social worker in the field can provide commentary related to your issue, contact that person in advance so that they are ready when the reporter calls. It’s also a good idea to identify an educator, researcher, or other expert who can provide statistics to back up your point of view.

Last but not least, know how to target the right reporter. Knowing who you are sending your e-mail to is the most important part of pitching a story. Research news outlets by reading/listening/watching, so that you know exactly who would best cover your issue.

If you don’t have access to media outlets outside your local area, you can contact the NASW Communications Department for a targeted media list by sending an e-mail to media@naswdc.org. Include an example of the story idea, so that we can help you target the right reporters.

HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE WITH OP-EDS

An op-ed is one of the best tools for gaining visibility for an issue, as well as making social work a credible source on a variety of issues. But writing one and getting it published are often easier said than done. So, how do you accomplish those goals?

Identify your message

First, identify your message. Be focused and clear. What is it that you want to happen in the end? Do you want legislators to do something, or just increase public understanding of an issue? Regardless of the end result, you need to be able to state your opinion in a clear, concise sentence. If you can’t, you need to continue to work on your message.

Back it up with facts

Next, you need to express that opinion, and then back it up with facts. For example, if your message is that legislators should not cut money from the social service budget because it will be detrimental to families, then you need to supply examples. How many families use social services in your community now? How many jobs would be affected by the budget cuts? How much more would it cost your community in crisis care versus preventive care? You can usually find numbers and statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau at www.census.gov/ or other government agencies. Think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution or the Urban Institute, often have research that is broken down geographically.

Write for the reader

The standard way to make an argument is to state your main point, present evidence to support that opinion, and then offer a recommendation or conclusion. The more conversational you can make the writing, the better. Avoid clichés and jargon. Emphasize active verbs and forget the adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing. Explain why your position is better than the opposition.

Try different angles with different outlets

If your op-ed is not published by your media outlet of choice—remember that the *New York Times* receives thousands of op-ed submissions every day—then consider re-submitting to a smaller, local or regional paper. They are always hungry for news items. The key is to keep pushing—if the issue is important to you, try different angles and different outlets. Be careful not to send your Op-ed to too many newspapers. Giving a newspaper an exclusive to the Op-ed might be an enticement to run it. If you need to send it to other publications, rewrite it to meet the needs of that publication.

Timely and relevant increase odds

Just as each organization or person has his or her own agenda, so does each publication. In order to make your Op-ed more desirable to a media outlet, the author should make it timely and relevant. Current issues affecting a community or a national topic that can be tied to an issue facing the entire community are more likely to be published.

Stick to the guidelines

Most publications have submission requirements, including word count—which usually falls between 700-800 words maximum. Make sure to draft your op-ed within these guidelines. Submit your piece with a letter that includes a brief biography (including your social work credentials), your phone number, and an explanation of why your piece is timely and relevant to readers.

Send your op-ed and cover letter by fax, e-mail, or regular mail, depending on the guidelines set by the publication. Most publications do not read faxes—e-mail is probably preferable, but again, research the specific publication's requirements. For more information about submission guidelines, go to the outlet's Web site. For more information contact NASW Communications for assistance at media@naswdc.org or call 202-336-8228.

HOW TO WRITE AND USE AN EFFECTIVE BACKGROUNDER IN PUBLIC RELATIONS



In order to write an effective backgrounder for a press kit (or for other uses), you must first understand what a backgrounder is.

What is a backgrounder?

A backgrounder is an in-depth informational piece providing, as the name implies, background information on a specific issue. They often accompany press releases and provide additional information not found in the releases.

How do you write a backgrounder?

To write a backgrounder, you need to follow some basic guidelines:

- Start with a concise statement on the issue or subject about the topic of accompanying press release. For example: “Clinical social workers provide the majority of the nation’s mental health services.”
- Follow the opening statement with a historical overview of the issue. Trace the issue’s evolution—how it came to be—and the major events leading up to it. You can utilize outside information in this section. However, cite your statements within the text, according to the appropriate style guidelines of the publication you are sending it to.
- Explain why this issue is important TODAY. State its significance and back that statement up, as appropriate.
- Present the implications of the issue. Back up that statement with facts.
- Use subheads where appropriate to make for easier reading. A backgrounder should average four to five pages in length; however, it is always a good idea to let the information, not the page number, dictate the length of your piece.

What are the uses for backgrounders?

- Collateral material for partner groups
- Talking points for an interview
- Preparation documents for a media interview
- Inclusion in an online or print press kit

For help preparing a backgrounder, use *Social Work Speaks*, *NASW NEWS*, and the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, or contact the NASW Communications Department at media@naswdc.org.