

Working with the Media

"The news media play a critical role in defining the context of the public and political debate...They need to improve and expand that effort."

-- Michael L. Millenson, *Demanding Medical Excellence*



Health care is one of the dominant issues today, regularly registering in the top five of public surveys. Health care media coverage has tended to focus on questions of either cost or access. RAM is fundamentally different. The series raises questions about why and how the American public should expect to receive quality health care. The media is increasingly interested in quality-related issues. For example, the Institute of Medicine's statistics on medical errors and recent studies on concerns about the health care system and the number of patients that are injured or killed due to medical error, are routinely reflected in print stories and broadcast coverage.

In order to generate local coverage, it will be essential for the Communications Committee to become familiar with the overarching issue of improving the quality of health care as well as the specific health care issue selected by the coalition. As noted earlier, a number of National Partners produce the latest

research and information about quality of care. To learn more, we encourage coalitions to log on to the Web sites of the:

- Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
- American Health Quality Association
- American Hospital Association
- Institute for Healthcare Improvement
- Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations
- Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
- National Quality Forum

To further assist your research, we have provided background information about two important health-quality issues that will be featured in the series. (See Chapter 16.) We also believe the national media relations campaign will raise awareness about the importance of quality improvement and help stimulate interest in local initiatives.

RAM coalition Communications Committees will most certainly have considerable experience working with the press. With that in mind, here are just a few items for review before initiating your campaign.

Get Prepared

Review the coalition's assessment survey. You may be able to incorporate some of the most important points made by the respondents, including their relevant experience, within your press materials. Review recent press coverage on the selected issue. Determine who has been interviewed on this

subject and their respective positions. Interview the coalition's quality experts and thoroughly discuss the issue with the Steering Committee.

Develop Key Message Points

Once the issue has been clearly defined, develop three or four message points that will serve as the foundation for the public relations and marketing campaign. Whenever possible, attempt to interweave your coalition's message within the topics being covered by the series. *Remaking American Medicine* will focus on 1) efforts to transform hospitals so they are safe, effective and efficient; 2) the challenges of providing chronic disease care that truly meets the needs of the patients; 3) involving local communities in efforts to improve medical care for everyone; and 4) the levers of change that are driving nationwide improvement efforts, including medical education, patient advocacy and collaborative efforts among all the stakeholders invested in the system.

Prepare Coalition Spokespersons

Provide media training with spokespersons, including the coalition chair, quality experts and *Champions of Change*. Make sure everyone is comfortable with key message points and knows how to respond to different types of media inquiries. Above all, your spokespersons must be positioned as credible, knowledgeable and responsive sources.

Build an Effective Press List

Single out reporters, editors and producers who have already covered this issue or whom you believe will be responsive to the subject. Then, broaden your list to include reporters who may cover health care from various angles - consumer, business or policy-related. Editorial boards will be receptive to a local story if it affects the entire community and the spokesperson is well known within the community.

On the broadcast side, promote the human-interest side to the story. Make sure your spokesperson is comfortable in providing short sound bites. For television, remember to suggest an appealing visual element as part of the story.

If you decide to conduct a town hall meeting, health fair or community forum, encourage local broadcasters to run PSAs and invite reporters to cover the event. You may also want to invite a health care reporter to serve on a panel or moderate a forum.

Consider how patient/consumer-oriented tools may be developed and co-branded with your PBS station. Keep in mind that print and broadcast media maintain Web sites that include re-purposed content, and increasing numbers of newspapers feature online chat sessions with experts.

Involve the Media

At the beginning of the campaign, arrange briefing sessions for your major newspapers. Ideally, conducted by the coalition chair and coalition experts, these meetings should be held with:

- Health care reporters. Introduce them to the overall goals of the campaign, describe the coalition membership and briefly describe proposed activities. Be sure to provide ideas and contacts for local stories. You may also wish to prepare an online resource directory that the media can print as a sidebar.
- The managing editor. In addition to briefing the editor about the campaign, you may wish to invite the managing editor to co-host or participate in a town hall meeting, health care forum or statewide roundtable.
- The editorial board. In addition to the chair, bring several quality experts to the meeting. Describe how your issue affects the community and encourage the editorial board to support the campaign.
- The advertising department. Suggest that the advertising department produce one or more

Advertorials in support of the campaign.
(The coalition will need to find a sponsor for this activity.)

Make your Story Personal

Focus on the health care challenges, solutions and the related success stories taking place in your community. Showcase community events and feature local *Champions of Change* and other individuals who are affected by the health care issue.

Leverage the coalition

Ask members to promote the campaign in their newsletters and magazines, on their respective Web sites and listservs and in employee or constituent mailings.

Tip: Log on to RAMcampaign.org. Download and customize press materials that you may wish to incorporate in your campaign. These can be found in the *Resources* and *Press Room* sections.