

ImPRESSive

A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

Winter 2002

THE STORY BANK: USING PERSONAL STORIES AS AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO GET YOUR MESSAGE OUT

Are you getting more and more requests from reporters for real stories to use in their pieces? This ImPRESSive explains why it is important to keep a database of consumer stories and more significantly, how you can use these stories as a means to develop relationships with reporters and to get your message across effectively.

From personal testimonials in articles to on-camera interviews on the nightly news, personal stories are becoming more and more important when reporting the news. This is especially true for health care stories. Reporters like to use real life examples to help simplify often complex health care issues. In addition to serving as a form of explanation, many reporters like to use a real life example to prove that the problem exists. Your organization can collect real stories as a tool for establishing yourselves as a resource to reporters as well as a means for getting your message out. For more information on creating a story bank, see our July 1999 ImPRESSive, The Art of Story Banking.

THE CONSUMER STORY BANK

A consumer story bank database will allow your organization to use people's personal stories to communicate through the media that there is a need for action to fix particular problems. In addition, reporters find the stories useful to better illustrate the everyday struggles that Americans face concerning their health care.

Real stories can be used in a variety of ways. You can use them in the reports you publish, or you can provide them to other advocacy groups and congressional offices in order to

put a face on complex health care issues. You can also invite someone whose story is in your database to a press conference to highlight why your issue is important and timely. In addition, you can pitch a consumer's story to a reporter in order to get your position on this issue into the reporter's story.

When maintaining a consumer story bank database, it is important to remember to protect each individual's privacy by making sure that any public release of information does not happen until you get his or her prior and specific consent. Individuals will also be more enthusiastic about getting involved in this project if they know they can control when and with whom they share their story.

ImPRESSive

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS THROUGH STORIES

Real stories can be the hook to help you establish yourself as a resource to reporters. Once reporters hear that your organization can help them find real stories for their pieces, the phones will not stop ringing. As with any media request, the trick to establishing yourself as a useful resource is to make sure that you get reporters the information they need quickly and efficiently.

In addition, as soon as you start helping a reporter find a real story for his or her piece, you should also pitch your spokesperson as well as some data or information the reporter can use for background information in the piece.

HANDLING A REPORTER'S REQUEST FOR A REAL STORY

The first step in handling this request is to ask the reporter for all the information he or she is going to need. When talking with the reporter, make an assessment of what kind of story the reporter is looking for as well as what you will be asking of the individual. Start the conversation by asking the reporter what kind of story he or she is working on. After that, get the following information from the reporter:

- ✓ Type of health care story—uninsured individual, prescription drug story, etc.
- ✓ Geographic requirements—especially an issue with TV stories, which often need to speak to someone in a major media market so they can get a camera crew to the individual's home.

- ✓ Type of interview—phone interview, on-camera interview, on-site interview with pictures, etc.
- ✓ Other information—age, occupation, marital status, and income level.

Get as much information as possible, but you should also be wary about raising the reporter's expectation level. The reporter will give you very detailed information about the exact story he or she is envisioning. Through your conversation, bring the reporter's idea of what he or she wants back to a bigger picture. For example, if the reporter is interested in speaking to an uninsured woman who is of a certain age and of a certain occupation, you can explain to the reporter that an uninsured woman in the more general age bracket would resonate just as well. If you explain that you can fulfill the more important qualities but not all of the criteria, you will not be left with a story that is nearly impossible to find.

PICKING THE RIGHT STORY

When considering what story you will be giving the reporter, start thinking about what kind of story will best communicate your message. You should also consider other elements of the story that will help explain your position on a certain issue. For example, if a reporter is interested in interviewing a family who is uninsured, try to find a family whose kids are enrolled in the SCHIP program—but the parents are uninsured. This way, the story shows the success of public programs at the same time that it fulfills the reporter's needs for the story.

You should also take into account whether the story is compelling and make sure that it relays your message.

PITCHING THE STORY

So far, you have found a story that fits the reporter's criteria and that also communicates your message. Your next step is to convince the reporter that this is the right story for his or her piece. Before you make that call, read through the story and make sure you have all the information you are going to need and that you are prepared to explain why your database story is the perfect fit for the reporter's story.

Call the reporter and give him or her a brief description of the story. Finish by explaining how and why your story fits into the story. You can say something like: This story will really work for your piece for this reason. Keep your voice upbeat and enthusiastic. The smile on your face will come across over the phone. If the reporter thinks you believe it will work, you have a better chance of convincing the reporter that this is the case. Do not call the consumer until AFTER you have gotten the reporter to sign-off on the story. Otherwise, you could dash a lot of expectations and hurt people's feelings when the reporter rejects his or her story.

Before you hang up the phone, make sure you pitch your spokesperson. As you did with the story, do this by explaining how your organization and spokesperson fit into the piece. You can say something like: Our director is an expert in the field and can give you an idea about how this issue affects our state. He or she is available this afternoon for an interview.

GETTING PERMISSION FROM THE CONSUMER

The next step is to call the consumer and get his or her permission. Explain what the piece is about and how he or she fits into the story. Make sure to give the person all the information about the interview.

Sample Script for Getting Permission from the Consumer:

Advocate: We are working with a reporter from the News who is putting together a piece on prescription drugs. She is interested in interviewing someone who is struggling with the high cost of prescription drugs and I thought of your story. She is interested in doing a phone interview and would probably call you today to talk to you about your story. She is really interested in talking to you about your prescription drug costs and will probably ask you what prescription drugs you are taking and how much they cost you a month. The interview will not take longer than 20 minutes. Can I give her your name and number?

Consumer: Yes.

Advocate: Great. Thank you so much. Her deadline is tomorrow afternoon but she would really like to speak to someone by tonight. What is the best time for her to reach you?

GETTING YOUR CONSUMER PREPARED FOR THE INTERVIEW

After you have gotten permission from the person and have a reporter that is interested in speaking to him or her, make sure to prepare the individual for the interview. You will find that many people are very nervous about telling their story to a reporter and will feel more at ease if you talk them through the process. Explain what the interview will be like, go over some potential questions that may come up in the interview, and assure the consumer that he or she should feel comfortable declining to answer any questions at any point during the interview. Give the consumer some information about the reporter such as if he or she is someone you work with often or any other relevant information. Finish off the call by giving the individual your contact information and letting the

person know that he or she can call you at any time with last minute questions or concerns.

When going over the interview with the individual, you can prepare the person by emphasizing not only what the reporter is going to ask, but also what aspects of their story fit into the reporter's story. Many individuals have several different stories and problems happening simultaneously. For this reason, it is important to focus the individual on what components of the story are compelling. During your conversation with the consumer, it is important to help him or her focus the story so that he or she can be a successful spokesperson. You can do this by emphasizing what aspect of the story the reporter is interested in talking about and helping the consumer talk through that aspect of his or her story.

Many times, it helps if the person writes down his or her story on note cards or a piece of paper. Often times, individuals can get nervous

during an interview. These notes will serve as a reminder of what needs to be addressed during the interview. If you have asked an individual to speak at a press conference, make sure that you have not only prepped the person, but that he or she has notes written down

on note cards or a piece of paper. This important prep work will help the person not only feel more at ease during his or her speech, but it will also allow him or her to be a more effective spokesperson during the event.

Media Tips for When a Story Bank Individual Speaks to a Reporter

Here are some media tips you can share with a consumer before his or her interview:

Relax - The most basic piece of advice and probably the most difficult. It's difficult to relax when you're being interviewed, possibly on-camera, by a reporter. It probably won't help you to realize that everyone, even the most seasoned professional, is nervous in an interview. What will help you is to take a deep breath and try to relax. Remember, these people are interested in you and your story and no one can tell it better than you.

Speak Slowly and Clearly - Your story is important and you should take your time telling it. Don't worry about going on for too long (within reason).

Know Your Rights - We only work with respected news establishments. Nonetheless, you should be aware that if a reporter asks you a question that you prefer not to answer, you have every right to refuse to answer that question. If that means that the interview is terminated, so be it. You should always feel comfortable with the reporter and the questions they ask.

You have a right to designate and limit the interview time. Explain this to the reporter beforehand and ask that they limit the interview to 20 minutes or a half hour. If you are not feeling well, you should feel free to let the reporter know when the time is up or if you need to rest.

Reporters should respect interview times. If they show up two hours late with no apology or reason for their behavior, you should not feel obligated to participate in the interview.

If you have had a negative experience with a reporter for any reason, please contact us and let us know. We do not have to work with every reporter who requests to speak to someone from our story bank.

*- By Kathryn Schroeder,
Former Families USA Press Secretary*

After you have gotten the individual's permission and you have prepared him or her for the interview, you can then call the reporter with the contact information. Make sure you give the reporter instructions, such as specific times to call (if that has been discussed) or any update on the story you learned through your conversation that will add to the reporter's story.

Reporters do not give hard interviews to people they use for real stories. You will probably never get a complaint. In case you do and a reporter does cross the line, you should have a stern conversation with the reporter about his or her inappropriate action. In addition, explain that these stories are an important resource to your organization and that if he or she is interested in continuing to use this resource, the reporter will need to follow the rules. In order to have a successful story bank database, it is crucial that your organization protect the individuals in your database.

CONCLUSION

A database of real stories is a resource you can use to further your relationships with reporters and to help get your message out through the media. Health care issues are often complex, and real stories help bring the policy issues down to a level that everyone can understand. Compelling stories can be powerful tools that will not only help you reach out to reporters but will also draw reporters to your organization. In addition, you can use these personal vignettes as a means for getting your organization's message out. You'll find that many individuals will be interested in sharing their stories. Interviews with the press will allow them to do something about their current situation and become activists on the issue.

Building Your Story Bank - Where To Find the Stories

Community Health Clinics: *Often have uninsured stories.*

Children's Organizations: *Many times, they will have stories of families where the kids are enrolled in SCHIP and the parents are still uninsured.*

Senior Centers: *For seniors struggling to pay for prescription drugs.*

Local Pharmacists: *A good source for prescription drug stories.*

Partner Groups: *Talk to other groups who work on your issues about sharing stories.*

Web site: *Create a section on your Web site where people can submit their story.*

Union Locals: *A good source for uninsured stories.*

More Sources:

Small Business Owner/Self-Employed Associations

Calls from Individuals to Your Organization

Faith-Based Charities or Organizations

For more ideas on story sources, see our July 1999 ImPRESSive, *The Art of Story Banking* (<http://www.familiesusa.org/media/pdf/impress/799imprs.pdf>).



Next **ImPRESSive**:
Coming in Spring 2003

Staging a Successful
Press Event

Through the next **ImPRESSive**, learn the ins and outs of putting on a press conference. Details such as picking the perfect location, determining what visuals will be needed, and finding the appropriate speakers will all be addressed.

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