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Working with the News Media

Working with the media is important

Most citizens and lawmakers get information about public policy issues from the news media. So it makes a lot of sense for us, as advocates for policy change, to take advantage of all opportunities to spread our messages using media outlets like newspapers, TV, radio, and the Internet.

Letters to the Editors (LTEs)

The easiest and single most effective media activity you can do is write letters to the editor (LTEs). Because LTEs are among the most widely-read parts of newspapers, many people will learn about SSDP's issues every time you get a letter published. It also feels really good to see something that YOU wrote in print, and to realize that YOU are making a difference by educating hundreds or thousands of people (depending on the size of the paper). And best of all, writing a letter takes only 10-15 minutes.

LTEs are generally 150-300 words long, depending on the size of the newspaper (more widely-circulated papers usually prefer shorter letters). Take a look at a copy of the paper before you start writing so you can see what kind of letters they usually publish. Make sure to include your full contact information (name, phone number, address, and organizational affiliation) below your letter so that the paper can confirm your identity. Your chances of publication will be greater if you are writing in response to a previously published article, editorial, column, Op-Ed, or another LTE, but it is certainly possible to get LTEs published out of the blue. If you're writing in response to a previous piece, you can dispute or elaborate on a point that was made, or highlight some aspect of the issue that wasn't covered. You usually have a better chance of being published if you live in the geographical area being covered by the paper, but local papers often print LTEs from people outside of their immediate readership areas. Once a letter is written, you can alter it slightly and send it to several papers, multiplying your effectiveness with just a little more effort. However, you should avoid sending the exact same letter to more than one paper in a given geographical area.

Press Releases

If you want reporters to write stories about SSDP you should send them press releases, especially when your chapter does something particularly newsworthy like host an event, launch a campaign, or achieve a victory. You should also send out press releases in response to news developments related to drug policy so that reporters can include SSDP's position in articles. Your press releases should be constructed just as you'd want ideal articles on the topic to appear; simply pretend you're writing what you want the paper to print. While releases should generally be confined to one page, it is sometimes (but very rarely) okay to go onto a second page. Put SSDP's letterhead on top (you can get this from the national office) to make it official. Beneath that, type "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" followed by the date you're sending the release out.

Also near the top, print “CONTACT” and the names and phone numbers of two people you want reporters to contact for more information.

Start with a compelling headline and sub-headline, include a catchy news hook and important information in the lead paragraph, then flesh out the rest of page with details. Include quotes from one or two members of your chapter and/or from the SSDP national office. Use SSDP’s mission statement as the last paragraph of your release. Type “###” at the bottom of the page to signify the end of the release.

Most reporters prefer to receive press releases via e-mail (in plain text only with no attachments). But it is also a good idea to send a fax of your fancy-looking letterhead version. When sending releases via fax, always try to address them to specific reporters to make sure they won’t end up newsroom trash bins. Simply write “ATTN: [Reporter’s Name]” on the top of the pages before you fax them. Always follow up with short phone calls to make sure that reporters received the releases and to see if they’d like additional information. If you need help developing a list of reporters in your area, ask the SSDP national office for help or find another local nonprofit that will lend you their list.

Always make sure to download the SSDP national office’s press releases and give them to your campus and local papers. When your local papers pick up a national story, it not only helps us educate people, but it can bolster your chapter’s recruitment efforts.

News Advisories

When your chapter is hosting an event, you should put out news advisories to alert the media in advance. News advisories are very similar to press releases, except that they explicitly spell out the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, and WHERE of your event. Distribute them about one week to three days in advance of your event. Make pitch calls the day before the event and then again on the morning of your event to remind reporters about it.

Columns

Another easy and effective thing you can do to raise awareness on campus and recruit new members is to have one of your chapter members write a weekly or biweekly column in your campus paper. Several SSDP chapters have successfully done this. Not only do the columns themselves educate lots of people about drug policy, but they also provide opportunities for chapter members and others to respond with LTEs, increasing our issues’ exposure. It is usually very easy to get an editor to give you a column (but they might not want you to write about drug policy all the time, so be prepared to write about other issues or to make the case that drug policy is an issue of such magnitude that you can approach it from entirely different angles with each column). Writing a column is an easy and very high visibility activity that generates lots of discussion on campus.

Even if you don’t get your own column, you can still influence newspaper columnists – at your campus paper and at the larger papers in your community, state, and region – to write about drug policy. Find their e-mail addresses and send them short messages pitching them on your idea. Follow up with phone calls to talk some more.

Op-Eds

Like LTEs, Op-Eds are opinion pieces from outside writers that are selected for publication by newspapers. However, Op-Eds are longer, usually 600-800 words. What also separates Op-Eds

from LTEs is that papers usually only accept Op-Eds from “important people,” such as heads of organizations, public officials, celebrities, and experts. Consequently, you may have to ghost-write a piece for someone else to sign, depending on the newspaper. For example, you may want to think about asking a professor, student government leader, your college president, or someone affected by the HEA Drug Provision to edit and sign an Op-Ed that you’ve drafted for them. But you can also easily make the case that you do have special expertise on the issue because you are a student advocate affected by the policy about which you’re writing.

Editorials

Newspapers’ editorial boards frequently take official positions on matters of public policy. As activists, we can influence editorial boards to opine in favor of drug policy reform. This is especially easy on campus. Get to know the editors of your campus paper and feed them information. You can also influence off-campus papers to write favorable editorials too. Just put together concise and captivating e-mail pitches and follow up with phone calls. At some papers, the editorial board may request that you meet with them in person to lobby for your position. Bring some concise written materials to leave behind. Also consider bringing someone who has been individually affected by the Drug War to show the personal importance of reform.

Editorial Cartoons

Some papers print editorial cartoons, which translate political issues into visual images that are easily understood and digested. Influencing a cartoonist can be fun and especially rewarding. Find out who draws cartoons for your paper and let them know about some of the ironies or absurdities of your campus’s drug policies or of the larger War on Drugs. Many cartoonists can easily think of funny and effective ways to visually depict the irrationality of the Drug War.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Many campuses have student-run TV and/or radio stations. With a little bit of effort and some readily-available technologies, you can create public service announcements (PSAs). Using PSAs allows you to raise awareness about our core issues like campus drug policies and the HEA Drug Provision. You can also use them to advertise specific events you’re having on campus. Try to find an ally who hosts a radio or TV show on campus or who has access to campus recording equipment. The SSDP national office can provide you with a sample script. Once the PSA is produced, talk to the station manager and ask him or her to include it in the regular rotation. Be sure to send a copy to the SSDP national office so that we can distribute it to other chapters.

The Internet

Using the Internet to spread your message is a great way to reach a wide audience with a little effort. Blogs are an increasingly popular mode of information distribution, and there are probably bloggers that write about issues on your campus or in your city or state. Make an effort to reach out and ask them to plug your chapter’s events and issues. You can also start your own blog for free at www.blogger.com.

Interviews with Reporters

When doing interviews, remember that anything you say can be quoted! Take some time to prepare in advance to nail down your core message and talking points. Stick to these during the interview. Try to anticipate potential questions, partly by thinking about some of the common arguments against our position. Practice being interviewed with a friend beforehand and come up with some effective responses to these questions and arguments. Formulate sound bites (5-12

seconds long) in advance and practice saying them naturally. Repeat them throughout the interview. You will probably only get a small quote in print or appear on TV or the radio for a few seconds. You want what is used to sound credible and to convey the seriousness and importance of the issue. Remember that anything you say can be used against you in the court of public opinion, no matter how friendly the reporter seems – so don't say anything you wouldn't want to appear in print or on the air. Sound bites should include action verbs, for example, "Students are being FORCED out of school." Deliver some sound bites in the form of questions, for example, "Why would we want to remove at-risk students from school?" or, "How, exactly, will closing the doors of education help solve our nation's drug problems?"

Remember that you never have to directly answer reporters' questions. Instead, interpret questions broadly and respond by acknowledging them and then communicating the core message you set out to deliver. If you don't know the answer to a reporter's question, say so. Never make up an answer or lie to a reporter. Instead, pledge to find the answer and get back to him or her later. Use the economy of expression when doing an interview – keep it simple. Don't get bogged down in small and boring details unless a reporter asks for more in-depth information. Speak slowly and clearly while delivering sound bites and answering questions. Dress conservatively, especially for TV interviews. You don't want to go through all the trouble of setting up an interview and then alienate the audience with your appearance.

Cultivating Relationships with Reporters

Reporters write articles for a living – it's their job. They're looking for interesting things to write about, and we have interesting things to tell them, so don't be afraid to reach out and pitch stories. After an interview, always follow up with reporters promptly if you promised to get them more information. After a piece is published, send a short note or make a quick phone call to thank a reporter for writing a fair and balanced article, or to politely point out any inaccuracies or glaring omissions that you noticed. Once you've worked with a reporter, try to maintain the relationship. Let them know when you've got something new going on. If they're not interested in covering a particular event or issue, don't be discouraged. They might be interested next time. Find out which reporters are covering "beats" that are related to your activism. For SSDP's purposes, we're most interested in working with reporters who cover education, criminal justice, or political issues. Get to know reporters' preferences and deadlines. Always be professional with them and do whatever you can to influence them to think of you as a helpful resource.

Additional Media Relations Resources

SPIN Project: www.spinproject.org

Media Awareness Project: www.mapinc.org

Video Activism: www.videoactivism.org/med_strad.html

College Democrats: www.collegedems.com/war-room/tools/chaptermanual.doc

Salzman, Jason. Making the News. Westview Press, 2003

For assistance with any of your media outreach efforts, contact Tom Angell in SSDP's National Headquarters at tom@ssdp.org or (202) 293-4414.