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Working with the Media

Why media relations?

Because many citizens and legislators get information about public policy issues from the news media, we as advocates should take advantage of all opportunities to spread our messages in newspapers, and on TV, radio, and the Internet.

Letters to the Editors (LTEs)

Probably the single most effective media activity you can do is write letters to the editor (LTEs). Writing letters is easy, effective, and certainly rewarding. Because the LTE section of the newspaper is the most read section of the paper, many people will learn about SSDP's issues when 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). Writing a letter takes only 10-15 minutes.

LTEs are generally 100-300 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 your start writing so you can see what types of letters they usually publish. Make sure to include your full contact information (name, phone number, and address) 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 LTE, but it is possible to get LTEs published out of the blue. If 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. Once a letter is written, you can alter it slightly and send it to several papers, multiplying your efficacy with just a little more effort. However, you should avoid sending the same letter to more than one paper in a given geographical area.

Press Releases

After you have an event or your chapter does something newsworthy, send out a press release. You should also send out press releases in response to news developments related to drug policy in the hope that reporters will include SSDP's position in articles. Your press releases should be written as you'd want ideal articles to be written – feed reporters what you want them to spit out (some are lazy and appreciate you doing their job for them). Releases should be confined to one page, but is okay to go onto a second page in special circumstances. Put SSDP's letterhead on top (you can get this from the national office). Below the letterhead, on the left of the page, type "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" and below that, the date. On the same lines, on the right side of the page, print "CONTACT" and below that, the names and phone numbers of two people the media can contact for more information.

Start with a catchy headline and sub-headline, include a catchy news hook and important information in the lead paragraph, then flesh out the page with details. Include quotes from one or two members of your chapter – we can also provide you with a quote from the national office if you'd like. The last paragraph should consist of SSDP's mission statement.

When sending out press releases, always try to address them to specific reporters to make sure they won't end up in newsroom trash bins. Simply write "ATTN: [Reporter's Name]" on the top of your releases before you fax them. Follow up with short phone calls to make sure that reporters received the releases and to ask if they have any questions. If you need help developing a list of reporters in your area, ask the SSDP national office for help or find out if another local nonprofit will lend you their list.

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 a pitch call the day before the event and then again on the morning of your event to remind the reporter 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 SSDPers have 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 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.

Op-Eds

Similar to 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 even an HEA Drug Provision victim to sign an Op-Ed that you've written. Alternatively, you could make the case that you have special expertise on the issue because you are a student advocate affected by the policy about which you're writing.

Influencing Editorials

Newspapers' editorial boards frequently take official positions on matters of public policy. You, as reformers, 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. You can draft an editorial advisory, which is essentially the same thing as a press release but is aimed at influencing a paper to write an editorial instead of getting a reporter to write an article. For larger papers, you may have to set up a meeting with the editorial board to lobby them. Bring some concise written materials. Also consider bringing someone who has been individually affected by the drug war to show the personal importance of reform.

Influence Editorial Cartoons

Some papers print editorial cartoons. Influencing a cartoonist can be fun and rewarding. Editorial cartoons translate issues into visual images that are easily understood and digested. Find out who draws cartoons for your paper and let them know about some of the ironies or absurdities of the War on Drugs. They'll usually be able to think of a funny and effective way to visually depict the ridiculousness of drug policies.

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). You can use PSAs to raise awareness about our core issues like the HEA Drug Provision, or you can use them to advertise specific events you're having on campus.

Doing interviews

When doing interviews, be careful! Take some time to prepare in advance. Determine your core message or messages. 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 be credible and to convey the seriousness and importance of the issue. Remember that anything you say can be used against you, no matter how friendly the reporter seems – so don't say anything you wouldn't want to appear in print. 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 actually answer a reporter's questions directly. Instead, interpret questions broadly and respond by acknowledging them and then communicating your core message by delivering a sound bite. 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, get it to them ASAP. After piece is published, send a short note or make a quick phone call to thank a reporter for writing a fair and balanced article. Once you've worked with a reporter, try to maintain the relationship. Let them know when you've got something going on. If they're not interested in covering a particular event or issue, don't be discouraged because they might be interested next time.

Find out which "beats" reporters cover. 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 in your dealings with them and influence them to see you as a helpful resource.