
Day of action on health and safety
Using the media
28 April 2012

How to use the media to promote the day of action on health and safety

If you are planning any events for the day of action to defend health and safety or you want to raise awareness about Workers' Memorial Day on 28 April, then it is important you consider how you can best use local media both before and on the Day. This briefing outlines some of the ways you can maximise media coverage.

The media are more likely to cover a story if there is a human element to it. Just saying that you are going to be holding a demonstration or a memorial service is unlikely to get more than a mention, if that. You will also need to highlight the human cost of health and safety failings both to workers and their families locally.

Using the local media

You can use the media to raise awareness of safety issues locally and to tell people about events organised to coincide with The Day of Action/Workers' Memorial Day. Don't be nervous about dealing with the media, you just need to understand what journalists are looking for, how to approach them and how to 'sell your story'.

First find out which newspapers and radio stations cover your area. You will no doubt already be aware of some of these, but you can find out which other newspapers and radio and TV stations there are by searching on the internet. If you don't already have a media mailing list, you should email or ring individual titles/outlets to find out the best person to target. This will usually be the news desk. It's probably best to email a press release and then follow it up with a phone call.

With a bit of research you can greatly improve your chances of getting media pick up. For example, building a relationship with local journalists, not ringing when they are on deadline, sending stories with as much notice as possible, and being across the key facts of your story will all help. When you speak to a journalist, it's important that you can convey the essence of the story in a few short sentences. If it helps write down what you plan to say and try to anticipate what the journalist might ask you.

Radio and TV interviews

If you're targeting local radio and television stations, listen to your local broadcasters to get a feel for the kind of stories they tend to cover. Decide who your story might be of interest to, then contact someone on the news desk. If you get asked for an interview, find out if it will be live or pre-recorded, who you might be on with and think about three key points you'd like to make. Keep the language simple and avoid jargon at all costs. Remember that people who are watching or listening may not know what 'mesothelioma' or 'musculoskeletal disorders' mean so always explain and don't talk too fast. Where you can, use examples to give what you say local colour, so make sure you know the figures for any fatalities in your area for example. Practice what you are going to say beforehand so you are more relaxed during the interview.

Letters' pages

The letter's page is often one of the most widely-read pages of local newspapers, so it can be a great place to raise awareness of your day of action or Workers' Memorial Day events. Editors like controversial discussion on their letters pages. You can either initiate or respond to letters, just make your letter short and snappy, say to a maximum of 150 words. Try to get several letters on the topic, including ones by people with direct experience of what happens when health and safety is ignored.

Press releases

If you are contacting the media with a news story of your own you'll need to write a press release. The opening paragraph needs to be short and sum up exactly what the story is – you need to grab the journalist's attention in those important initial seconds. A good checklist for your first paragraph is to see if you have answered the following questions – who, what, where, when, why and how.

A press release's purpose is to get key information across. You can list notes for editors at the end of the release to include more general or technical information if you think that's necessary. Avoid over long sentences or paragraphs, jargon and information that isn't relevant. Keep it brief – four to five paragraphs totalling about 400 words should suffice.

Write 'press release' at the top and who it is for the attention of. Make sure you include contact details – the name of the person taking media calls and an out of hours number. If you want photographers or camera crews to attend, then say so. Date it and where relevant include an embargo (so all media outlets can use the story at the same time) and give it a heading which encapsulates what the story is all about. Don't worry about spending hours coming up with a clever heading – just make sure the title makes it clear what the story is.

After you're happy with the first paragraph and title, expand in the second

and subsequent paragraphs, including additional information in decreasing order of importance. Be careful to use concise, punchy language that is both easily quotable and factually correct. Include a quote – this can sometimes be the only element of the release that makes it into a story – so make it count, without going over the top.

Remember the media are always after real people to illustrate their reporting, so if you do have case studies – people prepared to talk about their experiences – check first that they will come across well, then tell the journalist. (It's probably best to check each time with the individual rather than simply handing case studies' contact details over to journalists.)

Always send press releases in the body of an e-mail (not as an attachment) and include a clear, concise description of what the release is about in the subject box.

Photo opportunities

If you've got an event taking place that you think would make a good picture, write a separate operational note to send to picture desks on local papers and the planning desks of regional broadcasters. In this you should include a clear description of exactly where the stunt is due to take place, at what time (make sure you factor in any set-up time) and on what day. Expand with information about exactly what is happening and what the photo opportunity will illustrate. Think about having people on hand both to manage the media on the day and to speak to any interested reporters about what is going on.

Examples of “stunts” have included putting lines of shoes on a pavement to represent the number of people who have died from occupational diseases or injuries in a town, carrying a coffin through the high street, or having an exhibition featuring the details of people who have died along with a photograph and description of the accident. In several towns unions or hazards groups have contacted the local football team to ask them to put a notice about Workers Memorial Day in their programme for any Saturday fixtures. Given the press are likely to be at the match anyway, if you can also arrange for the relatives of people who have died through work to be there to meet the teams beforehand it could make a good media opportunity.

If your event or stunt is taking place on private land make sure you seek permission and if it's on the street or in a park, it's worth telling the local authority and also the police. You may also want to think about a 'wet weather' alternative.