



European Immunization Week

Guidelines: Public Relations and Working with the Media

I Background

The Media is highly influential to the success of any communications campaign and we see them as a key partner for European Immunization Week. However, we also recognise that working with the media is time consuming, competitive and often daunting.

As Public Relations (PR) is an integral component of every country's activity plan for European Immunization Week, the following document has been compiled to provide basic, concise and practical guidelines in relation to PR, press launches and working with the media. It is primarily targeted at those having limited experience in this area or perhaps not having access to a media specialist within their team. The guidelines are non-country specific and should be tailored according to individual country circumstances and needs. Every country is encouraged to recruit a local Media or PR specialist. However, where this is not possible, it is hoped that these guidelines will make the topic more manageable.

Should you require more in-depth information and guidance, the following are good sources:

1. Working with the Media (WHCA Action Guide) – a practical, pocket guide available in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. It can be downloaded at www.env-health.org/a/1720
2. Advocacy for Immunization. How to generate and maintain support for vaccination programmes. GAVI / The Global Fund. It can be downloaded at <http://www.path.org/vaccineresources/details.php?i=180>
3. Advocacy – a practical guide with polio eradication as a case study. It can be downloaded at <https://www.who.int/vaccines-documents/DocsPDF99/www9958.pdf>

II A strong, consistent Public Relations message

As with any activity in the communications / activity plan, key messages should be developed and closely adhered to. Of all communication activities, PR is the one that can potentially add huge value if done well. It is also the activity where your message is at most risk of getting lost and distorted if it is not communicated clearly and consistently. Before writing any PR materials or conducting media interviews, it is recommended that you spend some time on message development

- Think tactically about the messages you use and how they might be interpreted by journalists and eventually the public.
- Work out your top 3-5 messages for PR. What do you want to read about in the morning news? If your story is strong you should not be surprised by what the media reports!
- Think about the overall tone – are you trying to convey a positive or negative message? Are you trying to shock or surprise people to prompt them into action?
- Who is your ultimate target audience? For example, public media can be used as an advocacy tool for pressuring policy makers, in which cases messages will be tailored accordingly. In this case the eventual newspaper headline might read; “Health Services seek additional funding to reach out to every child” – a very different message than one targeting the general public, such as “Sports Hero visits rural community to remind parents of the importance of immunization”.
- Above all, remain focused and avoid the temptation to include too many messages. For all PR materials **ensure that headline and key messages relate back to your defined objectives for EIW** and are consistent with other communication activities.

III Press Releases

There are different types of press releases. Specifically, for European Immunization Week you might consider issuing the following:

1) Press Advisory (also known as ‘Note to the Press’) – gives advance warning to the media that an event will be happening (e.g. a launch / press conference). Use this to explain what the event is about and why it is important to attend. Make the event seem as newsworthy as possible without revealing the actual news. Craft the headline to this effect (e.g. *Minister inaugurates European Immunization Week with launch of 24 hour phone line to boost public confidence*).

The Press Advisory should be issued approximately **a week to ten days before** the event and **followed up two days before** the event with a reminder.

2) News Release (also known as Press Release) – is essential and will tell the Media all they need to know about EIW. A

simple, common format for the press release is 'Who', 'What', 'Why', 'When' & 'Where'.

The Press Release is often accompanied by **fact sheets**. Consider preparing the following (they will save you a lot of time answering the same questions!):

- Basic information about the immunization schedule, the diseases which can be prevented, coverage levels and disease incidence in your country
- Additional information about the specific products or activities you are launching during EIW
- Contact and information numbers plus reliable sources of information on the Internet

There are many excellent fact sheets on the Internet. If you do not have time to create your own, these can usually be downloaded and distributed, provided the authors are credited.

Deadlines for Press Releases vary according to the media and vary from **five days (weekly magazines) to one day** (newspapers).

3) Photo-Call Notice – announces that there will be an opportunity for Media to photograph a person or product and invites them to attend. It allows you to create photo opportunities that symbolically support your story. For example, if a celebrity is fronting your campaign, consider arranging a photo call at a local hospital or school or even at home with their children. These types of photos will generate better news coverage than podium-style photos taken during the press launch.

The photo-call notice should be issued **three or four days in advance of the event** and followed up with a reminder the day before the event.

4) Press Briefing Document (also known as 'Press Backgrounder') – is a more detailed document that provides background **information** on an issue or an event in order to help the journalist to grasp the full story. If your campaign touches upon complex or sensitive subject areas (e.g. Immunization Safety or Adverse Events Following Immunization) this is often a good idea. This document might be more technical in nature.

The Press Briefing Document can be issued alongside the Press Release or as part of a Press Kit (issued at the Press Launch).

- The media wants news-stories so work on presenting your information in a media-savvy way. Provide them with headlines so that they will not have to create their own! Strong stories sell and unless your item is newsworthy it will be relegated.
- Highlight the single most important piece of information.
- Use statistics to lend credibility but think carefully about how you present the data. For example, to an average person 87% coverage does not sound bad! Far better to say that coverage is the third lowest in Europe. Or talk about the number of unprotected children in the country. Highlight the human aspect of the story.
- Compare and contrast immunization data from within the WHO European Region (or include league tables) to demonstrate your message. E.g. X country has the third highest rate of measles..... Y country is the first country in the WHO European Region to reach targets on.....etc.

- Include quotes highlighting your key message, with the name and status of the speaker.
- Do not assume that the reader understands the subject matter. Keep it simple. Beware of technical jargon.
- Editors cut press releases from the bottom up so do not leave the punch-line to the last paragraph.
- Ask a colleague to proof-read / approve your press release. Watch out for factual errors as well as spelling mistakes and stylistic blunders (avoid exaggeration, irony, clichés etc.).
- Put your release on well-branded headed paper, including your logo and the EIW logo and slogan. Use one or maximum two single-sided sheets of white paper, typed in a plain font and appropriate size. Fancy fonts will annoy, rather than get you noticed!!
- Ensure relevant contact details (media and technical) are included and that the contact people are available and prepared to take calls.
- Create a targeted press list with contact information for all journalists.
- Never take it for granted that your Press Release has been received or read. Always follow up with a phone call to check if the journalist has seen it and to get their interest. As Press Releases often 'disappear', it sometimes helps to call in advance to explain and request the best mode of delivery. Do not be afraid to call again and check if it has arrived. Journalists are notoriously busy and can be brusque, but do not let this put you off. After all, you are helping them to do their job.
- Do not neglect local media. It is often very effective for health promotion / advocacy communications.

IV Press Conferences

A Press Conference is an opportunity for Media to question key figures about Immunization Week or other aspects of the Immunization Programme. Only hold a Press Conference if you are providing journalists with information that could not have been simply sent through a Press Release.

- Ensure it is planned carefully and managed efficiently. Stick to the agenda. Plan for the presentations and question session to last no more than one hour. Limit presentation slots to five minutes.
- Check that the timing does not overlap with any other scheduled event that might overshadow your news. Also the time should allow journalists to reach copy deadlines.
- Ensure that key speakers are available for interviews with journalists after the event.
- Choose the venue carefully and ensure all logistical and equipment arrangements are in place.
- Prepare and distribute a press kit including the press release, fact sheets, copies of reports or speeches, photographs, speakers' biographies etc.

- Recruit a confident, competent moderator and consider seeking an appropriate celebrity to launch the campaign.
- Ensure speakers are well briefed ahead of the event and that the content of speeches does not overlap. If possible speakers should prepare a handout of their speech or slides, which can be given to the Press.
- Ensure that you have representatives from different specialisms on your panel and agree in advance who will answer questions on particular subject areas. If a question is directed at the wrong (i.e. inappropriate) person, the nominated person may intervene.
- Think about topical news stories which might be raised by journalists and prepare speakers to answer questions that might arise.
- Prepare for the event by asking yourself the most difficult and awkward questions you can think of and document / pre-prepare your answers. Provide a question sheet to the panel of speakers. Do not share this sheet with the Press.
- Focus on getting the most influential journalists to attend.
- Do not limit your invitations to journalists. Your press conference will be more interesting if you also invite partners, civil society organizations, beneficiaries, members of the local community etc.
- Prepare a 'sign-in' sheet for all attendees and assign someone to take charge of this.
- Ensure the venue is strongly branded using your logo and EIW / WHO logo and branding. Most importantly, ensure that the table, lectern and backdrops are branded.
- Within a few hours of the event, deliver information to important journalists who were unable to attend.
- Follow up on the event by checking what has been published and collecting all published materials. Thank those who gave good coverage and correct those who got their facts wrong. Use the opportunity to sensitize the media and develop a long-term relationship. Aim to be the first person they turn to when they need information about immunization.

Should you decide that a formal press conference is inappropriate consider the value of holding a smaller, **informal press briefing**, such as a breakfast meeting.

V Media Interviews

Media interviews are a tremendous opportunity to raise awareness of your key message. Offer individual / 'exclusive' interviews to key media contacts and ensure that you allow sufficient time for this.

For detailed guidance on conducting media interviews, please consult the documents referenced above. Some key tips are:

- Learn more about the interview. Do not hesitate to ask what the reporter is looking for or planning to ask. What is the goal of the story? What is the audience profile? Is the

interview live or pre-recorded? If it is a TV or radio interview, will listeners be calling in to ask questions or will there be other guests or panellists?

- Develop 3-5 messages or '**talking points**'. These are the main ideas you want to emphasize and repeat during your interview. Weave these points into all of your answers. Anticipate what questions may be asked and be prepared with answers.
- Keep control over the interview and steer the content. Keep a focus on the issues. Do not be intimidated.
- Wear the right clothing.
- Avoid jargon and keep your answers short.
- Maintain eye contact. This holds a reporter's attention and makes you look confident.
- If a reporter asks a question you cannot or will not answer, you might say, "I cannot address that issue, but I can tell you..." Ask for clarification of vague questions.
- Remember nothing is "off-the-record."
- Never say "No Comment". It makes you look guilty and untrustworthy. If you cannot comment on a point, emphasize what you can say and return to your core message points.
- Do not repeat negative words or inaccurate facts included in a reporter's question. Correct the inaccuracies and shift to an appropriate message point.
- Stay focused and positive.

VI Dealing with rumours and negative publicity

Rumours or negative publicity concerning immunization have been experienced at some point in time by every Member State. Whilst this issue is more pertinent in some countries than others, we encourage all countries to think about this subject and develop a contingency plan.

Rumours and negative publicity could occur during EIW for a variety of reasons; perhaps groups or individuals who are opposed to immunization will try to mar the campaign, or perhaps an adverse event will take place causing the media to create a political stir. Either way, there are some general guidelines that should be considered:

In advance of the Week

- Identify a senior individual who will be in charge of your response to ensure consistency.
- Prepare materials in advance, including (1) Fact Sheet on Adverse Events Following Immunization (2) Frequently Asked Questions on Immunization Safety (3) A table comparing the risks posed by vaccination to the risks posed by disease.
- Identify parents who are prepared to speak out (through personal experience) in favour of immunization or the risks of not immunizing.

- Seek a trusted ambassador to front your initiative and champion the cause.
- Inform the media about Immunization Week objectives and activities.
- Brief health care professionals about Immunization Week. Try to ensure they have the information, skills and self-assurance to deal with worried or 'difficult' parents.

When the storm breaks

- Be prepared and ready to react quickly and consistently. Mishandling or poor handling through confusing statements will create a perception of having something to hide.
- Back your response up with iron-clad evidence - be assertive, not aggressive or defensive.
- Ensure that communication does not dictate to parents. Respect and address their questions and concerns and promote an open, balanced dialogue from credible sources.
- Do not get involved in personal attacks.
- Brief regional immunization teams on the response and request feedback from immunization teams on the ground.
- Health care workers are the single most trusted source of information for parents. Ensure they fully understand what has happened and how to deal with concerned parents.
- Monitor the impact of the negative event by recording changes in vaccination coverage in affected areas.

(i) Specifically, in the event of a rumour campaign or provocation by an anti-vaccination lobby (e.g. Parent appears in media during EIW saying 'Vaccine caused my child's learning disability')

- Clarify the extent of the rumour or misinformation and try to determine the motivation (e.g. ignorance, religious opposition etc.). Some rumour-mongers are malicious, but many are simply confused and desperate for an answer.
- Disseminate a response through the same channels used by the rumour-mongers. However, do not raise their profile by identifying and denouncing them. Inform the public about the true facts.
- If you are dealing with opposition from parents against immunization, include supportive parents in your response. If opponents present a very emotional argument, you need to be prepared to debate on a similar level.
- Meet with your opponents, although not publicly. Do not engage in a public debate or give a platform to the anti vaccination lobby or sources that are known to lack authenticity or credibility as this will only serve to raise their profile. As phoney as their arguments might sound, they can linger in the public consciousness for many years to come.
- Combat ignorance with knowledge, not coercion.

(ii) Specifically, in the event of AEFI (e.g. Media reports that a child has had a severe reaction to a vaccine during EIW)

- Start by verifying the facts.
- Clarify inaccuracies or factual mistakes.
- When genuine errors have occurred, acknowledge them. Outline what is being done to rectify mistakes. Respond to a negative event with positive actions.
- Issue a Press Statement explaining what has happened and why.
- Provide a mechanism for worried parents / professionals to address their concerns (e.g. a free Helpline).

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