

A note to course instructors



Communication is central to public health.

The material included in these modules will help your students learn specific communication skills related to working with the public and the media. The modules are premised on the notion that all public health professionals—from epidemiologists to sanitarians to health policy analysts—need to know how to interact with the media and with the public. Even if they are employed in a large organization the hosts its own health communication and media relations bureau, public health professionals at very least need to understand how the information they may be generating gets diffused.

Accordingly, the modules are designed so that instructors teaching virtually any course in an MPH program can select one or more modules and drop them into a course curriculum at nearly any point. The modules are self-contained, and therefore instructors need little disciplinary knowledge or experience in media relations to facilitate the instruction. Each module contains background reading and instructions for all the suggested exercises and activities. Each module is designed to take approximately 2.5 hours of class time to complete.

Specific modules included in this packet include:

- ✓ How to write a news release
- ✓ How to assemble a press kit
- ✓ The art of being interviewed by the media
- ✓ Contact Centers: Recommendations for successful practice
- ✓ Conducting community meetings



The materials were developed in response to needs expressed by University of Georgia Masters of Public Health (MPH) students during focus group meetings. Students in several MPH tracks indicated a need for more practical training in communication skills, including interviewing, media relations, report writing, team building, and community interaction. These same skills feature prominently in the Public Health Foundation Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice document, “Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals.”¹

Much of the information contained in this manual was inspired and adopted from a manual entitled, *Introduction to Media Relations* (1992) by Bob Howard, Office of Public Affairs, and Carol Robinson, Office of the Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sponsored by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and the Public Health Foundation, in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Public Health Training Network. For more information on how to obtain the video version of this particular resource go to: bookstore.phf.org. Other acknowledgments for materials adapted in these modules appear where appropriate.

¹ See: www.phf.org/link/corecompetencies.htm

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Throughout these modules, all class exercises and activities will appear in an enclosed box like this.

Information on **resources** and **helpful tips** are also interspersed throughout the modules.

Supplementary materials for each of the modules can be found on the CD included with this packet and on the Southern Center for Communication Health and Poverty Website at www.southerncenter.uga.edu.

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For more information about the Southern Center for Communication, Health and Poverty visit www.southerncenter.uga.edu.

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Preliminary Activity

*Creating a context
for working
with the media
and the public*



THE SOUTHERN CENTER FOR

Communication, Health & Poverty

Introduction

Numerous proposals for public health workforce development have advocated public and organizational communication skills for all practitioners. “Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals” promulgated by the Council on Linkages between Academic and Public Health Practice offers specific recommendations for training in communication. The competencies adopted by the Council in 2001 were divided into eight domains- Domain number 3 is Communication Skills (Table 1). All six of the competencies listed are relevant to practicing media and public relations.

Table 1

Recommended core competency communication skills for public health professionals

1. Communicates effectively both in writing and orally, or in other ways
2. Solicits input from individuals and organizations
3. Advocates for public health programs and resources
4. Leads and participates in groups to address specific issues
5. Uses the media, advance technologies, and community networks to communicate information
6. Effectively presents accurate demographic, statistical, programmatic, and scientific information for professional and lay audiences

Source: *Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice* (www.phf.org/link/corecompetencies.htm)

Understanding the difference between science and news media

Journalists are a vital link between the scientific world and the public; however, news reporters and scientists have divergent approaches and goals. Brooke Gladstone (Interview on “Morning Edition” with Robert Lee Hotz [transcript]. National Public Radio. June 4, 1998) provides a summary of the conflict between science and journalism, “Science is about questions and journalism is about answers; science is for the ages while journalism is for the moment.” Table 2 provides a general overview of such differences.

Resource: D.E. Nelson, R.C. Brownson, P.L Remington, & C. Parvanta (Eds.), *Communicating public health information effectively: A guide for practitioners* (pp., 73-96), Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.



Table 2

Contrast between mass media and public health goals

Mass Media Goals

Entertain, inform, or persuade
Make a profit
Reflect society
Address personal concerns
Focus on short term events
Present two or more points of view
Deliver salient pieces of information
Provide definitive (certain) answers

Public Health Goals

Educate
Improve health of the public
Change society
Address societal concerns
Focus on long term outcomes
Discount or dismiss unsubstantiated claims
Create understanding of complex information
Acknowledge uncertainty and realize that conclusions can change

Source: Greenwell, M. (2002). Communicating public health information to the news media. In D.E. Nelson, R.C. Brownson, P.L Remington, & C. Parvanta (Eds.), *Communicating public health information effectively: A guide for practitioners* (pp., 73-96), Washington, DC: American Public Health Association

General perspectives on media and public relations for public health professionals

The importance of building relations between the public health workforce and the media

In response to public health threats and heightened public interest in health issues, newspapers are publishing feature articles and special health sections, and many television stations have added programming on health-related topics. Accessing health information is one of the most common reasons why people use “new media” such as blogs and Internet discussion lists. As future public health leaders, your students will have the opportunity to take advantage of this intensified interest to inform the public about vital public health issues, tell their side of a story, and deliver news about health and risk issues to their communities.

This guide offers basic techniques that will help your students effectively deliver health messages through the media. It also offers suggestions on ways your students can build cooperative partnerships with media organizations to help ensure a flow of accurate public health information to the public.

It is vital that public health professionals have open access to media during times of crisis, or to deliver new information in a timely fashion. In order to assure such access when needed, public health professionals need to maintain media relations on a routine basis, when there is no pressing crisis or breaking news. Provided is a basic list of suggestions for maintaining such relationships.

Cultivate relationships with local journalists and news directors

Building and maintaining relationships with reporters is essential to getting your messages out in the media. The time to establish a relationship with the media is long before any trouble strikes. Try

to establish and maintain credibility in good and bad times. Visit or telephone reporters and editors. Invite them to visit your facility. Serving as a trustworthy source of information enhances your reputation, as well as your organization's reputation. Make sure to return reporters' telephone calls or emails and work directly with them to help them get the facts straight, the message clear. By doing this your organization's perspective is more likely to be accurately communicated to the public.

Understand a reporter's job responsibilities.

- Reporters are responsible for disseminating information quickly, accurately, and objectively.
- Reporters are interested in finding a good story. They want news.
- Reporters usually work on tight deadlines. Return their calls and let them know whether you will agree to be interviewed.
- Recognize the role of independent bloggers in filling many news reporting functions previously limited to professional journalists.



Maintain a list of media contacts

Being able to contact the right people is essential especially in an emergency or crisis situation.

Ensure you have trained spokespeople

Answering a reporter's questions effectively can be a challenging task. An effective spokesperson will be able to simplify content, provide a diplomatic statement to an event or to something someone has said, anticipate tricky questions, and have lucid and concise statements ready.

Have a one-page media policy for your organization & ensure all are aware of it

According to Leo Brown (2004)¹ a media policy provides guidelines for the release of information and establishes responsibilities of public information officers and other personnel when dealing with the media.

Know your facts when you speak to the media

Always research and rehearse what you are going to say to the media. One way to prepare for an interview is to anticipate what your audience already knows about a given situation, what are the three points the audience is most likely to get wrong unless they are emphasized and then develop your answers accordingly.

Know & respect media deadlines- Follow through when asked for information

Make sure you help reporters meet their deadlines. The length of time a health story can remain of interest for media coverage follows a similar pattern regardless of the medium covering it. A health story that revolves around a single event generally lasts about 24 hours in newspapers, radio, and television. However, a story which contains a connected set of events, such as a toxic waste site discovery, investigation, and cleanup, can be a newsworthy topic for months. Recognize that online websites for newspapers and broadcast media have changed the traditional news cycle. News media wish to have even partial stories online within hours of a news event. Similarly bloggers often depend on scooping traditional media, and therefore function 24 hours per day, seven days per

¹ Brown, L. (2004). *Media Relations for Public Safety Professionals*. Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

week. It can be important to make sure that bloggers have accurate information immediately, even if that information is just to affirm that an investigation or data analysis is underway. Otherwise inaccuracies that are very difficult to erase may be broadcast over the Internet.

Provide thanks for interviews/coverage

Always be sure to extend professional courtesy to your contacts. Professional, courteous behavior helps build relationships.

Always be honest

In the event of a health emergency or crisis, it is vital that you have maintained a reputation as a dependable and available information source with representatives of many different media outlets serving your community. Always be honest when dealing with the media. Providing false or inaccurate information can damage your reputation and may also put the public's welfare in jeopardy. If by chance you do not know the answer to a question you can always tell the reporter you will get back to them with the answer or refer them to someone who might know.

Class activity – Create a scenario

Ask students to outline scenarios in which they--as public health professionals in whatever job capacity they envision themselves-- will need to inform the public of an event in the community or of some breaking public health news. The scenarios might deal with health and safety during a natural disaster, an environmental clean-up program in the community, or conducting a health screening fair. Remind students to consider the full range of agencies and organizations with which public health professionals are employed. While a governmental public health agency comes to mind most readily, remind them of the communication functions of other entities such as hospitals, industry, and private consulting groups.

While students in a health promotion track probably won't have any difficulty envisioning themselves in such a scenario, other students aiming for careers as laboratorians might find it challenging to see how their work can have a public face; nonetheless, it is important for these students to understand all the possible roles for themselves in a chain of public information.

After students sketch the outlines of such a health-related event, ask them to share with the class actual media coverage of a similar event if they can.

Helpful tips for students to create health information scenarios: The Lexis/Nexis Academic Universe contains archives of over 5,000 news periodicals. Students could go there to get ideas. Also, most state departments of health archive news releases on their websites. Both sites will help students come up with ideas for this exercise. Extensive case studies regarding environmental health issues can be obtained from the ATSDR web-site. Other sources for case studies to use in these modules include Turning Point Social Marketing National Excellence Collaborative (www.turningpointprogram.org), Health Canada's Tools of Change (www.toolsofchange.com/english/casestudies.asp), and the online journal *Cases in Public Health Communication and Marketing* (www.casesjournal.org).

If they wish, students can use Activity 1 as the basis for all the activities in the following three modules. Students can work independently or in groups for this activity.