

Effective Communication Strategies for Sharing Key Pharmacy Messages

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Universal Activity # 0143-9999-11-062-H04-P

1.0 Credit Hours (0.1 CEUs)

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this session, successful participants will be able to:

1. Develop talking points on concepts important to the profession and utilize resources available through MPA.
2. Identify ways to reach out to the community and share significant pharmacy messages.
3. Identify ways to effectively communicate with the media on key pharmacy issues.
4. Define strategies for different types of media interviews, including in-person, over the phone and on-camera.
5. Establish and maintain effective media relationships.

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The media and the public are important audiences that require consistent and valuable communication. Whether it's through a newspaper, on the radio or on television, news media in your community can be a highly effective strategy to convey important pharmacy messages. Pharmacists must make their priorities connect with the general public, legislators and the media. With the profession constantly changing, it's important for pharmacists to educate key individuals on the value they provide. The question is sometimes asked, "How do we make these priority messages resonate with the public, legislators and media?" Pharmacists can't always be on the defense, or they will never score enough points to be recognized on the board.

Reporters, columnists, editorial writers and other media professionals are gatekeepers of information with the means to share that information on a state, national and even international level. They are important people to have on your side, or at least to educate so they can fairly and accurately

convey pharmacy's message and provide fair coverage.

Defining Your Pharmacy Priorities

The profession of pharmacy covers a wide range of health care issues. Because pharmacists' interests are wide and can span multiple areas, it's important for you to define your priorities before you shape your message(s).

In September 2010, Michigan Pharmacists Association (MPA) sent out a survey to all pharmacists in Michigan asking what pharmacy practice issue was most important to them. The top three were outsourcing of prescriptions (mail-order pharmacy), medication errors (nonpunitive reporting environment) and pharmacy benefit manager (PBM) transparency, with 33 percent, 12.5 percent and 10.7 percent of the votes respectively.

In addition to these important issues, it's vital to look at the big picture and answer the question, "What do you wish people knew and believed about pharmacists?"

Many pharmacists want the public to be aware that they do more than just count pills and dispense medications, so an important message to convey may be “pharmacists are uniquely qualified to understand the function of medications and ensure safe and effective patient therapy.” Your priorities may focus on a number of other things, such as a specific piece of legislation that would affect the profession. Advocating on behalf of pharmacy and educating legislators on important health care issues also is an important aspect of communicating effectively.

Audience

Knowing who your audience is and understanding how to best communicate with them is also important in sharing your message(s). To be sure we communicate clearly, we need to adjust how we say something and what information we include, and recognize that each audience understands messages differently. In general, most pharmacists want to communicate their pharmacy priorities to three key audiences: patients/general public, legislators and the media.

Patients/General Public

Most patients and the general public are not skilled in health care terminology, and different generations like to communicate in different ways. Also, when patients come to a pharmacy, they usually have a need, so it’s important to put yourself in their shoes when you’re trying to explain pharmacy issues. Be sincere; no one likes to be judged or talked down to.

Legislators

Legislators have full schedules. They’re looking to do the most good and want the outcome to help the most people, not just pharmacy. The information they’d be most interested in is the impact of

legislation or concepts in numbers or dollar amounts. Communicating information to them should be done in a professional and respectful way.

The Media

Lastly, the media traditionally have a set timetable. When it comes to pharmacy issues, in addition to hearing from a pharmacist, they often want a local or patient perspective. Backing up what you say with statistics or examples also makes you a credible source.

A pharmacy message or priority has to be a reality, or something you’re able to prove. Those things you deemed as what you wish people would know or believe about pharmacists have to be evident in pharmacy practice.

No matter who you want to reach, be sure you also review the 10 Cs of Communication (Table 2) before you start your strategy.

Crafting Messages and Talking Points

After you’ve determined your priorities and defined your audience, the most critical element of success is your main message. First, define what’s important, or your key statement. In other words, what’s the single most important statement that you’d like people to remember?

Now that you’ve determined what’s important, outline why it’s important.

Reinforce and clarify your key statement by providing background information and a call to action. In addition, collect evidence to back it up, such as anecdotes, research and statistics.

MPA developed many talking points on key pharmacy issues that members also have the opportunity to utilize. Pharmacy priority talking points are available at MichiganPharmacists.org/advocacy/priorities, and other materials also are available in the Patient Education Library at MichiganPharmacists.org/resources/education.

Table 2. The 10 Cs of Communications

Credibility	Is your messenger credible? Are they a trusted and respected source of information with your audience?
Context	Is your message in context with reality and the environment in which your audience is located?
Content	Is your message relevant to your audience? Are they interested in the information?
Clarity	Is your message straightforward? How far will it travel and how long will it last? Don't use abbreviations; most don't translate.
Continuity and Consistency	Repeat your message for audience penetration.
Channels	What channels/tools of communication are you utilizing? What value are they bringing to your audience?
Customer Benefits	What's in it for me?
Caring, Compassion and Concern	Does your audience know that you care?
Capability of Audience	Is your audience capable of understanding the message? Will they take the time to read, watch or listen to it?
Call to Action	What is your audience supposed to do now?

These customizable handouts give you a template to work off of, or a free resource to use if your main priority and message is consistent with the Association's.

Table 1 outlines several important pharmacy issues that MPA has developed talking points on. Printable handouts with background explaining these key messages are available on the pharmacy priority Web site page mentioned above.

Table 1. MPA Pharmacy Priority Talking Points: Examples of Key Statements

Pharmacy Priority	Key Statement
Department of Community Health	Pharmacists must be actively involved in solutions related to Department of Community Health issues for patients in Michigan to have the best care possible.
Medication Therapy Management (MTM)	Pharmacists strengthen patient health and decrease costs by providing MTM services.
Outsourcing Prescriptions	Outsourcing prescriptions is bad business for Michigan.
Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs)	PBMs must be regulated to stop abusive practices. In doing so, government entities and employers can realize significant cost savings.
Pharmacy Technician Certification	Licensing pharmacy technicians keeps patients safe, ensures better care and helps decrease drug diversion.

Sharing Your Message

So, your message has been developed; now what do you do? There are several ways that you can share your priorities with the community.

Write a Letter to the Editor or Opinion Editorial

Writing a letter to the editor is one route you could go. Letters to the editor reach a very large audience and almost every newspaper or magazine publishes them. They also give you a chance to rebut information that was not accurately conveyed in a news article. These letters also are frequently used by community leaders or legislators to gauge public sentiment about current issues in the news.

In addition to letters to the editor, people often submit opinion editorials for publication. These types of pieces often are clipped out of newspapers or bookmarked on the newspaper's Web site for individuals to share with colleagues, legislators, friends, etc. These types of submissions can be sent to a newspaper's opinion editor, but be aware that constrained word counts often exist, so you may want to check the publication guidelines in advance to be sure your message can be conveyed within their limits.

Become a Trusted Resource

Another option for sharing your message is to become a resource for a reporter. Identify reporters who cover health care in your local newspaper or television station and establish yourself as a reliable source of information. Reaching out and inviting them to your practice site could help educate them on what pharmacists do and why it's important, and then remain in regular contact. Reporters who find

an expert who's easy to understand and work with tend to go back to that source frequently.

You also can sign up for Help a Reporter Out (HARO) at www.helpareporterout.com, and when you have a story to share on a topic, offer the information to a reporter. HARO is one good way to spread information and get high-quality, free publicity for your business.

Host a Legislator Pharmacy Visit

Becoming a trusted source for legislators can be useful as well. Inviting them to your pharmacy for a visit will help educate them on important pharmacy services and give them a chance to interact with patients and ask questions about your practice. Feedback from your visits also allows MPA to plan future advocacy efforts and identify potential allies in promoting a pharmacy-friendly legislative agenda. A legislative visit report is available at MichiganPharmacists.org/advocacy/grassroots. MPA is also willing to send out a media advisory, or provide you with a template to create your own, to get the word out about a legislative pharmacy visit.

Talk Back

Talk radio and other talk-back opportunities also provide a good means for you to share your message. You can get involved in talk radio by being interviewed as a guest or calling into talk radio programs. The opportunity exists for you to create your own Internet radio talk show, such as through www.blogtalkradio.com, and share topics that concern you or

information about your priorities to the public.

Utilize Social Media

Social media has become a powerful tool for getting the word out. Web sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter provide so many new web-based and mobile technologies to communicate through. It's important to understand that you cannot completely control your message through social media, but rather, you can begin participating in the conversation and significantly influence it.

A simple social media post often is not enough to convey the full importance of a topic, but including links to expand on key ideas and utilizing multimedia, such as videos, photos and blog posts, can create value for your followers and showcase your knowledge.

Many people are using social media for successful public relations efforts, and social media resources offer unique features that may be used to advance the role of pharmacy in health care initiatives. Because social media is so far-reaching, you also can be connected to or network with those you wouldn't otherwise. Use the messages you craft to speak to these people.

Sharing content with your audience or potential customers also is a great way to generate more interest in your field, a particular service, your professional priorities and more.

Perfect Your Media Skills

When sharing your message, it's also important for you to acquire media skills. In many ways, the media acts as a gatekeeper to the community and is a powerful force in shaping opinions and creating perceptions.

Because of this, it's important for you to learn how to establish and maintain good media skills and develop long-lasting relationships with your local media.

Organization is key to speaking powerfully on behalf of the profession. Many organizations have internal public relations staff to gather certain information when a media representative calls. Whether someone else does it, or you do it yourself, it is essential that you know who called, what they called about, when they called, where they called from, their deadline and any other facts your company deems important.

It's okay to take the request and call back within their deadline with organized answers. Developing guidelines for media calls is critical to getting and staying organized in your public relations efforts. Once you've planned and organized, there are many things to keep in mind when implementing media communication, including what to do after you've agreed to talk with a reporter, how to handle bad questions, positive and negative words to use, on/off the record, body language and tips for looking good on television.

After agreeing to speak with a reporter, you'll need to do the following:

- Be a source before you are a subject
- Respond quickly; reporters are almost always working under a strict deadline
- Anticipate any and all questions
- Prepare your responses
- Know your key messages; go over your talking points in advance, or have them in front of you during phone conversations.
- Know your facts and stick to them
- Do not speculate or editorialize; if you don't know, then don't pretend

you do. If you need to look into a question, let them know and get back to them within their deadline.

- Avoid sarcasm
- Be brief; get your key messages out early in the conversation
- Know when to stop talking
- Tell the truth
- Don't take anything personally
- Keep your cool; act, don't react
- Be human

- Think and talk visually
- Speak simply; avoid technical jargon
- Repeat your key messages before you conclude; a reporter will almost always ask "Is there anything else?"

To go along with anticipating any and all questions, reporters sometimes may ask you what are considered "bad" questions. Table 3 lists different types of bad questions and how to handle them appropriately.

Table 3. Handling "Bad" Questions from Reporters

Type of Question	How to Handle It
Loaded question: Begins with false or misleading statements and asks for a response	Restate the question correcting any inaccuracies, and then answer it
Unacceptable alternatives: Offers choice between two extremes of false situations	Don't repeat the question, restate the reality; explain the real situation
Hypothetical question: Requests comment on a "what if" situation; reporter is usually fishing for information	Respond to a real situation only; don't guess, speculate or offer opinions, and don't answer questions that are beyond your area of expertise
Commentary: Requests comment on a statement made by someone else	Don't comment on hearsay or a study you haven't reviewed; unless you've personally heard the statement and are qualified to respond, don't. Instead, suggest the reporter contact the source directly
Rapid-fire questions: One question fired after another, without an opportunity to respond	First, only answer the questions you want to. Stop if you are continually interrupted and don't go on until the reporter stops, then respond to each individual question

In addition to bad questions, there also are bad or negative words that should be avoided. When it comes to the profession of pharmacy, positive words are those such as patient, pharmacy, pharmacists, medication, therapy and education, whereas words to avoid, or negative words, would include those like druggist, drugs, pills and abuse.

When speaking to a reporter, it's never recommended to go "off the record," meaning the material you provide them

may not be published or broadcasted. There are certain phrases, listed below, that reporters may use to make it sound like you're speaking off the record.

- **Not for attribution:** Information may be published, but the source of the information may not be identified. If you ever agree to this, make sure you know whether or not this applies to your name only, your

organization or anything else about you.

- **Background:** This typically means the reporter is simply doing some research on a subject before doing a story and will not use your name for publication, but make sure you clear this with the reporter.
- **Just between us:** Never use this phrase or agree to it with a reporter
- **Check it with me before you use it:** This allows the reporter to go over information or quotes with you before publication
- **Read it to me before you use it:** Never use this with a reporter; they will rarely read the story to you before it's published. All you can do is make sure your facts and quotes are accurate.

As a general rule, if you're not prepared to be quoted, don't say something. Reporters aren't obligated to check with you before they use a quote, or read or provide a story to you for review before it's published. When doing on-camera interviews, or in-person reporter interviews, body language and fashion come into play as well. Body language can often answer a reporter's question faster than you can. Watch for these revealing signs:

Signs of Confidence

- Uncross your legs
- Move toward the edge of your chair
- Lean toward the reporter
- Loosen your tie or unbutton your coat (print or radio only)
- Nod your head
- Gesture (moderately)
- Initiate and maintain eye contact
- Use a loud, clear voice
- Vary your vocal tones
- Vary your positions

Signs of Nervousness

- Cover your mouth
- Scratch your nose, ears or head
- Tug at your clothes, play with your jewelry, pen, paper, etc. – if you're a hand fidgeter, fold your hands
- Slump
- Look down and avoid eye contact
- Make unpleasant or inappropriate facial expressions
- Look away
- Keep your body rigid
- Hunch your shoulders
- Verbal pauses (um, ah, uh, etc.)

If you are nervous, it's okay to bring notes and refer to them. Even during on-camera interviews, there's often a break between spots and questions.

There are other good tips to utilize for on-camera interviews. Fashion is important to ensure that you look your best on television and represent yourself and your organization in a professional manner. It is suggested that men wear medium and dark toned sport coats (not black), such as charcoal, with an off-white, gray or pastel colored shirt. For ties, stick with medium and dark colors with plain and moderate (unbusy) patterns. In addition, it's recommended that men shave stubble prior to an on-camera interview.

For women, suits and dresses should be simple and tailored in wool, cotton or linen, avoiding reflective and shiny fabrics.

Blouses can be off-white, gray or pastel and jewelry should be minimal.

In addition, some general on-camera interview tips include:

- Remove nametags, hats, pens, wallets and notepads, and other nonessential things that could distract viewers.

- Silk ties and blouses could cause static interference with microphones clipped to clothing.
- Avoid comb-overs, “big hair” or anything that draws attention away from the important matter you’ll be discussing.
- Red, black and white are okay to wear, but black and white will create a monochromatic picture instead of taking advantage of television’s living color. Wearing these colors if you have very light or very dark skin also could compromise the picture’s overall exposure.
- Wear tailored, form-fitting clothing. Television tends to “add weight” to the on-camera person.

communication takes practice, and the only way to learn is to watch other pharmacy professionals in action and to evaluate your own practice.

Determine what worked and what didn’t and decide what you learned that could help the next time around. If you’re asked the same questions in a future interview or want to reiterate different points the next time around, make note of it, and if you’re ever called again to speak on the same or similar subject you’ll be better prepared. Table 4 provides several tips for establishing and sustaining good media relationships. Once you’ve served as a reliable source and expert on pharmacy topics, these are important things to keep in mind to maintain that relationship. Even when there isn’t breaking news or something crucial to pharmacy in the news, it’s important to stay in contact with key members of the media.

Put Your Media Skills Into Practice

A good way to develop media and interview skills is to learn from others. Media

Table 4. Tips for Establishing and Maintaining Media Relationships

Tips	Additional Information
Find out who key health care reporters in your state are	Develop an accurate contact list and keep it up-to-date
Hold one-on-one meetings with key reporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go to their office • Get to know them • Present your key issues and leave behind materials • Offer your assistance as a resource • Discover what kind of stories peak their interest and how to best correspond with them
Understand the reporter’s deadline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow guidelines of how they best like to be contacted • Meet their deadlines through this form of communication
Try not to sent out blanket press releases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customize press releases to each reporter (particularly key health care reporters) • Send to them personally rather than through a distribution list
Avoid images and attachments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t include attachments along with e-mail press releases

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mails could go to their spam folder or be deleted altogether
Follow up with reporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show your appreciation for attention to an issue • Take that opportunity to educate them further
Follow key reporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send them an e-mail if you thought a story they wrote was good/informative/insightful • Reporters like genuine praise
Use e-mail correspondence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporters prefer e-mail correspondence • Never fax, unless they specifically say to • No time to retype a statement, especially under deadline
Record your interactions with reporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep track of each time you interact with a reporter or the media • Follow up and be familiar with how they like to be contacted or what issues they've already been educated on
Find local connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish local connections for state and national stories • Reporters often want a local perspective on national issues • Supply them with the names of media-trained members who are familiar with your organization's positions and talking points
Create a triage system in your organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporter calls should never go to voicemail • They are on deadline and often need to speak with someone right away • Develop a system that addresses the reporter's request, even if you need to take a message and return the call after preparing information

Pharmacists are the medication experts on the health care team. As a pharmacist, you are uniquely qualified to help consumers take charge of their health care by making wise choices regarding medications. As a resource, pharmacists can be powerful tools, educating the media, legislators and the public on important priorities.

When communicating your key pharmacy messages to the community, it's important to stay organized by establishing a strategy, developing talking points and keeping your media skills in check. Effectively sharing your priorities could take pharmacy to a new level, by educating the public, legislators and media, and getting the word

out there about key initiatives that impact the profession.

Several concepts in this article were shared from a public relations campaign developed

in collaboration with The Rossman Group in Lansing. MPA would like to thank Rossman, as well as Jill Cobb, B.A., for their contributions to the development of this continuing education home study.

KPhA hires new director of communications and continuing education

The Kentucky Pharmacists Association named Scott Sisco as its new director for communications and continuing education.

“This position plays a pivotal role in providing the highest level of service to our members,” said Robert McFalls, Executive Director. “We are thrilled to have someone of Mr. Sisco’s talent to join our team.”

Sisco’s background includes several newsroom positions at daily newspapers around Kentucky and alumni relations support positions at Western Kentucky University and Kentucky State University. He holds two degrees from WKU: a Bachelor’s degree in Print Journalism and a Master’s in Communication.

“I look forward to informing the pharmacists of Kentucky about issues relating directly to them, and managing the continuing education process efficiently,” Sisco said. “One of my goals is to connect with the younger pharmacists, and engage them in the activities of the Association. I also want to continue to provide excellent service to all Kentucky pharmacists.”

The mission of the Kentucky Pharmacists Association is to promote the profession of pharmacy, enhance the practice standards of the profession, and demonstrate the value of pharmacist services within the health care system.

For more information, contact Scott Sisco at 502-227-2303 or ssisco@kphanet.org.