Introduction

When communicating about any important public health issue, it is important to make sure you are reaching all segments of the community. This guide provides practical advice and strategies for working with your agency’s leadership to communicate with media serving ethnic populations. Although the guide was originally created to focus on communicating with ethnic media about immunization issues, the strategies described can be used for a variety of public health issues.

The guide has been prepared by the National Public Health Information Coalition (NPHIC), as part of its cooperative agreement with the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

NPHIC also offers a general media relations guide, The Media and You, for a modest fee. Topics include preparing for an interview, developing your message, dealing with bloggers, tricks and traps, and legal considerations. Learn more about it at http://www.nphic.org/join/buy-our-media-relations-guide.

Special thanks to CDC, New America Media and public information officers from Seattle and King County Public Health Department for their input into this guide.

Changing Demographics and Media Landscape

The U.S. population has been changing dramatically. For example, in communities where English has been the predominant language, we are now hearing such diverse languages as Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese and Arabic. The population is expected to become increasingly diverse in the years ahead. Along with the growing diversity of our population comes a growing array of media outlets serving ethnic communities.

Ethnic media outlets deliver information using the same channels that non-ethnic media use: daily, monthly and weekly newspapers; radio and TV stations; cable access programming; websites and social media. Ethnic media organizations range from one-person, part-time shops to local affiliates of national networks. They may rely heavily on advertising revenue, in part because they often provide their information free of paid subscriptions.

An important first step in communicating effectively with ethnic media is identifying the ethnic populations within your community. Locating where these populations physically reside will lead you to the media that serve them. Because of the continuing demographic changes expected in the U.S., you may need to periodically reassess this information.

If ethnic media are not readily identifiable, you may want to search online to see if there is an ethnic media association in your community. Or, if you can find one ethnic media outlet, they may lead you to others. Another way to locate ethnic media is to visit ethnic stores and restaurants; publications are often placed near the door. You can also speak with ethnic community leaders to find out what media outlets serve their community.

Another helpful source of information is New America Media (NAM). This organization is the country’s largest national collaboration of ethnic news organizations. NAM is headquartered in California with offices in New York and Washington D.C. They have established partnerships with journalism schools to grow local associations of ethnic media. They also publish an online ethnic media directory that is available by subscription. For more information, see http://newamericamedia.org/.

The Importance of Building Relationships with Ethnic Media

Working with ethnic media means much more than just sending news releases to them. It is important to build relationships with ethnic media and create a presence in the communities they serve.

Building relationships will help ethnic media understand that you are a trusted source of information, and it will help you understand their needs and preferences for obtaining and tailoring information for their audiences.

One of the keys to building relationships is to educate ethnic media about the subject matter before asking them to become messengers. For example, CDC developed a
simple and brief “Flu 101” presentation that was part of a media kit to share the facts and the impact that flu can have among health-disparate populations.

Before reaching out to ethnic media, do your homework:
• Conduct research to better understand the history, culture and customs of the communities they serve.
• Identify the specific diseases or conditions that may disproportionately affect each group, whether due to lifestyle, environment or genetics.
• Obtain prevalence data on diseases or conditions for the specific groups you are trying to reach. Providing this data to ethnic media will help them tell a more effective story.
• When an important public health issue arises, it is helpful if community leaders can speak on your behalf. Their endorsement may be key to your communications success. That’s why it is valuable not only for your department to establish relationships with ethnic media, but with ethnic community leaders, too. This collaborative effort will give the community leaders some ownership of the issue, which will help them work with media to get your message to their community. Ethnic media may be able to help you identify the leaders and the voices that the community respects.

Ethnic media often serve as advocates for the communities they serve. This is an important point to remember since it may represent a perspective you have not encountered in working with non-ethnic media.

Ethnic media can be very powerful. In many cases, they are the only trusted voice in their community. Ethnic populations often trust their own ethnic media more than other media sources. In smaller ethnic communities, ethnic media may be their only source of information.

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ETHNIC MEDIA

One effective way to build relationships with ethnic media is through editorial board meetings. In such meetings, it is helpful to include subject matter experts from your department who reflect the ethnic community you are trying to reach. However, lacking those individuals should not prevent you from having a meeting and building a relationship.

You can also establish an ongoing presence with a health column or section in a newspaper or become a regular guest on a broadcast. Ethnic media generally welcome ready-to-go information.

Another effective way to develop relationships with ethnic media is to purchase their advertising. Ethnic media rely on ad revenue for their survival, and rates are usually affordable.

More importantly, by purchasing advertising, you are seen as supporting the community. You will also generate goodwill that may be helpful if you need to reach out to them at a later date for assistance with another health issue.

Most importantly, don’t show up only when there is a crisis. Communicate regularly with ethnic media. Listen to them. Understand their needs. Then, when a crisis does occur, you will have established the foundation for a strong working relationship.

SPECIAL TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH ETHNIC MEDIA

COMMUNICATING WITH ETHNIC MEDIA MAY REQUIRE SPECIAL TOOLS, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING.

a. Experts who speak the language
When a public health issue affects a non-English speaking population, the ideal scenario would be to involve a spokesperson from your agency who speaks the language and is comfortable working with the media. If you don’t have this capacity, don’t let it be a barrier. Ethnic media may be able to help you explore alternatives.

b. Ethnic media roundtables
An ethnic media roundtable can be a very effective tool for working with ethnic media on important public health issues. It typically involves bringing subject matter experts together with a range of ethnic media to discuss ways to ensure effective communication with ethnic populations on an important public health issue.

For example, the California Department of Public Health conducted an “Ethnic Media Roundtable for Emergency Preparedness for Pandemic Flu” in March 2006, in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The roundtable meetings, co-sponsored by New America Media, provided a forum for the department and members of ethnic media to discuss methods of communication, information needs of various ethnic groups and lessons learned from past situations. The roundtable resulted in a number of new or improved strategies for working together to effectively communicate with ethnic populations during a pandemic flu.

c. Translation
Although there is a cost to translating written English information into alternative languages, there may be a higher cost to not translating important public health information for ethnic media and the populations they serve. Consider the health consequences that could occur if medical information is misunderstood due to lack of translation or poor translation.

In the process of building relationships with ethnic media, you will come to understand how important it is for them to

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receive translated information. Some ethnic media organizations may want all information from you (e.g., news releases, columns, fact sheets) translated into the language they use. Other ethnic media organizations may prefer to translate materials themselves. It is important to follow their lead.

Remember that a simple translation from English into another language may not, alone, be sufficient. There are many nuances in languages used by different cultures that do not allow for a simple translation. For example, one word may have two totally different meanings to a population speaking the same language.

A new term being used to describe a more thorough process of translation is “transadaption.” This process not only translates words, but also adapts the content for cultural and linguistic differences between English and the target language.

To ensure accuracy of information being translated, follow these best practices:

• Use a certified translator. Translation is a skill that requires training and experience. Even if someone is a native speaker of a language, that person may not be skilled in translation. Do not use machine translation or quick online alternatives. For more information about certified translators, visit the website of the American Translators Association at www.atanet.org.

• Have another agency “back-translate” the non-English language to English. Compare both English versions to make sure the information you are trying to communicate will be conveyed accurately.

• Have the translated information “community reviewed.” This process involves having at least one member of the target community review the translated information to ensure that it will be understood accurately.

• Ask community leaders to review text to ensure that the terminology reflects the target audience’s language and understanding. They should also review any photos, illustrations and images to ensure they are relevant and not offensive to the population. Remember that certain words, parts of a human body, symbols or photos could be offensive to a certain population. Therefore, it is best to get feedback from community leaders who represent or work closely with that population.

It may be impossible to implement all of these best practices when dealing with an urgent situation. However, when you have the time to prepare materials with more lead time, it is recommended that you follow as many of these steps as possible.

d. Interpretation

It is possible you will be involved with ethnic media in events or other situations where language interpreters may be necessary. For example, if you are having a public meeting to discuss an outbreak or other health crisis, interpreters will be needed to convey information from English-speaking subject matter experts to ethnic media, community leaders and the audience—and vice versa. This may also be necessary for radio and television interviews and related situations.

e. Visuals

Visuals, such as pictograms, often tell a story far better than words, especially for certain ethnic groups. Work with the ethnic media serving the populations you are trying to reach to determine if visuals would help convey your message. Those media may even be helpful in identifying ways to create the visuals.

POTENTIALLY SENSITIVE ISSUES

Communicating with ethnic media about issues that could be perceived as sensitive by a particular ethnic group may pose additional challenges.

For example, it is very possible your work with ethnic media may involve reaching out to populations that have differing perspectives on immunization. In this case, it will be important to work with community leaders and ethnic media to understand the population’s knowledge of immunization as well as any cultural beliefs that may serve as a barrier to accepting immunizations.

Similarly, certain populations may have an inherent mistrust of government agencies and/or western medicine. It will be important not to attempt to quickly change their points of view. Instead, listen carefully first and then calmly and thoroughly explain the benefits of immunization, being sure to address all concerns and questions. Building trust in this way will go a long way toward gaining acceptance of the importance of immunizations.

The above advice should be followed when communicating with ethnic media about any issue that could be potentially sensitive.

A FINAL WORD

Working with ethnic media does not have to be costly or complicated. And the benefits in improved communication and potentially better health outcomes can be significant. A strong collaboration between your agency, ethnic media and community leaders is your best formula for success.

If you would like to share information about how your agency has worked effectively with ethnic media on an important public health issue, please contact:

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