Marketing Your Support Group

by Meredith P. Goins, MIS

Does one of these two situations sound familiar? You’ve decided to start a support group so you contacted the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) for the packet on starting a support group. You’ve planned, organized, and held your first meeting yet only a few people attended. Or, your support group has been around for years or even decades, and it needs to be revitalized. It needs new members and maybe a fresh new look. Whichever may be the case, let marketing come to the rescue!

Ask these questions to your group members the next time you meet. Do we have a way to communicate with others who may be interested? Do we have a way of advertising our group? Do we publicize our events? Does our group have a brand or “feel” to it?

First, does your group have a way of communicating with your current and potential members, supporters and facilities? Some ideas include:

- Newsletter
- Web site – updated monthly for return visitors
- E-mail – quickest, easiest and cheapest way to communicate and disseminate information
- Flyers – one-page, eye-catching poster detailing meeting time, place and contact information
- Business cards – easy to carry and hand out.

Do you have a logo? A logo is a graphical representation of your group. When people see your logo, they should think immediately of your group! So you’re not an artist. See if someone in your group is! Hold a contest and have a panel of judges select your winner. Make sure that there is recognition and a prize for the winner.

Another idea is to go to your local community college or university and see if they teach graphic arts or design. Contact the school and ask them to assign this as a class project. Once you have a logo, make sure you put it on your newsletter, Web site, e-mails, flyers, and business cards.

Web pages are wonderful tools for sharing information at any time day or night. If the thought of creating and maintaining a Web site scares you, see if someone in your group or from a local college can assist. You can also contact your local public library; libraries often offer free courses. Please realize, however, that not everyone has Internet access and that communication with your members should be in the manner they request it.

Flyers are one of the cheapest and easiest ways to distribute information about your support group. Make sure to include your group’s logo and contact information, including group name, telephone number(s), e-mail and Web addresses, and meeting dates and location. Post your flyers at the following locations; just be sure to get permission first:

- Public libraries
- Senior centers
- Medical facilities (and their libraries too!)
- Doctor offices
- O&P facilities
- Local office on aging
- Local veterans organizations

Create business cards to hand out to new and potential members. This gives them a person to get in touch with if they have questions or just want to talk. It’s always a good idea to have at least one person responsible for your marketing efforts. In many small groups, it’s often the founder,
president, program coordinator, or volunteer coordinator, which often happens to be the same person!

Another way to spread the good word about your support group is by becoming an ACA-certified peer visitor. These individuals are called upon to visit soon-to-be or new amputees and family members to offer support and education. Peer visits are done by telephone, e-mail or in person. Take the time to mention your support group during visits, and give patients a flyer or business card so that they can visit when they’re ready.

Become an ACA member support group and have your group listed on ACA’s Web site at www.amputee-coalition.org/support_groups/npn_group_list.asp. A listing of support groups is also mailed and e-mailed to amputees when requested from the ACA’s National Limb Loss Information Center (NLLIC).

Don’t forget internal communication either. Do you have a welcoming committee or someone who follows up with a new visitor or new member? Use this person when meeting attendance has dropped as well. Call on folks who haven’t visited to see why and how you can get them back.

Also, check your local newspaper for listings of support groups. Many newspapers have a community news section and a reporter looking for a story! He or she might be happy to receive a press release announcing the election of your board of directors or special events your group holds.

Before submitting article ideas, however, it’s a good idea to call the reporter to introduce yourself and tell him or her a little about your group. At that time, you can also find out whether he or she prefers you to send your information by mail, fax or e-mail. Although reporters can’t sit in on your support group meetings, you can invite them to other events you’re holding or to the welcome reception of a meeting.

Press releases should include at least one contact name and telephone number and your Web site and e-mail addresses. In the lead sentence, tell who, what, when, where, why and how, and elaborate in the following paragraphs. Time is of the essence for reporters. The most important information should be at the beginning of the press release. Also, make sure to mention your mission statement and that you are a proud supporter and/or member of the ACA.

I hope these starting points will help you form or rejuvenate your group! Remember, you can contact the ACA any time for further information. Also, see what other support groups are doing. There is nothing wrong with copying each other’s ideas! If the ideas work for them, they might work for you. And if they work for you, continue doing them!

For more information, see 7 Steps to Writing Irresistible Media Announcements below.
of the 5% that actually gets read and acted upon, not tossed in
the recycle pile.

So what exactly is a media announcement? It’s a one-page
announcement of some newsworthy event. Depending on your
company, your newsworthy event could be the fact that you
merged with another company, that you have a new spokesper-
son, that you have a new and improved product, or that you
won an industry award.

Realize that your media announcement is definitely NOT an ad-
vertisement. If you want to place an ad for your company, then
call the advertisement department of any media outlet. They’ll
be happy to help you.

Regardless of what you’re announcing, all successful media an-
nouncements follow a few writing and formatting ground rules.
As you create your media announcement, be sure to adhere to
the following:

Ground Rule #1: Size Matters
Use a clear typeface on 8 ½” x 11” paper with one-inch margins.
Times New Roman in 10, 11, or 12 point font is best, and keep
the announcement limited to one page. If you have to make
your print tiny in order to squeeze in additional details, then
you’re saying too much. Three hundred words or so is all you
get to make your point. As Shakespeare said, “Brevity is the soul
of wit.” In the case of media announcements, “Brevity is the
showcase of your wits.”

Ground Rule #2: Know Your Focus
Even though you likely have many exciting things happening
in your company at the same time, your media announcement
must focus on only one. Nothing turns the media off more than
an announcement that attempts to cover multiple topics or that
goes off on various tangents. Prior to writing your announce-
ment, determine the one specific topic your announcement
will be about. Resist the temptation to add side points or to
brag about unrelated items. While you may believe that giving
additional information enables the media to “pick and choose”
something that interests them, in reality you’re simply showing
unprofessionalism. Keep your focus laser sharp at all times.

Ground Rule #3: Grab ‘Em Early
Craft a compelling headline that immediately conveys why
your information is important. If you’ve ever wondered how
important headlines really are, consider the facts: First, you have
exactly five seconds to impress the media enough to continue
reading. And your headline is the first thing people see. So if
your headline is weak, then no one will bother reading the rest
of your announcement. Second, great headlines can increase the
response to your announcement by as much as 2,100 percent.
No, that’s not a typo – that’s 2,100 percent! That’s a huge
response, and well worth the additional effort it takes to create a
winning headline.

The most popular headline style for the media is the “New For-

du-lar” (state the new product, service, or thing, and then state
the benefits). Such a headline works because people naturally
respond to new things. Plus, using the word “new” in a headline
sparks curiosity. Some examples include: “New CEO of ABC
Company Puts a Focus Back to the Customers” and “New Wid-
get 1000 Increases ABC Company’s Profits by 2000%.”

Ground Rule #4: Be Clear
State the purpose of your media announcement in the first para-
graph. Never expect someone to search for information or the
“point” of your announcement. If the media professionals can’t
understand your message immediately, then they’ll think it’s too
complicated to be conveyed in a two-minute radio or TV spot,
or in a one paragraph print spot.

Ground Rule #5: Use Quotes Liberally
Talk to the media directly in your announcement. Show them
that you’re not just a faceless company trying to get some free
PR. Quote your CEO, a member of your executive team, your
spokesperson, or even a key client in your media release. “Direct
quotes carry more weight and help sell your ideas,” says Dawn
Josephson, writing expert and author of….

Ground Rule #6: Write it Right
Sure, you want to gain attention, so breaking some grammar
rules for added impact or emphasis is okay. But don’t overdo it or you may appear careless. Remember, you’re showing the media your professionalism and selling your ideas. If your announce-
ment is riddled with errors, the media will think your company is too. Always have another qualified person read your announce-
ment prior to sending it out.

**Ground Rule #7: Who You Gonna Call?**
Always list your company’s contact information, including a contact person, phone number, web site, and email address, prominently. The goal of any media announcement is to elicit media attention and get them to call you for more information. If they have to hunt for your contact info, they likely won’t bother.

**Write Your Way into the Headlines**
Media announcements are a great way to keep your company’s name in the limelight. And the more you structure your an-
nouncement according to the media’s preferences, the higher your chances of being in that 5% that gets results. When you follow these seven ground rules for creating media announce-
ments, you’ll reap the rewards of more name recognition, which ultimately leads to higher profits.

---

Ready to take your media announcements to the next level?
Then keep these tips in mind:

• The average media person receives hundreds of media announcements per day. To make yours stand out, stay within the one-page guideline, and say something meaningful.

• Media professionals are only interested in one thing: knowing how your information will benefit their audience. Keep their audience in mind at all times and gear your information for them.

• Saying something outrageous is a great way to generate interest. People naturally love controversy, and if you can stir things up, you’ll get lots of exposure. Just remember that you must be able to prove everything you say. So if you want to say something just for sensationalism, but you can’t back it up, don’t. You must be able to support everything you print.

---

**About the Author**
Dawn Josephson, the Master Writing Coach, is founder of Cameo Publications, an editorial and publishing consulting and services firm. She is the author of two books, Putting It On Paper: The Ground Rules for Creating Promotional Pieces that Sell Books and Write It Right: The Ground Rules for Self-Editing Like the Pros, as well as the ghostwriter of 20 published books and over 1,500 magazine articles. She can be reached at (866) 37-CAMEO (866-372-2636) or dawn@cameopublications.com.

To support the ACA or to become a member, call 1-888/267-5669 45