

Start the publicity machine for Active Aging Week



Start early to plan media coverage that will publicize your special events during Active Aging Week, September 22–28, 2008

by Patricia Ryan, MS

How will older adults know about your Active Aging Week events? If your week's activities are going to introduce or reinforce the benefits of an active lifestyle, people need to attend! That's where your media strategy comes into play.

Active Aging Week has features that you can promote to gain media attention. The week's activities are for a good cause: promoting healthy, active lifestyles among older adults. All the events are free. The events support community health and well-being, particularly when they include families and people of all ages. Often many organizations, individuals and groups participate, which showcases how people in the community work together. Not to mention, Active Aging Week events are often very visual photo opportunities.

When promoting Active Aging Week—or any special event—there are two routes you can take: free publicity and paid advertising. This article will concentrate mostly on free publicity, which is a successful route for many health promotion events.

Making the most of free publicity

Free publicity falls under the umbrella of public relations, which is how your organization connects with the larger community. This is the coverage your activities receive in newspapers, television and radio stations, and the newsletters of other organizations. The major costs for public relations are postage and your time.

The tools used to generate free publicity include:

- press release(s)
- fact sheets and media advisories
- calendar announcement(s)
- short articles
- background information on your organization
- stories about older adults who can be profiled
- photographs
- interviews

With free publicity there is no guarantee your events will be covered, because the media outlet (or other organization) decides what they will cover and to what extent. However, there are factors within your control that will enhance your chance of Active Aging Week coverage. The following tips will help you turn these factors to your advantage:

Target media with an interest in your events. Look for media outlets that cover the type of events you'll offer. Both newspapers and television stations cover health, human interest (featuring a success story), older adults, news and community-wide activities. But not all media cover all these things, so target the outlets that have the type of coverage you need. Remember, a calendar announcement won't get printed if there's no calendar section.

Position activities so they are newsworthy for the local community. Customize press releases by adding a quote from one of your older clients or a staff person to link Active Aging Week events to your locale, or to the many local providers who will present during the week. Invite a local celebrity, such as the mayor or a television reporter, to join the event.

Develop a relationship with the editor or producer. The more you and your organization are recognized as reliable

Media resources from ICAA

Step 1.

Visit the ICAA website at www.icaa.cc

Step 2.

Look under “Networking and education.”

Step 3.

Click on “Active Aging Week.”

Shortcut: www.icaa.cc/aaw.htm

Look for these items:

- Active Aging Week Fact Sheet
- fact sheets to customize
- calendar announcement
- host site press release
- examples of past press releases
- article on writing press releases
- sample letter requesting proclamation

sources of stories and background information, the more likely your press releases and story ideas will get attention.

Find a reporter whose beat is older adults. With so much focus on the aging population, some media outlets have a reporter whose job is to cover older adults and aging services. A long-standing relationship with the reporter who writes a weekly column on older adults for the *Windsor Star* resulted in an article on Active Aging Week last year, says Janelle Way, recreation programmer at

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the Centres for Seniors Windsor in Ontario, Canada. During the week, participants could join most activities for free, and those who toured the facility received a complimentary pedometer and magnetic calendar to keep track of their steps. Way notes that “oftentimes seniors will read what [the columnist] is putting in, and a group of friends will say, ‘Let’s go down; they’re giving stuff away.’”

Feature individuals. There are older adults in every community who portray the positive results of active living. With permission, offer the story of one of these individuals, along with a photo. This adds a human interest element to a story, and provides more depth to your announcement of upcoming events.

Provide all the material editors and producers need. The less work a reporter has to do developing the story, the more likely you are to get a positive presentation. Offer to provide press releases, fact sheets on Active Aging Week and your organi-

zation, photos, background on what happened at past Active Aging Week events, and referrals to older adults or experts who can be interviewed.

Respond immediately to press calls. Everyone is busy. But to build relationships with reporters, who are on never-ending deadlines, you must return phone calls and emails immediately. Provide an alternate phone number if you are not always available.

Remember to have a person available early in the morning and into the evening as Active Aging Week nears. As Martha Inman, an activity director at Westminster Oaks Active Living Community (an ICAA 100 member), in Tallahassee, Florida, says: “It’s easy for all of us to say, ‘I should have planned this earlier ... I’ll try to get coverage next time,’ when a good last-minute push may still be worth it. If just the right news isn’t breaking at the very moment papers go to press or stations plan the

next day’s features, they may be looking for a filler, and it might as well be you!”

Follow up gently. There is a balance between following up to make sure a reporter has all the information that is needed and annoying the person with too many phone calls and emails. This balance likely differs among reporters.

To reach the health editor at North Carolina’s *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Rebecca Chaplin, aging program specialist for the Area Agency on Aging, called about two months in advance and sent a press release one month in advance of Active Aging Week. About one week later, she sent articles about older adults who had started exercising. Chaplin followed up with a telephone call each time materials were sent. The *Times* printed an article on the week’s activities in its “Living” section. A staff writer for another publication, *Mountain Xpress*, who is interested in articles for “younger older people,” published two preview articles

and included the photos Chaplin provided.

“[Press coverage] is a combination of learning to communicate in a way the media will hear, and if they have the space,” comments Chaplin. The stories she sent about active older adults “really worked,” she says. However, “the biggest thing is developing a relationship with a media contact,” she advises, “and if you don’t have it, have someone who does have that relationship be the contact.”

Another example is found in the experience of Martha Inman. For Active Aging Week, Westminster Oaks hosted a walk for residents and their guests through the large campus. Two days before the walk, the *Tallahassee Democrat* printed a photo of a resident walking in the campus gardens in a features section that was health oriented on the day. The local television station also covered the event, broadcasting a one-minute feature on the evening news showing residents and visitors as they walked through the grounds.

Generally, Inman writes a press release and sends it by fax and email to the local paper or television station, then makes a phone call. “We speak to someone in the features department, and agree to email them the picture, or if they require [an image with] better resolution, hand-carry a CD down to the newspaper office with a blurb about the event.” Networking is the key, stresses Inman. “Any marketing or PR we do with [media] at other times of the year makes it more likely that we will get coverage the next time. The better our reputation at Westminster Oaks for having interesting, active programming, the more likely they will consider us to ‘fill their empty spaces.’”

One factor that affects free publicity is outside of your control. When a big news story suddenly appears, or local attention is focused elsewhere, then

media may put aside or postpone lifestyle stories. A big news story may be a revelation about a political candidate, or a major natural event such as a flood or earthquake. While you cannot control this factor, you can sometimes predict it. In the United States, the presidential and local elections in November are likely to consume media attention. How about inviting local political candidates to visit your Active Aging Week events?

The most powerful free publicity is achieved through “word of mouth,” when older adults encourage their friends and neighbors to participate because an event sounds interesting or they participated in a prior year and enjoyed Active Aging Week. Your best bet on generating word-of-mouth advertising is to have a great event. You might even encourage one of your satisfied older adults to contact the media outlets and provide a personal story about the benefits of an active lifestyle.

Paid advertising and marketing

To guarantee coverage of your Active Aging Week activities, you can purchase advertising space in publications, or “spots” (short announcements) on television and radio. Nowadays many print publications and other outlets also place announcements and stories on their websites.

An advertisement or announcement that attracts attention has a catchy headline, a clear and short message, and details on the location and time of your events. Add a website or phone number people can contact for more information. In general, the fewer words the better.

For the visual mediums of print, television and websites, a photo can be worth many words to relay your message.

Pre-event marketing includes brochures, posters, flyers and postcards that are

Resources

Internet

National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity

Active Communication: A Guide to Reaching the Media

www.ncppa.org/mediaguide.pdf

US Administration on Aging

Media Advocacy Toolkit

www.aoa.gov/press/more/media_advocacy/media_advocacy.aspx

Print

“Effective news releases”

By Brigid Sanner

Journal on Active Aging, 4(2), 22–28; March/April 2005

- Available online to International Council on Active Aging® members in the “Article archives” (“Marketing”) in the members only section at www.icaa.cc

printed and distributed in advance of the event. Active Aging Week host sites have offset the costs of paid advertising and marketing through the generosity of sponsors and donors. Hosts of successful events have also had such costs funded in the annual budget.

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Active Aging Week September 22–28, 2008

Held each year in the last full week of September, Active Aging Week events are offered by host sites throughout the United States and Canada. These events are fun, educational and free to participants. The Active Aging Week health promotion initiative, spearheaded by the International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA), is designed to give as many older adults as possible the means to experience activities and exercise in a safe, friendly and fun atmosphere.

The tools needed to generate paid advertising and marketing include:

- requirements or specifications for the media
- copywriter
- graphic designer
- print shop

Do your homework

Each route you take for publicizing Active Aging Week starts at the same place. First, do your homework to identify the media outlets likely to publicize Active Aging Week events. Is it the small community newspaper distributed around the neighborhood for free? The daily or weekly paper? The cable television station or the national affiliate? The Internet version of a newspaper or station? Or a local cable station that constantly cycles event announcements? Look into your options. Also, consider organizations that could announce Active Aging Week events in their newsletters. For example, a local hospital with a health promotion program; walking and

bicycle clubs; churches; health clubs; retirement communities; or recreation centers.

Although you may choose to send press releases to every outlet in the vicinity, pay special attention to the few that are most likely to cover your events and reach your older-adult market. These are the places to spend time and effort developing contacts.

The best way to discover the media to target is to read and watch. Pick up copies of the newspapers. What do they cover? Are there stories on local people, or a weekly or monthly lifestyle section? Watch television. Which stations cover health or community topics? At what times of day? If these topics are broadcast at 3 a.m., you may not reach many people. With this knowledge, you are better prepared to position your materials to the format followed by the paper or station.

Find out the name of the editor (print and website) or producer (television and radio) in charge of the specific section you are interested in. Do this by looking at the staff list or by calling the receptionist. You may be passed along to several people before finding the right person.

“The most important thing is making personal connections,” explains media veteran Tracy Bishop, director of marketing at The Heritage of Southfield (Michigan), an ICAA 100 member. “It takes a while to build relations with the right person. You have to make them care [about your message].”

Bishop says that at a television station the first person to contact is usually a director of community relations or public relations. This person is responsible for bringing stories to the producers or editors who will decide who covers them. At a newspaper, she goes to the editor

who assigns to the health or features editor.

Send an email, telephone and set up a meeting with your contact. “I would bring story ideas, press releases ready to go, a prewritten public service announcement and the organization’s press kit,” outlines Bishop. “The easier you make [that person’s] job and the more prepared [you are], the more likely you are to get that piece.”

Find the answers to the following questions by calling the editor/producer, or exploring the organization’s website:

- Is it better to send announcements and press releases by email or by regular mail or fax?
- How far in advance should press releases and announcements be sent?
- How frequently do you want me to contact you?
- What types of stories are of interest?
- Do you need an expert resource on aging issues and older-adult lifestyles?
- How can I help you?

Once you know the answers, you’ll be prepared to send media materials that are well-positioned to garner free publicity for your events.

Before, during and after Active Aging Week, collect the print stories and chronicle the television and radio coverage you receive. Ask your colleagues and planning committee to keep an eye and ear out for coverage as well. By seeing what gained publicity this year, you’ll have direction to keep Active Aging Week publicity en route for next year. ☞

Patricia Ryan, MS, vice president of education for the International Council on Active Aging®, has a certificate in marketing from the University of California, San Diego, and is program manager for Active Aging Week.