

YOU CAN BE A MEDIA SUPERHERO

Local pharmacy's high credibility makes it a natural go-to source for insight on health care issues

by Bruce Kneeland

In his popular business book, *David vs. Goliath*, Malcom Gladwell makes the point that the young Biblical hero was not the underdog in his fight with Goliath. If you take a serious look at the facts, says Gladwell, it was Goliath who was destined to lose. David's skill with the sling had been honed to perfection while protecting his sheep from predators. Goliath was simply too big a target for David to miss. In today's vernacular, Goliath was guilty of bringing a knife to a gun fight.

So, what does this have to do with anyone who owns or manages an independent community pharmacy? Plenty.

You see, when it comes to getting free coverage with the local media, you are in the perfect position. It's simple, you have the freedom to talk candidly to the local media, a freedom the chain store manager might not enjoy.





What's even more important is that local media is eager to find someone credible who can provide them with a local angle on health-related stories being reported in the national media. And for years, pharmacy, and in particular community pharmacy, has consistently ranked near the top in polls of the most trusted professions.

No health-related story in my memory has done more to shine a positive light on independent pharmacy than COVID-19. Every day some national media outlet — be it TV, radio, newspaper, or social media — carries a story about how an independent pharmacy is helping people get tested for, or immunized against, COVID-19. As coronavirus vaccination ramped up in the winter and spring many of you have been featured in local (and even national) news stories that have generated significant publicity.

MORE THAN JUST COVID COVERAGE

But do not let the enormous amount of coverage on COVID overshadow the constant stream of other health-related news you can share. At least monthly, and frequently more often, there is some news report on issues such as the high cost of medicine, a new treatment for some ailment, the seasonal emergence of West Nile virus, an effort to make drug reimportation legal, or the opioid epidemic (which is still a problem, even with the pandemic).

Each of these national stories generate a need for the local press to talk with someone who can explain how the BIG story affects people in your community. In this day and age of shrinking budgets and consolidation, the local newspaper, radio, or TV station is typically short staffed, so if approached professionally, they will often relish the idea of having the owner of a local pharmacy be interviewed to generate content.

LOCAL MEDIA STAR

Mayank Amin, PharmD, owner of Skippack Pharmacy in Schwenksville, Pa., has become a local media hero. Shortly after opening his pharmacy in 2019 he decided a little showmanship would help attract new patients. So, he bought a super-hero costume. He sometimes uses it to make deliveries, and on occasion he'll wear it in the pharmacy. People started talking about it and the local press ate it up. As a result, Amin has become, the local "go-to guy" for health care topics in the Philadelphia suburb where the pharmacy is located.

If you Google Mayank Amin and Skippack Pharmacy, you'll see several articles on the pharmacy. He even parlayed the media attention into an interview on a major talk radio station in the Philadelphia market. He was one of the first to compound hand sanitizer and donate it to first responders – in his superhero suit. He's wearing the suit to coronavirus vaccination clinics, not to draw attention to himself, he says, but to pay tribute the true superheroes, the first responders, fellow health care workers and volunteers helping people get the vaccinations they need.



Not even a snowstorm will stop a superhero like Mayank Amin from spreading the word and serving his patients.

Chris Antypas, PharmD, president and co-owner of Asti's South Hills Pharmacy in Pittsburgh, is another pharmacist who has found ways to generate press coverage. He is frequently featured in the local media where he provides insight and commentary on how a particular news story affects people in the greater Pittsburgh area. If you look online for him or Asti's South Hills Pharmacy, you'll see Asti's being featured on radio, TV, and local newspaper on subjects as varied as new rules over the state's prescription drug monitoring program, the benefits of providing medication flavoring, and a string of drug store burglaries in Pittsburgh.

NCPA CAN HELP

NCPA's communications and advocacy team can also be a resource to get your story told. In the last year, the association has significantly ramped up its profile not only with health care trade media, but also with major print and broadcast networks. Of course, whether it's the *Washington Post* or a small-town daily newspaper, NCPA is constantly engaging the media and looking to highlight its members in news and feature coverage. For more assistance from NCPA on media outreach efforts, visit ncpa.org/advocacy#toolkit for tips, or send an email to media@ncpa.org.

GETTING STARTED

Based on interviews with dozens of pharmacy owners, here are a few things to consider if you want to generate media coverage for you and your business.

Work with your staff, and perhaps even a few well-networked customers to create a list of media that serves the local area. If your pharmacy has a marketing manager, have that person take the lead. It would be especially nice if someone you spoke with worked for or knew a key person at a media outlet. It is always helpful to contact a person you don't know by saying,

"Sally Jones suggested I call you."

Your list should include as many relevant media sources as possible including TV (both cable and broadcast), radio stations, and newspapers in your area. Call the newsroom or use the internet to find out who the health or community editors are and get their name, title, phone number, physical address, email address, and social media handles.

Next, start a spreadsheet or create some method of tracking who you talked to, when, and what you learned from that contact. After that, make note of your next steps. This is a serious work project and needs to be managed appropriately. Based on your budget, it might be worth it to invest in media monitoring companies such as Meltwater where you can drill down to identify media sources; build, modify, and customize press lists; send press releases and announcements; and track your coverage.



Asti's South Hills Pharmacy has been a "go-to" resource for local media.



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President, COO and Pharmacist at Asti's South Hills Pharmacy Chris Antypas joined Robert Mangino to discuss the large amount of people wanting the vaccine and the impact of the demand outweighing the supply.

Pharmacies Expect Doses Of Coronavirus Vaccine 'Any Day Now,' Pharmacists Say

The federal government plans for 3,000 to 6,000 pharmacies to administer shots in the next couple of weeks.

January 7, 2021 at 6:45 pm



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PITTSBURGH (KDKA) – The coronavirus vaccine could be coming to a pharmacy near you.

"Pharmacies are getting calls countless times per day asking about the vaccine," says Asti Drug pharmacist Chris Antypas. "We expect doses any day now."

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The federal government plans for 3,000 to 6,000 pharmacies to administer shots in the next couple of weeks, expanding availability beyond hospitals.

"It's actually quite convenient. You've got pharmacies on most corners. Most towns have more than one pharmacy," Antypas said.



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YOUR PHARMACY HAS A GREAT STORY TO TELL, SO START SPREADING THE NEWS!



PRIORITIZE YOUR APPROACH

You need to prioritize who you approach first and then reach out to them with an email or phone call to introduce yourself and see if they are open to a short face-to-face meeting to get acquainted. As mentioned previously, one strategy or “hook” when reaching out is to mention a national health care news story and point out that you have some additional information at the local level they might find interesting.

If they agree to meet, great. If not, thank them for their time, reiterate your interest in helping them and indicate you’ll reach out from time to time when you hear “something in the news” where you think you can be of help. Then, repeat the process with your second highest priority and go from there.



Mayank Amin of Skippack Pharmacy seizes every opportunity to get out in front of the media as a trusted health care expert for news outlets in greater Philadelphia.

If you are basically doing a cold call, don’t be discouraged by a negative or even harsh response. In my experience in selling to pharmacies, I learned it wasn’t until the third try that I actually got owners to listen to me. Being pleasantly persistent is a good rule.

If you are the outgoing type, another way to start, or perhaps to follow up, is to stop by their offices with a simple gift basket and ask for it to be delivered to a specific person. The basket could contain some simple private label items such as ibuprofen hand sanitizer and hand lotion. If your pharmacy features some special, non-medical item, such as handmade fudge or helium-filled mylar balloons or any other “fun” type item, feel free to use them. With the gift basket should be a letter introducing yourself and asking them to call you the next time they were looking for a comment on a health care related news story. Be mindful that ethics policies

may prohibit them from accepting gifts.

BROADEN THE OPPORTUNITIES

As you nurture a relationship, find ways to broaden the types of news stories you can provide. For example, if your pharmacy has been in town for decades, you might want to send out a press release and a photo of a long-time employee who is retiring, or even a story on an employee who was promoted or just became a technician. Anniversaries are also fodder for a press release. Has Sally worked for you for 20 years? Is this the 50-year anniversary of the opening of the pharmacy? Local media, especially in small towns and rural areas, will often gladly highlight community-friendly human interest news items.

From a more business-oriented point of view, did you just install a major new piece of technology, such as a robot or pick-to-light will call bin system? These can be newsworthy also. Are you doing compliance or convenience packaging, medication synchronization, or starting point-of-care testing? Perhaps you just completed a certification program or attended a pharmacy trade show and got continuing education credit for any variety of pharmacy-related items. Innovative technology and best practices can attract interest from both business and technology editors.

You get the idea. Once you start thinking of things that can be highlighted in a press release or social media posting, your biggest challenge will be finding the time to create, distribute and follow up on them. It's a good challenge to have.

KEYS FOR SUCCESS

There are three keys to success in this endeavor.

- Always position yourself and your “news idea” as a way to help the media outlet or consumers in the local area.
- Don't expect to win the first time, or every time. Luck plays a key role in success here. If some other big news story comes along, the media will pursue that, and they should. But also remember the phrase, “The harder I work, the luckier I get.” Having a local media plan and then working and refining the plan will help you get lucky sooner.
- While planning is important, be careful not to wait too long or prepare too much before you make a phone call, send an email, or drop in on a media outlet. Getting started is the key to success in any project, and you'll learn a lot faster by doing than by thinking and planning.

Here's hoping some of the comments, suggestions, and organization tips provided here will prove useful. As a local pharmacy owner, you are likely to have a better feel for the pulse of your community when interacting with media, instead of a chain that's part of a corporate conglomerate. One of them is your ability to talk with the media. So, to borrow a slogan from one of the most popular ad campaigns ever, my last suggestion is to “Just Do It.” ■



Chris Antypas of Asti's South Hills Pharmacy has been frequently featured in Pittsburgh-area media for his insights on health care issues.



Bruce Kneeland is a long-time friend of community pharmacy and industry consultant. He currently hosts a podcast show which can be heard at www.pharmacycrossroads.com, and he can be reached at BFKneeland@gmail.com