

Demystifying the media

Working with the media can be a powerful addition to your marketing toolkit and it doesn't have to be intimidating or time consuming. **Ruth Clowes** explains the available options and advises on how to put a media campaign into action



What does 'the media' mean? For our purposes, it's a collective term for the main means of mass communication, encompassing newsletters, newspapers, magazines, blogs, television and radio. Throw social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook into the mix and you can see that what we refer to as 'the media' represents a vast and elaborate network of communication outlets. This complex terrain may appear impossible to navigate at first. The purpose of this article is to demystify the media landscape and provide you with a practical 'media toolkit' which will allow you to harness these powerful means of communication.

The advice below is written in a narrative way – starting with the planning stages, then moving through small, local media to bigger, more high-profile options. However, this isn't to say that you need to work through them in a strict order, because some opportunities might be more relevant to your practice and way of working than others. For example, if you specialise in online therapy, online methods of communication may prove more effective than promoting yourself locally. So do pick and choose from the various suggestions, and build a way of working with the media that best suits you.

Get in the right mindset

Some counsellors are put off the idea of promoting themselves and their work because it seems self-important or selfish, and consequently a little unsavoury. You may be uncomfortable with the thought of blowing your own trumpet – it might even seem fundamentally at odds with your way of working. One approach many counsellors active in the media employ is to concentrate on promoting the benefits of counselling generally. Consider the value of the services you provide and the ways in which they improve the lives of your clients. By actively and publicly becoming a champion of counselling, you open up its benefits to a huge number of people. In short – move the spotlight off yourself and onto your profession.

Make a plan

What do you want to achieve through your media work? This simple question requires a clear, specific answer before you do anything. Once you have a firm objective in mind you need to identify your key audience, which will in turn help you identify which outlets will be most useful to you. Let's say that you specialise in working with children and young people and that your objective is to attract more clients. You may identify your primary audience as being parents of children aged between eight and 14 years within a 10-mile radius of your practice. A little research into your target audience should allow you to draw up a list of suitable media, including local newspapers,

school newsletters, parenting blogs and community centre notice boards, which are widely read by your target audience.

I strongly suggest that you take time to research this vitally important initial stage thoroughly, and produce a forward plan that you can refer back to and revisit later on. By taking time at the outset to properly plan your campaign, you'll give yourself the best possible chance of success and make sure you don't lose your way.

Set the stage

The other thing you need to have in place before you get started is a simple, consistent set of marketing tools. An online home for your practice is vital. It doesn't need to be fancy; it just needs to give an overview of what you do and why it's important. Having this information in an accessible place online will mean that you can refer journalists and other interested parties to your website. If you lack technical skills, BACP's IT team can set up and maintain your website for you.

You'll probably also want some business cards (keep a couple with you at all times to maximise on chance meetings). If you are aiming your efforts at a local audience, a few leaflets or posters may also be useful. This type of marketing collateral has been discussed before in more detail so I won't extrapolate further here. My own advice is to keep things simple and consistent – create a solid base and you can always build on it later. There are many websites, such as Canva (www.canva.com), which allow you to create your own marketing material quickly and easily.

Start small

Let's go back to the beginning and the definition of media as any method of communication that targets many people in one go. Your main audience is likely to be either a local one, or one closely related to your specialist area. Think about small-scale ways in which you can make your work known to this group. Get in touch with schools, community groups and social clubs in your area and offer to visit or give a talk about what you do. Distribute your flyers in coffee shops, leisure centres and libraries (ask permission first). Get together with a handful of fellow practitioners and organise a charity event or open day, perhaps to coincide with an awareness day like World Mental Health Day.

Projects like those suggested above fulfil two aims. On the one hand they are valuable marketing activities in their own right, and will have the effect of spreading the word about your work in a way that goes one step further than relying on word of mouth or people discovering your details through a web or directory search. They also make you more attractive to media professionals, laying the foundations for the next part of your media journey.

Be social

I'm not going to spend too much time writing about social media here because it's a subject that has been covered thoroughly elsewhere in this journal.^{1,2} Needless to say, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook offer a powerful way to promote your work and connect with potential future clients, journalists and traditional media outlets. As always though, it's important to recognise that communicating via these methods must be done with a clear, practical objective in mind. Consider your aims, and how these will be most

By actively and publicly becoming a champion of counselling, you open up its benefits to a huge number of people

effectively achieved. If you're new to social media I recommend *The Beginner's Guide to Social Media*, available online,³ as a straightforward, jargon-free guide to get you started.

Enter the blogosphere

A blog is a regularly updated website, typically one run by an individual or small group, and generally written in an informal or conversational style. Blogs exist on every subject imaginable and many accept 'guest posts' relating to the author's area of interest. Don't overlook blogs when you're starting out in the media – they provide a valuable opportunity to experiment with media activity while generally carrying less risk and allowing more control than traditional media. They are also an excellent way to start building an online portfolio of media work.

Get in touch with local bloggers and those who run websites and social media pages accepting guest posts. Offer to write a short article about an issue relevant to both your work and the blog's audience. For example, for a local fitness blog you could write an article about how exercise is an important factor in wellbeing. You don't have to be an accomplished writer to do this – take a commonsense approach and draw on your own experience.

Don't overlook blogs when you're starting out in the media – they provide a valuable opportunity to experiment with media activity while allowing more control than traditional media

Get into print and radio

Research suggests that local newspapers are the most widely read print medium in Britain and are more than twice as trusted as any other. With local media websites attracting 62 million unique users every week,⁴ the potential rewards available in this area are obvious. For its part, radio enjoys a unique position as a source of news and entertainment, which is seen as both inclusive and community centred.

Widening your outreach

By now you will have a professional and informative website, have spent time promoting your work locally, and have had a couple of short articles published on blogs. This puts you in an excellent position to widen your outreach to local newspapers, magazines and radio programmes. Make a list of outlets you'd like to work with. Remember to keep returning to the key objectives and audience you identified at the beginning so you don't veer off track. Take advantage of any existing connections to people who work at these outlets – do you know someone who knows someone who works at the local paper or radio station? A personal recommendation or introduction works wonders. Offer your services as a local spokesperson within your area of expertise. Media outlets generally have a network of spokespeople who they contact on an ad hoc basis to comment on breaking news. By responding quickly and appropriately to requests, you'll soon become a valuable contact to a busy journalist.

There are many similarities between working with the press and with radio outlets, and a few important differences. Appearing on a radio programme can be a logistically challenging affair – you may not be given a lot of notice and you will probably have to travel to a studio either to pre-record your interview or as a live guest. If you are able to work within these constrictions though, radio has great potential as a uniquely direct and emotive medium. An added advantage is that the likelihood of becoming a regular guest following a successful appearance is far greater than with print.

Follow best practice

The following practical advice applies to all elements of media work. Whether you are submitting a guest blog for a small online outlet, preparing for your first interview with a journalist, or a local radio station has approached you, there are a few rules that it always pays to follow:

- **Ask questions** – find out as much information as possible about a potential media opportunity before making a commitment. What is the story about? Who else is being interviewed? What questions will be asked? What is the deadline?
- **Use key messages** – having a set of go-to messages and statistics at your fingertips is a great way to make sure you stick to what's important and get your key points across.
- **Protect your professional reputation** – remain within your area of expertise during interviews and avoid being pressured into commenting on something if you feel uncomfortable about it. Remember that you're in charge.
- **Hone your interview technique** – being interviewed by a journalist can be a nerve-wracking experience, but there are a few straightforward guidelines you can follow which will make things much easier. You can find these on BACP's website on the Media Centre pages.
- **Ask the experts** – BACP's Media Team is on hand to offer advice and support throughout your media endeavours. Find out more about how we can help in the 'Get some support' section below.

Be a spokesperson for BACP

The Media Team manages an ever-growing network of media spokespeople with an interest in, and experience of, working with the media, who can be called upon to represent BACP and the profession in response to media enquiries. This system means that when a media request comes in, it is possible to quickly access the details of a spokesperson with the relevant expertise to provide a quote, conduct an interview, or take part in whichever media activity is required.

We are always on the lookout for new spokespeople, both those who specialise in quite narrow areas (pre-trial therapy, for example, or children with behavioural difficulties), and those who are comfortable speaking within a much broader remit, about relationships or anxiety, for example. It is the range of different modalities, specialisms and expertise within the network that makes it so successful.

In addition to the spokesperson network, the Media Team also regularly calls on the services of our Media Focus Group. This group makes up nearly 10 per cent of BACP's total membership and contributes to our media output by providing quick-fire statistics and comments, which we use when responding to incoming enquiries. Joining this group is a great low commitment way to dip your toe in the water of media interaction. Details of both the spokesperson network and Media Focus Group can be found in the Media Centre.

Share your work with us

Since the beginning of the year the Media Team has changed the way it uses its pages on of BACP's website to make it more inclusive, informative and representative of the work our members do with the media. As well as publishing all BACP's press releases and regular round-ups of the resulting media activity and coverage, we now actively promote the media work of our members. If you've contributed to a local newspaper story, been a guest on a radio programme, or submitted a guest post to a wellbeing blog, let us know so that we can write about it on our website. Over time we'll build up a library of the work of BACP members in the media that will provide support and inspiration to counsellors embarking on their own media campaigns.

Get some support

Whether you're promoting your own practice locally or engaging with the media on a national level, BACP's Media Team is on hand to provide advice and guidance. In addition to the one-to-one support available, BACP's CPD courses and professional development days offer frequent opportunities to learn new marketing skills. There are lots of online resources available to small businesses, too, many of which supply free guides and articles on specific areas of promotion and media activities. Two of my favourites are Smarta (www.smarta.com) and Small Business (www.smallbusiness.co.uk).

Seize the moment

The wealth of opportunities offered by a profusion of traditional and social media outlets mean that there has never been a better time to begin your own media campaign. Start small, think local, be patient and make the most of the opportunities that present themselves and you'll soon start to see the benefits of effective promotion through the media. ●

References

1. Hogg M. Getting networked. *Private Practice* 2014; Summer: 5.
2. Hogg M. How to use Twitter to market your practice. *Private Practice* 2015; Spring: 6.
3. Moz. Beginner's guide to social media. [Online.] <http://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-social-media> (accessed 23 March 2015).
4. Johnston Press. Facts and figures. [Online.] <http://www.johnstonpress.co.uk/about-us/facts-and-figures/> (accessed 23 March 2015).

About the author

Ruth Clowes is Media and Communications Manager at BACP. Prior to joining BACP three years ago, she worked in the press office at Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service. Before this she spent five years in customer service and editorial roles on board luxury cruise ships.

Find out more

You can contact the Media Team at BACP by calling 01455 883342 or emailing media@bacp.co.uk www.bacp.co.uk/media

