Making the Most of the Media

At some stage, most freelance dietitians will interact with the media. This could be to promote your own business or profession, or as part of your work for a client. Whatever the reason, the ground rules and cautions are the same.

What is ‘The Media’?

The media is an umbrella term for journalists working for local or national newspapers, consumer magazines, trade journals, health professional magazines, radio stations, television stations or websites. Few will have nutrition qualifications, although there are a number of specialist ‘health’ journalists around who will be more knowledgeable.

Types of Interactions with the Media

This list is not exhaustive but may include:

- Sending a press release to local newspapers to launch your new clinic.
- Giving a radio interview to comment on a client’s product launch.
- Appearing on TV programme as a commentator on a topic of nutrition.
- Being the ‘expert’ for a media briefing on a client’s new campaign.
- Doing a telephone interview with a freelance journalist to mention product benefits or comment on specific aspects of public health, clinical or sports nutrition or a fad’ diet.

If you work with public relations (PR) agencies (such as the British Dietetic Association media spokesperson team), you may find that you are asked to speak to print media journalists (newspapers, magazines) on a regular basis. It has been said that around 70% of articles generated in magazines have been prompted by PR activity for a particular product or service! The role of PR agencies is to get free publicity for clients by encouraging journalists to write about a specific topic, product or service. Freelance dietitians have a role in this as the ‘expert’ commentators.

Ten Tips for Working with the Media

1. Journalists need information FAST! That means if you are involved in a Press Release or publicity campaign, you need to respond to media requests within the hour or lose the opportunity.
2. Journalists, particularly those working for local media, like a ready-made story. If you can write a good press release, it is likely that it will be published verbatim. Summer is a good time to get stuff into national newspapers as the politicians are away on holiday and journalists are on the lookout for news items.
3. Local Media likes good news. National media like bad news (e.g. 90% of children are at risk of diabetes due to bad diets). Human interest stories work
best, especially those involving children. Try to include case studies (with names removed) to emphasise your messages.

4. Never have more than three messages when doing interviews or writing press releases as your audience won’t remember them. Be brief and to the point at all times. Be more animated than usual on the radio and TV as you can get away with it and it will be fun. Avoid hand gestures on TV.

5. Write down your key messages before you give an interview and make sure you say them within the first few minutes (within the first 30 seconds if you are on TV or radio). Say them regardless of what question you are asked – more experienced dietitians will find a way to link the journalist’s question with what they planned to say anyway. Watch politicians for ideas but at least attempt to answer the question a little before launching into your own messages.

6. Magazines work 3-4 months in advance. So if you are planning to hit a Christmas issue, approach journalists no later than August.

7. Get your facts right first time to avoid being misquoted. A few journalists will be happy to correct data in their draft articles. However, most will have already gone to press and moved onto other things. Beware of sub-editors and how they might re-write your words and even put words into your mouth. Being brief and limiting yourself to three clear messages will help avoid this.

8. Don’t worry about messing up live radio or TV appearances. No one will remember if you stumbled or stuttered. Just extract yourself with humour and move on quickly to the next point.

9. When working with TV or radio journalists, there is a distinct possibility that your interview will not go ahead (even if you are already sitting in the studio) or that it will be brutally edited. Don’t take it personally. There is a lot of competition in the world of news and a juicy celebrity affair will always take precedence over your views on bananas.

10. Media courses will give you the basics, not teach you how to give great interviews. Practice makes perfect so take every opportunity to do so. Start low key and local if you are nervous. Sending your CV and mobile number to local radio stations and newspapers will increase your chance of gaining lots of experience. Don’t forget the free papers that are always desperate for news items.

Endorsement

Although the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) guidelines on the promotion of products are vague in relation to media work, it is a good idea to avoid endorsing your clients’ products or services. An example of endorsement would be:

“Dietitian, Maisie Smith, recommends Protoblast as it contains prebiotics which are a more natural way of relieving constipation”.

This could fall foul of HCPC rules or will at least ensure that Maisie is seen as a Protoblast spokesman and discourage work from similar clients. A less direct way of helping a client’s campaign would be:

“Dietitian, Maisie Smith, said that laxatives which contain prebiotics, such as Protoblast, offer the most natural option for relieving constipation”.

Some clients will have unreasonable expectations about what you can say about their products. Since you are a freelancer, and not an employee, it is important to be clear about what you are willing to say then communicate that to the client, in writing, to avoid misunderstandings.
Some tips to help:

- Never speak ‘on behalf’ of a company or organisation if you are being employed by them on a freelance basis.
- Be clear to the journalists that you are an independent or freelance dietitian. Say this on air if you are doing radio or TV interviews and need listeners to be clear about your status.
- Talk about the properties, ingredients or benefits of generic products, e.g. fruit juices, ready meals, vitamin supplements, focusing on the science and evidence. Give product names as examples.
- PR agencies will expect you to get in the product name at least once during an interview with print journalists. For radio or TV interviews, especially for the BBC, it is good practice to check with your interviewer in advance whether it would be OK to mention a product name. Avoid doing this more than once.
- If you are required to defend a product or service, focus on defending the science or generic properties (e.g. occasional high salt snacks are not dangerous, it is OK to include burgers as part of a healthy diet). In response to any specific product- or corporate-related criticisms, say that these are a matter for <company name> since you are an independent.

Hostile Media

Some (unlucky) dietitians may come up against a difficult presenter, journalist or be asked by a client to help address media criticism of a product or service (e.g. in relation to safety, health concerns). This is not easy and should be avoided by those with little experience of the media.

The key points to avoid this difficult situation are:

- Be prepared. Make a list of difficult questions that you might be asked (sometimes called FAQs) and plan answers to them. Work with your client on this.
- Products containing sugar, salt, saturated fats, additives and caffeine or those that are eaten as snacks or marketed to children, are most likely to be criticised. If you are involved with products such as these, anticipate as many questions and criticisms as you can. Enlist the help of colleagues if you feel you are too close to the product.
- Avoid sounding defensive during interviews with hostile media. Adopt a ‘reasonable’ voice and calm demeanour even if the journalist becomes aggressive. In TV or radio interviews, aggression is a turn-off to viewers and will only increase their sympathy for the other party i.e. you!
- Don’t shirk difficult questions. Make sure they are addressed in the way you had planned. Then go on to add any benefits or ameliorating points.
- As with less stressful interviews, plan your three key messages and ensure you get these in, especially early on. Be brief, and avoid getting side-tracked into areas of discussion which will lead away from your messages.
- Emphasise your credibility as a qualified health professional and your independence. Always say “I”, not “we” to avoid sounding corporate or sinister.
- Focus on science and evidence. Ensure you have facts and figures to hand e.g. “In 20 studies of caffeine intake, 15 found a positive or neutral effect on mood”.
- Avoiding repeating negative statements from questions or including your own, e.g. “lots of people think that cheese makes them fat but I don’t agree”. Try to be
positive instead, e.g. “That is one view, however, I think it’s possible to include cheese in your diet if you are physically active”.

- Don’t be afraid to rephrase the question if it is backing you into a corner. For example in answer to “So are you saying that all additives are beneficial?” you can say “I wouldn’t be so extreme. The evidence says that current intake levels of approved additives are not causing any health problems”.

- Make sure your last words are brief and positive e.g. “at the end of the day, it gives consumers choice” or “I’m satisfied that moderate amounts are healthy for most people”.

How to Write a Press Release

A Press Release is your way of communicating messages to journalists in the hope that they will either print them verbatim or respond by offering an interview.

You can use press releases for any type of media including TV and radio. The content of press release will differ but there are certain key components and these are:

1. An attention-grabbing title.
2. A first sentence that says it all.
3. A hook.
4. A person.
5. A quote.
6. Somewhere for readers/listeners to get more information.
7. A contact person and telephone number.
8. Background details for Editors.

Here is a sample press release aimed at local media:

### Schools project to tackle junk food (1)

Rising obesity in Smithfield’s school children has prompted a local dietitian to launch a new healthy eating project (2). More than 40% of 15 year olds are now classified as overweight (3) putting their future health at risk.

The project, funded by Smithfield Council, will involve training more than 40 catering assistants across the city and running healthy eating workshops for teenagers.

Freelance dietitian, Tracey Bloggs (4), said: “Parents are increasingly concerned about their children’s diets and want to know that they are getting the right messages about diet at school. Smithfield Council asked me to conduct this project to improve standards of catering and encourage children to make healthier choices” (5).

The project will run in the city’s secondary schools from January to July. A website has been set up to inform parents: [www.healthykids-smithfield.co.uk](http://www.healthykids-smithfield.co.uk) (6)

End

For more information, contact Tracey Bloggs on 07777 777 111 (7)

**Note to editors:** (8)

Tracey is available for radio interviews
The workshops will be held at lunchtimes for all 12-18 year olds who wish to attend
Tracey is a qualified freelance dietitian. Her own website is [www.traceybloggs.co.uk](http://www.traceybloggs.co.uk)
The British Dietetic Association and other organisations provide media training courses that are normally run over one day. Choose one that promises small groups, is led by a media-savvy person and includes role-playing and video-taping. However, once you have done a course, practice at every opportunity in real situations.

Remember

- Respond quickly to media requests.
- Be prepared with your three key points ready.
- Don't be afraid of mistakes – try again and again.

Fact Sheets are available on request from the Membership Officer of the Freelance Dietitians Group. To obtain further information about the Freelance Dietitians Group visit the BDA website at www.bda.uk.com.

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