

How to use public service announcements

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are short, “noncommercial” announcements aired on radio or television to provide information to the public. A noncommercial announcement contains information that benefits its intended *audience*, rather than the *company* that created it. For example, a PSA that provides health *information* differs from an ad that promotes the *sale* of a health product. Consequently, most PSAs are produced by nonprofit associations, but commercial, for-profit organizations may also use them to promote their community-building activities and events.

Free PSA air time (usually 10- to 60-second spots) on television and radio is available to groups such as community associations, community foundations, advocate groups, nonprofit organizations and for-profit organizations that are promoting their community or nonprofit events. TV and radio stations donate this air time to meet the Federal Communications Commission’s public service requirements.

PSAs are used by organizations to:

- Familiarize the public with their organization
- Publicize community events
- Provide health and safety tips
- Assist in fund raising efforts
- Inform and influence public opinion

PSA messages:

- *Must* contain information that is beneficial to the community
- Should not include controversial or self-serving material

Many radio and TV stations have guidelines for acceptance and production of PSAs.

Always send your news in their requested format.

Radio PSAs

Audio

Some radio stations require audio PSAs that are ready to air. Audio PSAs produced by your foundation or fund may be as simple as having one person record the scripted message on audiotape; however, you may also incorporate music and sound effects. Write and format

the copy for the taped PSA in the same manner as you would prepare live copy for broadcast (see below).

Live copy

Many radio stations encourage the preparation of live-copy PSAs, which are short, scripted announcements to be read by the station's on-air talent during regular programming. ("Copy" is a term used to refer to text in brochures, press releases and, as in this case, a broadcast script.) PSAs are read as part of a community calendar or used whenever there is spare broadcast time. It is important to contact the public service directors at radio stations to determine the preferred format and length for PSAs.

Guidelines for radio PSAs

Length

- Fit your message into the standard time slots of 10, 15, 30 or 60 seconds. Names and phone numbers included in the message should be included in your timing. If you are submitting live copy, read the message out loud and **time yourself**.
- Many stations prefer PSAs that are short.

Message

- Include the most essential information in the first paragraph (the *lead* paragraph).
- Use the active voice.
 - *Active voice*: The company offers several services.
 - *Passive voice*: Several services are offered by the company.
- Use short, upbeat sentences written in everyday language.
- Tell how this information can help the viewer/listener.
- Ask for action.
- Tell viewers/listeners where they can go, what they can do or who they can call.
- Edit tightly; look for ways to shorten phrases and sentences.

Submitting audio PSAs

- Ask the station if cassette, reel-to-reel or CD audio—or some newer format—is preferred.
- Be sure the audio is labeled with your name, telephone number and the topic or headline of the PSA.
- Submit a printed copy (script) of the PSA, along with your pre-recorded audio, to the station and type "Audio Material Enclosed" at the top or end of the PSA script.

Submitting live copy

- Print the PSA, if possible, on your foundation's or fund's letterhead (or with a heading that includes your organization's name, address, numbers, etc.).
- Type PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT at the top of the page so the journalist immediately knows what she's reading.
- Indicate whether the announcement is for immediate release or for a later release date. For example, you can type "For Immediate Release," "For Release on November 1, 2007" or "For Release On or After November 1, 2007."
- Include a contact name (most likely yours) and phone number. Be available to answer questions or provide further information. Call the reporter back promptly with responses to his or her inquiry.
- Include a reading time (how many seconds it should take to read the PSA on the air).
- Provide a short headline that summarizes the content at a glance. Try to include your foundation's or fund's name in the headline to build instant name recognition. For example, "Musselshell County Foundation To Present Grants on July 4th."

Format (for PSA copy)

- Type on only one side of the 8½" x 11" piece of paper—never print copy on the back side of the paper.
- *Triple-space the entire PSA* so that it can be easily read.
- Indent all paragraphs.
- Leave at least 1" for left and right margins. This gives the station space for editing, and makes your live copy easier to scan.
- Try to limit your PSA to one sheet. If it spills over to a second sheet, try to end the first page with a completed paragraph, or at least a completed sentence. Type "-more-" (*without* the quotation marks) in the bottom center of the first page. At the top of the second page type a brief heading (flush left or right, but not centered) that includes the name of your organization, the date, page number and topic of the announcement (in case it's separated from the first page).
- Mark the end of your announcement with "###" or a "-30-" (centered and *without* the quotation marks) to signal that no additional copy follows.

Lead time

- Send your PSA to the stations as far in advance as possible.
- Many stations request at least a two-week lead time.

Television PSAs

For television, there must be a visual component to the story. Most of the guidelines for radio PSAs (see above) are applicable to television PSAs, with two exceptions:

- Ask the TV station whether three-quarter inch or one-inch videotape is preferred—or perhaps some newer format, like DVD.
- Format the verbal (audio) message of your PSA in the same manner as you would prepare live copy for radio broadcast (see above) with one exception—format script pages so that the text of the audio portion is on the right side and a description of what is occurring in the video portion is on the left. Here’s an example of a broadcast script:

Remember to submit a printed copy of your message along with your prerecorded videotape to the station. Be sure “Tape enclosed” appears on the printed copy, and that your tape is labeled with your name, foundation name, telephone number and the PSA headline.

Sample Broadcast Script

Musselshell County Community Foundation makes grants to five county nonprofit organizations

Time: 30 seconds

Video

Children in a park playing on playground equipment.

Panning shot of the Foundation’s Board Members around a table discussing issues, fading to the Foundation’s logo.

Audio

The Musselshell County Community Foundation improves our children’s lives.

Musselshell County Community Foundation is here for Good, for Musselshell County, Forever. For more information, call...

Production on a shoestring

Production costs for videotaped TV PSAs tend to be much higher than those for radio. Costs vary depending on the simplicity or complexity of the spot you develop. For assistance in producing a TV PSA, you might try several things:

- Ask a local advertising or public relations firm to assist you as a public service.
- Ask a local TV station to produce your spot. They may be willing to help if you use their on-air talent for your announcement. Allow the station to share the tag line with your organization. For example, "...brought to you by Channel 3 and the Musselshell County Community Foundation."
- Contact your local public access cable station. Many community stations offer classes on producing PSAs and/or provide low-cost assistance.
- Students at college TV stations may be willing to help.

Air time

Most stations broadcast PSAs early in the morning or very late at night. Ask the station's public service director to consider placing your PSA in an available day or prime time spot—especially around local news broadcasts. If possible, visit the station to hand-deliver your PSA and meet the public service director.