

General PSA Guidelines
(as of October 2011; an informal document from Paws4Change)

There was a time when the FCC required network TV stations to devote x amount of free air time to nonprofits. Those days are long gone. When you see a PSA on TV for an organization like the ASPCA or the HSUS, they're paying big money for that. Stations use their own discretion in deciding what to air that doesn't bring in money so this is really all about good will, good contacts and content. A station that reviews a PSA and does not like the content simply will not air it and the station owes you no explanation. Even if a station does like a PSA and will air it, you will never be told when it will air. PSAs are like the spackle of TV. They never run in prime time and are like filler. They fill empty gaps between paid programming.

With the transition to high def, many TV stations will take a PSA submitted on a DVD. Other stations require BETA tapes which are like small VHS tapes. Many production companies can make a tape from a DVD at the cost of about \$20-25 per tape.

PSAs can run anywhere from 10 seconds to 60 seconds. The universally accepted length is 30 seconds. Because so many are that length, it is sometimes better to do a shorter spot (10, 15 or 20) or even a longer spot (60) if those are available. Different stations have different preferences. Most stations will only take a PSA from a local group because they're essentially giving away air time. When dealing with a PSA for a group that does work nation-wide (even if it's only via the Internet) some stations may air the PSA simply because they like it and they support the message.

Any PSA you submit has to be submitted on behalf of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and you have to use copyright cleared content. You cannot use copyrighted music at all. Your video must be your own and your photos must be your own or used with permission.

Step 1: Station Homework

Most regions have four network stations: ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox. Each station has a PSA contact. This person normally does a multitude of other tasks and communication with them can be difficult. Call each local station, ask for the name of the PSA contact and find out if they prefer contact via phone or email. Some of mine prefer email. If you end up leaving a message for the PSA contact, call back if you have not heard from him/her in a week. Don't push too hard but be persistent. You don't want to alienate the one person who can help you. If you have to, ask for the station manager and just explain you've had trouble reaching the PSA contact and you'd appreciate some help. As you get names and contact info, develop a list you can use for the future. TV station people are like nomads so even if you do get a solid contact, you may have to check every few months to make sure they're still your contact.

Step 2: Getting Details

Once you connect with the PSA contact, find out if 1) they'll take a PSA on DVD; 2) if you can ask for your PSA to be "evergreen." This means that the PSA is not event-oriented and can run for up to six months. Also find out what the processing time is. Some stations want up to two weeks to process the PSA before it airs. That allows them to review it and fit it in with other stuff they're running. The final detail is to find out how they want to receive your PSA. It is standard practice so do a short cover letter and provide proof of nonprofit status. Some stations don't want letters and they just want the DVD with a post-it note with your desired run time (for example, November 2011 through April 2012).

Step 3: Submitting the PSA

Once you have the PSA in the format the station will take and you know how they want you to send it to them, just put it in the mail or deliver it if you're close by. If you do a cover letter, indicate your desired run time. Make sure you include a copy of the IRS determination letter to document nonprofit status.

Step 4: Follow-Up

If you have a good rapport with your station contact, you may be able to call a week or two after your PSA is submitted to ask if it's been processed and if it will air. If you don't have a good relationship with the person, wait a couple of weeks and approach it as, "I wanted to make sure you didn't need any more information from me." That should prompt a response either that the PSA has been processed or they decided to not air it. If they opt to not air it, see if you can find out why.

Once you know a station is running your PSA, send your contact a handwritten thank you note. This is just a small goodwill gesture to keep them on your side. When your run time is about to expire, you can submit a new PSA. Check to make sure the PSA contact has not changed in the interim so you can ensure you get the PSA to the right person.