

PRWEEK

MEDIA

MEDIA ROUNDUP

Death coverage takes on a new life

As the baby-boomer generation ages, reporters are finding that audiences are now willing to hear about death, a topic that was once off-limits. David Ward reports

Death is one of the two certainties in life (you know the other). It's also a controversial topic that was once taboo for reporters because many news outlets feared upsetting their audiences.

But the nation's changing demographics, primarily the aging of baby boomers, are forcing people to consider how and when they want themselves and their loved ones to die. And modern medicine's ability to keep people alive longer than ever before has triggered real debates, not only on the quality of the end of life but also on whether people have the right to choose when and how they want that end to come.

Increased coverage

"In the last five years, there has been a change, and people are talking more about the issue," says Jon Radulovic, communications VP for National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Radulovic traces this increase in interest to coverage that began with the 2000 PBS series "On Our Own Terms: Bill Moyers on Dying in America."

That year Knight Ridder did a 10-part series that was picked up by newspapers across the country, and *Time* magazine devoted a cover to the issue. "All those stories sort of signaled a change where you did see an increased willingness to talk about this subject," Radulovic says.

But stories about death and dying are still not easy to pitch. "I do think there's still some skittishness," says Ellen Grosshans, partner with the Bay area's Galvin Communications, which represents a psychotherapist who specializes in death and dying-related issues. She says, "Some reporters will say, 'I don't think

Pitching... death issues



- **Reporters are looking for the human element** to add drama to many end-of-life issues, so provide individuals and families who can talk about the decisions they faced dealing with the loss of a loved one.
- **With an aging baby-boomer population**, death and dying is

becoming an increasingly relevant issue. Remind the media of the shifting demographics in the coming years.

- **When working with finance reporters**, link end-of-life care in with other news-you-can-use topics, such as retirement and estate planning.

that's relevant to our readers, and you want to say, 'Well death is relevant to everyone.'"

Coverage of the topic can be hit or miss. "We hit a lot of family and parenting reporters, as well as religion writers, who tend to the most open about it," says Scott Spiewak of Fresh iMPact Communications, who represents Harry and Cheryl Salem, authors of the book, "From Grief

to Glory: Rediscovering Life After Loss." "But nobody really writes about the subject regularly," he says.

Indeed, much of death and dying coverage today tends to be triggered by other events, such as the sudden death of TV star John Ritter, that end up driving a more general debate.

Elizabeth Weinmann, VP of marketing and communications

for Last Act Partnerships, says most reporters take the time to cover death-related issues with thoroughness and sensitivity because most of them had dealt with the loss of a loved one or acquaintance at some point.

"When we talk to the press, they are so interested in this because they are all going through it or they're coming to the realization that the demographic is pointing everyone in that direction," says Weinmann, whose group serves as an information clearing house for end-of-life issues. "You can't avoid it."

Avoiding the abstract

Paul Malley, president of Aging with Dignity, says the aging baby-boomer population seems to take a more proactive approach toward preparing for the end of their lives. "People are looking at end-of-life planning and how it goes along with other planning like long-term healthcare and retirement planning, and, in that context, the media's more than willing to talk about it," he says. "We have begun working more with business writers on stories about companies addressing care-giving with employees."

But Malley stresses that few reporters want to talk about end-of-life issues in the abstract. "When we first started the workplace program and we began to approach reporters, the common response was, 'It's great you have a program, but what's happening with it?'" Malley says. "When we went back to those same reporters a year later and said, 'Here's what's happening at the US State Department; here's what's happening at PNC Bank,' then they said, 'OK, there's a good story.'"

Radulovic adds, "The stories that are effective are often based on one individual's experience and I think that's where you're starting to see more reporting in those feature types of articles."