

Communications 101 -- Dealing with the Media

by Scott Bogren

The scenario begins with a phone call -- a newspaper reporter is on the line for you.

"What does she want?" you worry. "That newspaper never has anything good to say about publicly funded programs, so she probably has a hidden agenda."

During the conversation, you feel under attack. The reporter has no understanding for the subtleties of providing community transportation and asks questions that illustrate her unfamiliarity with the subject. Your answers further confuse her. Not surprisingly, the paper the next day presents a less-than-favorable impression of you and your system. You feel burned again.

If this experience rings true, it's time you learned how to develop a positive relationship with the press; one that is beneficial to your agency.

Reach Out

The first step in improving your relationship with the media is to be proactive. Don't wait for the local reporter to call you. Get to know the reporter who covers transportation (for many newspapers, it will be the reporter covering local government) in your local newspaper -- and don't forget any local radio station and television outlet. Arrange a lunch or breakfast and become more than just a name to them. Call them and introduce yourself as the contact at your agency should they need any information. Invite these reporters to come and tour your agency to see your operation first-hand. Reach out to them with special invitations to agency celebrations (like anniversaries), landmark accomplishments (new ridership records), news of awards, etc.

By reaching out, you can immediately establish a rapport and credibility that will serve you and your organization well in the future. If a reporter hears negative rumors about the system, he or she will be willing to give you a ring and confirm the information -- rather than simply run with it. The goal is to become a resource for the reporter. Your ability to effectively deal with the media all stems from this initial contact effort. It's critical.

The Truth, Always

Once you've established a working relationship with a member of the media, the most important tip is to always be truthful. No matter how negative the story (for instance, an accident), always be honest with a reporter. There is no quicker way to do permanent damage to a press relationship than lying.

If a reporter begins to question you on a subject you'd rather not discuss, a simple, "No comment," is the best answer. Remember, you are in control of the information flow from your agency, not the reporter. A professional reporter will not take a "no comment" personally. It's an accepted part of their job.

Never tell a reporter anything "off the record." A good rule of thumb is to expect everything you say to a reporter to end up on the front page of the paper or the lead on the nightly news. If you don't think you'd want whatever you're saying to be on the front page, don't say it at all. Going, "off the record," is an absolute invitation to disaster. As soon as you say it, you are no longer in control of the information flow.

Another aspect of being truthful is being available. In even the most negative of situations, a reporter will respect you for being available for discussion or formal interviews. Ducking calls or -- worse -- not returning calls will only exacerbate the problem.

The best example in this case is the makers of Tylenol. In the late 1970s several people were killed by taking Tylenol laced with cyanide. Throughout the tragedy, Tylenol officials were openly available to the press, expressing sympathy, grief and anger. They were honest and approachable. In the aftermath of the crisis, the company was seen as sympathetic and a victim. In less than a year, sales rose beyond the levels prior to the tragedy. Conversely, Exxon officials hid from the press after the Valdez went down in the Gulf of Alaska spilling millions of gallons of oil. The media vilified the company in many articles and stories and Exxon has yet to fully recover.

Controlling the Information

Never forget that you control the flow of information from your agency. So, make sure your employees know who to send media calls to and when they should and shouldn't speak freely with the press. It's important not to leave these decisions to each employee's discretion.

Most companies designate a single individual to deal with the press, which ensures continuity and consistency. Maybe your agency isn't big enough to have a press relations specialist. No matter, designate yourself as the contact and let your drivers and other employees know that they need to have your approval before speaking with the press. Explain that they don't need to be evasive or wary of the media. They need only say, "I'd be happy to speak with you, but first can you call (your name and phone number) to get approval."

Just as with the media, honesty with your employees is absolutely the only way to go. Write up your plan and rules and distribute them throughout the agency. By instituting a media plan within your organization, you'll avoid potential loose cannons and have documentation should any disciplinary action be necessary.

Of course, you know what they say about the best of plans. The reality is that it is tough to always control the flow of information out of your agency. Information leaks do happen and you must be prepared to deal with them. This is where an established relationship with a reporter can be crucial. It's also where some common sense about sharing sensitive information is necessary.

Preparation Makes Perfect

When conducting an interview with a member of the press or holding any structured conversation with the media, preparation is pivotal. Do your homework. Prepare some meaningful statistics that back up whatever you're saying and try decide the most important point you'd like to make. Basically, determine what single point you'd like to see in the story. Throughout the interview, come back to that point and don't be afraid to repeat yourself.

Based on your organization's goals and objectives, try to develop some familiar themes that you constantly touch upon regardless of whether you're being interviewed by the media or speaking at a local civic organization. This consistency of message will help you come across as prepared and topical.

Provide written materials that emphasize your point to members of the press. Whether it be a written copy of a speech, a press release or a favorable report -- reporters like to have background materials and it could save you a phone call later.

Common Sense Prevails

A productive, positive relationship with those members of the press covering transportation in your area will prove itself valuable in myriad ways. Like it or not, the media cultivates the general public's perception of many organizations and industries -- including public transportation. Those of you who doubt the potential effect of the media have likely never experienced bad press, or needed the press' help in shaping public sentiment.

There's no real secret to dealing with the press. Use your common sense, be honest and approachable, be prepared and maintain control. Following these simple steps you can establish meaningful connections with the members of your local press that prove beneficial to both parties.