

“Your PIO: Perception is 90% of the Game”

In these days of cost cutting, number crunching and budget balancing, police executives are constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the bottom line. In many instances, city staff demands, “if it doesn't help catch crooks, dump it”. In some cases, police departments look to downsize or even eliminate their media or public relations staff.

No question, “PR-types” or Public Information Officers (PIO) are hard to justify. They aren't patrolling the streets, setting up crime-busting stings, or tending to victims. But what downtown may not realize is that they are paramount to your department doing its job.

In 1999, Halifax Regional Police conducted a community survey and asked the question, “What has the greatest influence on your opinion of the department?” Far and away, the greatest response was, “the media”. Only 15% responded 'one-on-one experience with an officer’. In fact, the majority of people in our communities will never have direct contact with a police officer ... and most hope they don't!

Community Perception Counts

The perception people have of your department is vital to law enforcement getting the job done. Cops can't function without the support of the community. A PR agency executive, hired by the LAPD after the Rodney King incident put it best when he said, “a police department can truly only be as good as the community in which it's serving wants it to be.”

Police agencies are the only municipal department that must rely on the community to do its job. Libraries will operate with or without the support of the public. Streets will be cleaned with or without the approval rating of area residents. Garbage will be collected, and so on. Police, however, can't be effective without the public's support.

That being said, the image of your police service, as a caring, professional, ethical agency is vitally important to your bottom line - and that's where your media PIO or public relations staff can play a major role in promoting the good work your officers do. By promoting a positive public image of your department, the community will come to perceive their police as an agency they can trust and depend on. With that public support, it's amazing what a department can achieve.

For instance, back in 1997, Halifax Regional Police was in its infancy. It was a newly amalgamated force, with internal issues and external perception problems. At that time, the public placed policing eleventh on its list of important issues when it came to spending tax dollars. By 2001, policing had shot to number one ... not because there was a crime wave, but because the profile of department and community safety issues was raised dramatically.

This was done with a strategic plan in place to bring policing issues front-and-centre and to promote a positive public perception of the department and the good work of its officers.

Perception vs. Reality

Unfortunately, in the majority of cases, public perception means more than reality. If the public perceives your department is unethical, if they perceive you do racial profiling; no amount of denials, news conferences or media interviews will change their mind. It's all about perception, and learning how to gain positive public support before the image-threatening issue arises.

A couple of years ago, Halifax Regional Police experienced the horrors of having to charge one of their own with extortion. It was the ultimate breach of public trust. However, because public support of the

department was so high, besides a day or two of sneers and painful jabs from some members of the community, overall backing of the department did not waver. The media dealt with the issue in three days, and it was over. Much to many people's surprise, the department's image did not suffer.

Your public affairs staff or PIO can build on the image your officers already portray to the public and can communicate the good work your officers do. However, they cannot build on an image that is misleading or non-existent, nor should they ever be asked to cover up serious errors of judgment made by police or lie about incidents.

Every day your staff is on the front lines dealing with the public. All police officers need to remember the public is always watching and listening.

When it comes down to it, the public believes what they see before what they hear, and will believe, in most part, what the media tell them. It's your responsibility as a police officer to maintain the public image you want your department to have, and a compelling reason to maintain a well-trained, well-respected, image conscious PIO on staff. When it comes down to it, can you afford not to?

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.