

The Power of the Pen

Officers participating in media training or media awareness workshops often ask why police must 'pander' to the media. The simple answer? Once police get their own radio station, television station and newspaper with the same reach as the local media, we can stop 'pandering' to them.

Fact is, the old saying about the power of the pen is true. For police, the saying should read, "the power of the pen is mightier than the ~~sword~~ 9 mil".

Police and the media have a lively symbiotic relationship. For those of us a little rusty in biology terms, it means we depend on each other to survive. I've had many a debate with police officers about this issue. "We can do our jobs just fine without them," is the usual response. But, the day police need to find a missing child or identify a suspect related to a sexual assault; the media come in pretty handy.

About five years ago, Halifax Regional Police arrested a man accused of brutally beating a young store clerk. Police found about six different pieces of ID with different names and ages, and the suspect refused to provide any factual information. Investigators knew there was more to the story, and orchestrated a news conference to ask for the public's assistance in identifying him. Investigators felt the man may have been from the United States, so the media were asked to make an effort to sell the story to their national news desks.

Sure enough, within minutes of the story airing, a Buffalo, New York television station's switchboard lit up with people calling to identify the man who was on New York's Most Wanted List for escaping custody on an assault charge. His previous record included beating his mother to death with a baseball bat.

Without the media's help, it may have taken days, weeks or even months to identify this suspect; a two-minute story did the trick. An excellent example of international media-police cooperation.

On the flip side, media are the first to admit they 'need' the police. Well, maybe not the police per se, but definitely the stories police are associated with. Going back to the old media credo, "if it bleeds, it leads", big police news is usually on page one, inhabits an inside city page and sometimes fills out a regular crime-beat column to boot. Some days, police issues dominate national and international news, and create huge controversy.

So, work with the media. Make an effort to establish positive working relationships with members of the media every day, so when you need get information out to the public, they will be there for you. Provide media with what they need, so they can do a decent job informing the public, but don't ever forget, television stations, radio stations and newspapers are in business to make money, sell advertising and keep shareholders happy.

Never be surprised when a police 'scandal' hits the front page ... it sells. Expect the full-colour photo of the two police car traffic accident (even if it's a minor fender bender) ... it sells. Expect the lead story on the six-o'clock news about the accused drunk claiming police brutality ... it sells. Izzie Asper, the Chairman of Global Television was once asked what he did for a living. Without missing a beat, he replied, "I sell soap."

The key here is to find a synchronicity between what the media want and what police want to provide. Police are in complete control of release of information ... to a degree. Don't be fooled into thinking if you don't release it, it won't make the news. If there is a story out there, it is the media's job to ferret it out. Some journalists would make mighty fine investigators!

However, police must realize, as proven by the Supreme Court of Canada's Jane Doe decision, that the

public has not only a vested interest, but a right to know about issues relating to their personal and public safety. Police have the information, and media are often the best conduit to reach the community.

There will be times when a journalist or reporter needs to be gently reminded of their powers. Media outlets always get a chuckle out of pulling April Fool's Day pranks on unsuspecting viewers, listeners and readers, and are then amazed when people believe their story ... does Orson Wells' War of the Worlds mean anything to you?

Bottom line, if you view the media as a necessary evil, so be it. But, in truth, they are a valuable tool which when used effectively, can make a significant positive impact on the way the community looks at you and your department.

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.