

Media Relations 101: Managing Your Message

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INTRODUCTION

How many times have you heard the question, “so, how do we control the media?” The simple answer: you don't. And you never will. The media cannot be controlled, nor should an agency, organization or program attempt to do so. Your message, however, can be managed. Managing your message means being prepared - knowing your audience, knowing your message and how best to communicate it. This chapter provides a broad overview of the media, what motivates reporters, how to develop your message, and tips on how best to get your messages across to your real audience - in most cases, the general public.

Medical directors of critical care transport services, program directors, and other program personnel may be called upon to “talk to the media.” The most likely circumstances that lead to interactions with the media may include a planned “profile” on your program; follow up to a major accident, mass casualty incident, or disaster; or after an accident involving one of your aircraft or ground ambulances. In addition, it is not uncommon for the media to seek information and reaction after an accident involving another flight program.

ABOUT THE MEDIA

Media is an important instrument of communication. It both mirrors and influences the public. It is extremely powerful and serves as a “watchdog” for our society. However, media is also a business. A business that informs, persuades, entertains, investigates, educates...and earns a profit! The majority of media outlets deliver what sells. And what sells may not necessarily be your message.

In order to work effectively with the media, it is important to understand a bit about the people working in the industry and what their jobs require. Reporters cannot be stereotyped. They have varying degrees of intelligence, experience and integrity. There are reporters that consistently report stories in a fair and balanced way, while others appear to seek controversy at every turn. Variables affecting journalistic product range from basic reporter experience and knowledge of the subject, to personal intangibles such as bias and motivation.

Take, for example, a reporter whose mother was saved by paramedics last week after suffering a heart attack versus a reporter whose parent recently died because of a physician's carelessness. There is a good chance these two reporters will cover an emergency medical situation in different ways. Similarly, a new reporter, fresh out of a university, is often looking for a story to establish her or himself and will look for the 'big story' to break. While a more seasoned, veteran journalist, who has covered many high-adrenaline, emergency medical stories before, will be more likely to report the facts rather than sensationalize the incident. The tone of their story also depends on the outlet - a newspaper's style. Never expect USA Today to cover a story the same way The National Enquirer would!

The important point to remember is that media is only a conduit to your real audience - the general public - Mr. and Mrs. Brown watching television news at night, Joe Smith listening to his car radio on the way home from work, and Mary Jones reading the Saturday morning paper. We still depend on reporters to deliver our message, so this conduit must be used effectively.

With the advent of the Internet and proliferation of home computers, people are more often turning directly to an online source for their information. However, until your agency has its own television network (with great ratings), radio station and newspaper, we must still count on third-party reporters to take our message to the masses. This will not happen if you have a bad relationship with the reporter.

No doubt, you will encounter reporters who make you angry...and you will regret any anger demonstrated with a reporter. The public have an established perceptual bond and relationship with the media outlet they favor. The public essentially 'allows' a reporter into their home by tuning to their station and, in many cases, feel they know reporters or news anchors personally. Although you are a trusted official, physician, or health care administrator or allied health care provider, the bond the public has with the media is typically stronger. So, if you lose your temper, your real audience has no idea that the reporter was rude or abrasive in any way, and will be left wondering why this individual is so angry, evasive or abusive of 'their' host or reporter. Your message will not only be lost but your credibility compromised.

The Reporter's Job

A reporter arriving at an incident scene has three basic priorities: to get the story, to stay on deadline, and to get a better story than the competition. This injects more pressure into an often already intense situation, which means clear and concise messaging is critically important.

A reporter wants to be able to provide his or her audience with an accurate and thorough account of the incident. Reporters also need to make their story interesting and easily understood by their audience. Reporters will often try to localize a larger story or have you hypothesize about similar situations to make it more understandable for their audience.

With the advent of satellite trucks, cable 24-hour news networks and cyber space, deadlines are more important today and more restrictive than ever. In the past, reporters may have had hourly deadlines for radio, and evening deadlines for television and newspapers. Today, there is a new deadline every minute and that accelerated pressure can lead to inaccurate and often misleading reporting.

Lastly, every reporter wants to get a better story than his or her colleague. They will poke, prod and pester you for information that is unique, titillating, emotional or controversial. Anything that will make their story stand out from their competitors and make them look good to their bosses - who are monitoring their competition!

It is easy to understand how these three priorities can be potentially hazardous to your message and why it is extremely important to stay on point and stick to your key messages.

WHAT IS NEWS?

News is any information that is new, unusual, unexpected, controversial and/or of wide significance or interest to the general public. Often a story that would not be significant in one instance can become extremely newsworthy with just one twist. For example, a car accident during the afternoon that results in minor injuries may not be newsworthy, until the media discover the mayor's son was driving the car. A common assault that occurs at a bar one evening isn't newsworthy, until it's discovered it involved a local high school football star recently drafted by the NFL. A simple transport to a hospital of a pregnant woman probably won't attract the media, until they learn the woman is pregnant with quadruplets and her husband is serving overseas.

The old adage, "If it bleeds, it leads," is still very much prevalent for today's media. Think about the "compelling C's" - catastrophe, crisis, conflict, crime and corruption. These are the issues that sell newspapers and draw the public's attention to CNN, CNBC, FOX News and others.

Quite simply, anything that you would talk about with your colleagues or family and friends when you leave work is something that is likely to be 'newsworthy.'

Usually newsworthy events include a number of the following elements:

- **Timeliness.** Is it happening now?

- **Proximity.** Who is affected? Where will the greatest impact be felt? Can it happen here?
- **Controversy.** Is there an element of conflict or threat?
- **Unusual.** Is something out of the ordinary happening?
- **Importance.** How significant is the event? What is the magnitude of its effect on the area?
- **Interest.** What degree of human curiosity is there?

THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

Reporters turn to people in positions of authority first for pertinent facts about a story. Stories lacking real information (therefore leaving the reporter to hypothesize about what is happening or, worse, looking for other not-so-reliable sources) are stories that can be extremely damaging to your agency. This is why it's so important to make every effort to have all the facts and state the obvious for the reporter.

For some critical care transport programs, the point of contact will be a pre-designated Public Information Officer (PIO). Hospital-based programs and some large medical transport operations may have a public affairs department with trained individuals who can serve in this capacity. However, most air medical transport services lack these specialized resources and must rely upon program leadership and often program personnel to work with, and address, the media. Regardless of the background of the individual - public relations, medical, aviation, or communications - this person will be representing the program as its PIO.

A successful PIO understands the symbiotic relationship between his or her agency and the media. Working together allows both organizations to better achieve their individual goals. PIOs must work effectively with the media as it is one of the most efficient and successful ways to reach the general public.

Therefore, a PIO needs to have the tools and specific skills to do this important job. Your agency should have a comprehensive media policy that outlines the specific duties and responsibilities of the position, as well as an outline of the basic legal and agency restrictions on release of information. By sharing this policy with local media, it allows both the agency and local media outlets to play "on the same field," which can be especially helpful in delicate situations.

A PIO must be a media consumer, publicly oriented, and politically astute. He or she must be able to anticipate sensitive or controversial situations and must be positioned within the organization to ably and quickly respond to media inquiries, i.e., with direct and open access to key decision-makers.

A PIO must be calm in crisis and project candour, honesty, integrity and respect for the job the media does. A PIO must be assertive and comfortable in disagreeing when necessary, be able to admit to not knowing everything, and willing to take calculated risks.

Finally, a PIO needs to be a positive representation of your organization. Your agency's employees will look to this person as their representative and s/he is often the visual 'face' of your organization in the public eye. This person must be conscious of their heightened profile and be prepared to risk criticism because of this elevated standard of accountability.

THE THREE-STEP PREPARATION PROCESS

There are two non-negotiable rules when working with the media - never lie and never do an interview cold. Especially when involving active incidents, it is imperative to take time - even a minute or two - to prepare for an interview. This could be the one and only chance your agency will have to convey important information to the public about an incident and requires, at minimum, a few minutes of thought and preparation.

Prepare

If you have the opportunity, usually if a reporter is calling about a story, rather than at an active incident, take a moment to interview the reporter. Ask what their story is about, what their deadline is, who else they are speaking with on the subject, and if they need additional information before the interview. Use this information to decide if you will do the interview or not. There will be circumstances when your organization should choose not to do an interview - especially if there is another lead agency or the story outline is vague. If you decide to participate, tell the reporter you will gather the information he or she is requesting and call them back shortly.

Whether or not you have notification prior to an interview request, it is crucial you prepare a short statement or key messages that clearly cover what you can and will say. If there is no prior notice, tell the reporter you will need a few minutes to gather the correct information and you will call them back. If you are at an incident scene, ask the reporters for a moment to collect information from the incident commander or person in charge. Reporters will understand this and allow you time. If you think you may be surrounded by reporters as you step out of a vehicle or arrive at a scene, take time to prepare a few key statements before you arrive.

When preparing your statement, clarify known facts. No opinions or speculations should be offered. Once you have a statement, stick to it! Make sure you review your messages with the incident commander or person in charge before releasing it and try to keep to three or four key points that are short, clear and concise.

Rehearse

After preparing your key points, take a few moments before you call the reporter back, or while the TV crew is setting up, and say your statements out loud a few times. This will help you to become familiar with the statement, as well as to reinforce key messages in your own mind.

If you have the opportunity and the time, ask a colleague to act as a reporter and "grill" you with some tough questions, especially if you anticipate it may be a difficult or hostile interview. A seasoned PIO will come to learn and expect what questions will be asked in almost any situation and will be able to prepare for them by creating key points to cover the questions in advance. Make sure your initial statement covers as many of the journalist "5-W's" - who, what, where, when, why and how - as possible.

Bridge

When responding to a negative or hostile question, never refute it by repeating the negative statement. Instead, bridge back to one of your main points. This is a difficult process to master, but by doing so, you draw the reporter back to your key messages, which may help focus the reporter's story. Remember, it is not the question the public remembers; it's your answer! Always use positive words and make every effort not to repeat negative statements.

Example:

Reporter: Isn't it true that medical helicopters are unsafe and most of the patients don't need to be flown?

Unprepared Response: No, medical helicopters are not unsafe and we don't fly patients who don't need to be flown.

Prepared Response: The decision to transport a patient by helicopter, like all medical decisions, is associated with risks and benefits that must be carefully weighed. At ABC Flight Program the safety of our crew and patients is our primary objective and we are proud of our record.

A prepared statement with key messages will help remind you of the facts to be used. Only relevant questions should be addressed. If a question is not relevant, politely state that you are dealing with issues at hand and can discuss other issues at a suitable time.

INTERVIEWS

There are four forms of mass media, each with its own characteristics and needs. Print journalists, radio and television broadcasters are covered here. Internet reporters and bloggers can fall under any of the categories below, depending on what Internet medium is used. It is important to remember that anything you say can potentially be fed to a national or international feed, or posted to a website. A reporter thousands of miles away can access your comments and confront you about your statements. You must be prepared to back up any comments you make nationally as well as locally.

Print Journalists

A writer for a newspaper or magazine will generally provide the public with the most detailed information about an incident. They usually have much more time to create their story and the public is more likely to speak directly with a journalist than a television reporter. The journalist requires much more detail about an incident than a television or radio reporter does. It is their job to create a picture of the incident with words.

It is important to keep this in mind when doing a print interview, as the journalist may be seeking more information than you can release. Making comparisons or analogies will often help print reporters understand your message.

Since a print reporter will be taking notes on your discussion, keep your message clear and concise. You must speak slowly enough for the reporter to write down your statements accurately. Print journalists often record interviews using very small tape recorders that are sometimes hidden under their notebooks. You should also record your interviews if you have the opportunity, to retain a record of everything said.

Radio Reporters

A radio reporter may often ask you to go 'live' from an incident scene via phone. Your tone of voice is crucial. Your message may say one thing, but your tone of voice can convey a completely different message. Immediacy is very important to radio and you may find yourself responding to a number of radio station calls before you even arrive at an incident scene. This kind of interview can be intimidating because you often do not see the person interviewing you, nor their reaction to your answers.

Radio newscasts are often very short (30-90 seconds). To help ensure your quote or information is used, try to keep your quotes to 15 seconds or less. Speak very clearly and enunciate more carefully than you would in usual conversation. It is also helpful to tape your interview for back-up if you are misquoted or information is rebroadcast out of context.

It is also important to assume you are being taped the minute you call the station. In the United States, laws vary by state. For example, in California, media must inform you that you are being recorded, but in New York and New Jersey, it is not necessary. Best bet? Always assume you are on the record and being recorded and be sure to ask the reporter right away if the interview is being taped or going to be live. This way, you will be aware that a clear, quick and simple message is essential. And if you go into a radio studio to conduct the interview, treat the entire studio like a live microphone. Anything you say in the studio is fair game for reporters to quote because you are in their 'territory.'

Television Reporters

The television interview is often the most unnerving. Visual presentation speaks volumes. Your body language and surroundings will affect your message in a positive or negative way. There is often no time to strike a rapport with a broadcast journalist before he or she sticks a camera in your face and begins asking questions "live". Perceptually, this medium brings you the closest to your audience - they can see you being nervous and hear it in your intonation. They also see in real time what is going on around you. In this case, you are not only trying to manage your message, but your surroundings - which is often

impossible.

Your physical appearance, dress and deportment are crucial. Clothes must be appropriate. Emergency services personnel in 'work dress' is encouraged. One suggestion is to take off glasses or sunglasses when conducting an interview. Dark tints hide the eyes, which subliminally suggests that you may be hiding information.

Again, it is important to assume the television camera is on the moment the reporter and camera operator step out of their vehicle. How you act and what you say could be recorded at any time.

The use of facial expressions and body gestures can help or hinder your interview. Using non-verbal indicators can project a certain attitude. Facial expressions that correspond to your verbal message will enhance your delivery because they demonstrate you are a caring, feeling individual. Do not use elaborate hand gestures, but keep your hands visible.

Camera Tactics

Confidence is the key to looking and sounding authoritative and believable on camera. Know your subject, feel confident about your message and it will show. In addition, here are a few pointers that can help ensure the visual message you convey supports the ones you are saying:

- Try to place yourself higher than the camera to assume an authoritative position
- Attempt to manage your background by standing in front of a helicopter, an ambulance, fire truck or anything that obscures potential live 'action' or distractions behind you
- Never make a fist or other aggressive gesture - it could be misused
- Ground yourself by placing one foot in front of the other - this prevents you from swaying back and forth
- Be aware of nervous gestures and learn to control them; a camera can pin-point these habits and focus on them
- Look at the reporter; if you can't meet his or her eyes, look at his/her ear closest to the camera
- If you need to look away, a sideways glance is fine, but rolling your eyes or looking down conveys different visual cues and negative connotations for the audience

INCIDENT SCENE INTERVIEWS

Major incidents create media attention at the scene, at receiving hospitals, and other related locations. These interviews may take place as the incident unfolds and response is in progress or the interview may occur after-the-fact, in follow up to the incident.

During a major incident, reporters will often turn up at the scene before or at the same time as emergency personnel. As a working "official or unofficial" PIO, you and your crew (medical and aviation) must know how to handle these situations as you may be approached by the media for an interview. You will work very closely with the Incident Commander or agency in charge to discuss the release of information.

As the PIO on the scene, you may be responsible for the following:

- Taking initiative to go to a scene if you believe the incident may generate media attention for your agency
- Making immediate contact with the person in charge of the scene to determine what can be released
- Ensuring others in your organization who may speak with the media have the same information as you do, so information dissemination is consistent

- Working with PIOs from other agencies to coordinate release of information
- Maintaining regular contact with media at the scene if it is a prolonged incident
- Ensuring the safety of the reporters who are on the scene and ensuring safety restrictions are adhered to
- Keeping reporters in one spot - essentially a staging area
- Ushering reporters in past safety barricades for photos and video, in some cases
- Treating all reporters equally

If you are a crewmember on the scene, defer to your media policy. Some organizations will allow all staff to provide the media with basic information about an incident, while some require that all media contact be made through the Public Information Officer. If you do speak with the media, make sure to provide known facts only. Think about the 'five W's' without the why -- who, what, where, and when. Usually the media will be satisfied with the basics early in an incident. Be concise and don't hypothesize. A good rule of thumb is to speak as if your program director or clinical supervisor was standing beside you. Most important, make sure you let the PIO know exactly what you told the media if/when he or she arrives or takes over the incident. It is important to your agency's credibility that it speaks with one voice and your PIO does not contradict what you have already told the media.

Incident scenes can often turn a group of reporters into an unruly crowd. It may be your job to manage the reporters in the area and your message. In these situations you are not doing one-on-one interviews, but a number of reporters will cluster around you.

If you arrive at such a scene, the media will often gather around you as soon as you get out of the car. Greet the media and tell them you are going to get information from the person in charge of the scene and will return shortly. Cameras and microphones will likely be on. Do not avoid the cameras or appear to run away from them. Reporters thrive on controversy - if it is not apparent, they may try to create it themselves - so be open and honest all the time.

Meet with the person in charge of the scene and take time to prepare some key messages. Once you approach the media, they will regroup tightly around you. Intruding on personal space is an intimidation tactic often used by the media. Give reporters and cameras a moment to set up (in a location of your choosing), then take a small step back to gain personal space and provide a feeling of personal comfort just as you begin your statement. Why will the media let you manage this maneuver? Because you have information they need for their story.

During these group interviews, treat all reporters alike. Do not ignore reporters that you don't like or be goaded into an argument with one reporter - all of them will have it on tape. Always act as if the camera is 'live'; in many cases, it will be at an active incident scene. Present your answers in complete, concise sentences to make it more difficult for editors to take phrases out of context.

Once you have provided all the information you are able to give at that time, feel free to conclude the media briefing by saying, "that is all I have for now," and alert reporters to when you will be able to provide an update. Providing updates at an active incident scene every 10 to 15 minutes allows you to keep most reporters in one area, and their focus on you as their primary information source. If you do not provide regular and timely updates, media will tend to wander among those at the scene to find a new "angle" for the story for their next update - which could indeed be every five to ten minutes.

FACILITATING A NEWS CONFERENCE

When serving as a PIO, you may be called upon to either host or manage a news conference or media briefing in relation to a high-profile situation. A news conference infers something special - a major announcement. You will lose significant credibility if your story is not "real news."

When facilitating a news conference or media briefing, the PIO should:

- If time permits, send out an advisory to let reporters know the date, time and place of the news conference
- If the PIO will not be delivering the message, he/she should help the speaker prepare key messages and a statement
- Brief and rehearse the speaker in regards to the type of questions media may ask
- Introduce the speaker and give a brief outline as to what the news conference is about
- Ensure the room is in proper order, and anything you don't want the media to see is completely out of visual range, preferably taken out of the room
- Make sure there is an easy exit for the speaker (not through the media) in case things turn volatile
- Notify any outside parties involved in the issue and persons within your organization that you are having a news conference and what will be said
- Keep a list of media who attended, and as a courtesy, send out the news release to media who did not attend
- Hand out copies of a written release or statement when media enter the room to give them a chance to read things before the conference gets started
- Video the news conference, if at all possible
- Do not use any visual aids that require darkening the room, as this will not work for television. Provide actual photos, drawings or computer images in a format the media can use
- Make sure the facts and figures you use on paper are the same as the ones you use in your statement

HOSTILE REPORTERS

If possible, when dealing with a hostile reporter or controversial topic, it is useful to attempt to set ground rules with the reporter or reporters prior to the interview, such as what your topic is, what the topic parameters are and what information you are able to provide.

If this is violated during the interview, you can say, "I understand that we are here today to talk about our response to the serious hazmat incident on Highway XYZ. If you would like to discuss the training and response of the fire department's hazmat team, I would be happy to refer you to an expert who could provide this information for you."

The key to handling a hostile interview successfully is to keep calm and in control by sticking to your prepared statement. This ensures both your professional and contextual messages are understood.

During a hostile interview, the reporter may attempt to have you elaborate on an answer by not saying anything after you respond. The silence is referred to as "dead air." The silence may be intimidating, but remember, your job is to stick to the facts prepared in your statement, not fill the dead air time. There are a number of other interview techniques a reporter may use to get negative or potentially controversial information from you, or to glean information you may not be prepared to give. Knowing these tactics, and how to deflect them, can prepare you for 'difficult' interviews:

Leading With a Hypothetical or Loaded Question. These questions typically begin with the words: "Hypothetically," "Let's just say," or "Suppose." Identify these questions as hypothetical and refuse to answer them on that basis. Your response can be as simple as, "That's a hypothetical question. What has happened here...".

Playing 20 Questions. Reporters may often ask you the same question three, four or five different ways during the course of an interview to try to draw out information you cannot provide. For example:

Reporter: Can you tell me what caused the accident?

You: The NTSB is investigating and a determination has not been made at this time.

Reporter: Well, a witness said she heard a loud “boom” shortly after the aircraft took off. Was there a mechanical problem with the aircraft?

You: At this time, we do not have any details as to what may have happened before the accident and the police and NTSB are conducting their interviews of any witnesses. You will have to speak with them to get the details.

Reporter: There are people at the scene who said that it was very foggy when the helicopter departed. Do you know if bad weather was a factor in this accident?

You: Right now, we do not have any information about the weather conditions at the scene. Our pilots utilize various resources for current weather reporting before leaving on a transport, but information in distant rural areas is often limited. For additional details, you will have to talk with NTSB.

Lead With Soft Questions, Hit With Hard Ones. Some reporters will make you feel comfortable with easy questions to start, then knock you off your stride with a tough question. Keep calm, steady, stay alert and always be ready for the tough one.

Paraphraser. A reporter may try to put words in your mouth-for instance, “Do you mean to say ...?” Simply say, “To clarify, I said...”.

Question Roulette. Some reporters may ask you three or four different questions in a row. This gives you the opportunity to answer the question that relates best to your key messages. If none of the questions relate directly to your key messages, ask the reporter to repeat each question one at a time. The reporter may end up asking a completely different question altogether.

Interruptions. Often times, in the heat of a moment, a reporter will interrupt your statement or answer to a question. Wait until the interruption is done, then say something like, “I can address that issue in a moment, what I was saying was...”.

Dart Thrower. A reporter may try to apply hostile or negative labels to a person or issue you are dealing with. Be very careful not to repeat the negative statement. It is extremely important to address all points raised by the reporter, and not to nod your head while a negative statement is being declared by this type of reporter. For example:

Reporter: Don't EMS helicopter pilots have a reputation for being cowboys? Doesn't this concern you as a medical crewmember?

You: On the contrary, our pilots have a spotless safety record and are well respected by their co-workers for their decision-making and communications skills.

GUIDELINES TO A GOOD INTERVIEW

There are ten basic rules to conducting a successful interview, no matter how difficult or painful the reporter or subject. If you can master these simple skills, without saying a word, you have already communicated a positive, professional image to your audience. Of all the guidelines, be sure to commit two to memory - be prepared and tell the truth!

Never Say “No Comment.” No matter what form or circumstances of the interview, a golden rule is never to say “no comment.” This only tells the reporter that you are hiding something. If you cannot reply, say so and be sure to explain why. If you really cannot answer the question, try bridging back to one of your key messages. Remember, an audience usually remembers the answer to a question, not the question itself.

Be Aware of Non-Verbal Indicators. Body language is vital in any interview. Maintain eye contact. Doing so shows that you are honest, credible and in control. Be conscious of facial expressions. Rolling your eyes or smiling during a touchy or controversial subject will send negative impressions to the audience,

regardless of your message.

Listen Carefully. Be attentive. Let the reporter ask the whole question before responding. Listen to the reporter's question and identify which part of it relates to your main points. Once your response is given, do not elaborate; simply wait for the next question. Remember, it is not your job to fill dead air. If you do not understand the question, simply ask the reporter to re-phrase it.

Dress and Act Professionally. Be sure to wear clean and proper attire. Physical appearance greatly affects your credibility. Remember, you are representing the entire organization and you speak on behalf of your agency. The image you portray equals the image of the organization. Politeness also displays professionalism. Stay calm and in control, and never argue with a reporter. Always end an interview with a handshake.

Check Your Setting. What is going on around you can adversely affect your message. Check your surroundings before the interview begins. A camera can zoom in on a negative or conflicting background environment, or a print reporter can describe the scene.

Be Prepared. Always follow the three-step preparation process (prepare, rehearse, bridge). Draft a statement and possible questions a reporter may ask. Practice saying your message out loud and responding to anticipated questions. Keep in mind that a totally irrelevant question may be asked. Before you answer a question, pause for a moment to gather your thoughts. It may be helpful to preface your sentences with the name of your agency, something you don't have to think about before responding to a tough question. Remember to bridge back to the topic at hand and have background information, such as photos, ready to give reporters right after an interview.

Never Go "Off The Record." No matter how friendly the reporter is, he or she is a reporter first, and his or her job is to get the story. Providing information "off the record" may send a reporter looking for a conflicting or competing source who will go on the record to confirm your comments. Whenever there is a microphone or camera present, conduct yourself as if it is on. When working with the media, there is no such thing as "off the record."

Avoid Using Technical Jargon. Always speak in clear and simple terms. If you must use a technical term, explain it. Keep your statements brief and conversational. This helps ensure your message is clear and increases the chance your quotes will be used accurately.

Be Aware of News Deadlines. When scheduling an interview, it is helpful to be considerate of the reporter's deadlines. This consideration creates a positive working relationship with the media and helps ensure your side of the story is told. If the reporter must wait until the last minute to get your quote, they likely will have already conducted interviews with a number of other sources and those sources may conflict with your side of the story.

Tell the Truth. NEVER LIE! When (not if) your statement is found to be untrue, the reporter will be back for a second interview about why you lied, and you've just damaged both your credibility and the credibility of the agency you represent. If you honestly do not know the answer to a question, you can simply respond by saying something like, "I know we responded to the call at 2:10 a.m., but at this time I do not know how long it took for the helicopter to arrive. I can find that out for you and provide that information at our next briefing." Remember, stick to known facts and keep personal opinions to yourself. Once you voice your own opinion, it becomes the opinion of the organization.

PERSONAL, PERSONNEL AND OTHER INFORMATION RELEASE GUIDELINES

"O.K., I've got all this down, but now, what do I say to the media?" Here is where a textbook, or in this case, this chapter, cannot provide the guidance you will need as a PIO or someone who must deal with

the media. You must look to your agency and its media policy, which should clearly state what your organization can and cannot release to the media. This policy must take into consideration local, state and federal laws (HIPAA, for example) and statutes as well as organizational dynamics. One organization's leadership may opt for complete transparency, while others may choose, for reasons that may be unknown to you, that certain information is either not released, or couched in a specific way. Often times, political or business reasons may affect the way media policies are written.

If your organization does not have a media policy, request that one be developed - and fast! It provides not only guidelines for you, but for the media as well. Share your media policy with reporters you deal with on a regular basis. This is extremely helpful in emergency situations when time is of the essence, and there isn't time to debate what information you can or cannot release.

Personal Questions Reporters will often ask about personal feelings or try to seek information that will elicit an emotional response from their subject. Think about all the times reporters try to make celebrities cry - unfortunately, it makes for 'good TV.' If you feel comfortable saying something personal, make sure your response is reflective of your entire organization. For example, if there were a horrific school bus crash and it appears all the children aboard were killed, most would be comfortable saying, "This is the worst motor vehicle accident I've seen in my entire career. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of these children."

However, even with such an innocuous sentiment, a reporter could try to create controversy out of the statement by alluding to the fact that you thrust Christian morals into the picture.

This being said, it is often important that emergency services personnel put a human face to their organization, and not appear emotionless in the face of tragedy. In the case of the school bus accident, it would be prudent to say something like, "Tragedies of this magnitude are emotionally draining for everyone involved. Our crews are working diligently on recovery efforts in hopes of saving lives and providing comfort and care to the injured."

Personal statements must be made only after careful thought. They can lead to spin-off stories that make you the center of the story, as opposed to the incident itself. Reporters may use the hypothetical situation tactic outlined in an earlier part of this chapter to elicit a response. Be cautious and think through your answer. If you do not want to respond to a personal question, simply respond by bridging back to a key message of the organization. This shows the reporter you are speaking on behalf of your agency.

Personnel Questions Often the most difficult interviews will involve responding to a personnel-related incident. Whether it be an employee fatality or an employee being charged with criminal wrongdoing, these interviews are fraught with emotion and potential hazards. In these cases, it is extremely important to keep in mind who your audience is. Sure, the media will be front-and-center demanding answers, but you must also keep in mind that your primary audiences will be the employees of your organization and those employees' family and friends.

Again, the existence of a comprehensive media policy is invaluable in these situations. Minutes after a staff member has been charged with a crime is not the time to be deciding how much information you will release to the media and if the release will be proactive or reactive. Your organization's media policy should clearly outline what, when and how information relating to personnel issues will be communicated.

It is also wise, in these situations, to inform staff before releasing information to the media. If, for example, a staff member was killed in an accident, make every attempt to notify the family first, employees second, and then the media. Again, it is important to have the methods and tools in place for this type of emergency communication before an incident occurs. Simple phone trees or automated dialing systems for agencies that have employees working on various shifts or geographic areas work well.

This attempt to communicate with your employees first, before the general public, will go a long way toward preserving your agency's morale and staff respect.

If you are speaking with the media about a personnel incident, is it important to maintain your composure and professionalism. Showing emotion, empathy and caring is important, as is maintaining a respectful demeanor that the media will often mirror in their coverage of such an event. If the incident involves someone well known to you, think carefully if you are the best person to conduct the media interviews. If a reporter knows you are particularly close to an employee being accused of misconduct, he or she could be particularly brutal with his or her line of questioning. Or, if it was your partner who was fatally injured, the reporter will likely present a line of questioning that will elicit strong emotions from you.

Commenting on "The Other Guys"

If something bad happens somewhere in the country or in the next county over, you can almost guarantee that local reporters will be tasked to find a way to "bring the story home." We all saw it after Katrina, when news media were asking local emergency preparedness agencies: "Are we ready? What if it happened here?"

Be extremely careful and cognizant of responding to such interview requests. Often, if an incident happened close to your organization's jurisdictional area, the reporter may be trying to stir up controversy, insinuating how the other agency mishandled the situation. Although you may feel you know all the facts about the incident, there is a good chance that there is more to the story. Respect sister and brother agencies and don't second-guess their decisions in the media. It's unprofessional, and can and will create friction between your organization and others you will likely have to work with in the future.

In these cases, it is quite appropriate to tell the media that it is unfair for you to comment on another agency's policies or procedures and refer them back to the organization in question. It may also be helpful to refer reporters to national organizations or governing bodies. You've learned already not to respond to hypothetical questions, so take the opportunity to practice your bridging techniques and steer the media to your positive key messages. Also, keep in mind that you always have the option of politely turning down an interview.

CORRECTING ERRORS

Despite how well you prepare for and respond in an interview, there is still the possibility a reporter may make a mistake. The mistake can vary from having your name and title wrong, to misquoting you or leaving out a vital part of the story.

Correcting journalistic errors must not be confused with disagreeing with the slant of a story. If a story is skewed in a negative or dissuasive way, but factually correct, there is no impetus for a correction.

Depending on the degree of damage done by an omission or error, there are various ways to handle the situation. The objective of requesting a correction is not to punish the reporter, but to relay the correct message to the public. If you would like a reporter to clarify a mistake in his or her next edition or broadcast, politely ask the reporter to do so. Most reporters will be glad you brought it to their attention and will be happy to make the correction for you and their audience. If you have to go to the editor, make sure you talk about the story, not the reporter. Remember, headlines run in 40-point type on page one, corrections run in 8-point type on page three, so be selective in your calls for corrections.

If it's a small mistake, such as spelling your name wrong or using an incorrect title, do nothing. If the reporter made the mistake out of ignorance, let it go. If you battle every minor error, you will be in constant dispute with the media. If it is a common mistake that constantly re-occurs, explain the correction at a convenient, non-stressful time.

It is important to make serious corrections immediately. A story could go across the wires in an instant, and almost every media outlet has Internet sites which can be updated in seconds if it is a breaking story. Unless the information is corrected, it will go out incorrectly until it is fixed.

If you believe a damaging error was made intentionally, you may consider asking for a meeting with the reporter's news director to discuss the problem. Keep in mind that, once you have done this, future encounters with that reporter may be strained. If you do not receive an acceptable explanation or correction, depending on where you are, you may ask for a press council meeting, the involvement of the media ombudsman (if the media outlet has one) or pursue legal action.

SUMMARY

Working with the media and managing your message can be a difficult and complex job. While attempting to convey the message of your organization, you must work effectively with a medium with differing and often conflicting goals. You do not have control over the angle the media will take with your story once they complete their interviews, but you are ultimately responsible for dealing with the public perceptions and opinions the media fosters.

The PIO and media have a symbiotic relationship. The PIO needs the media to communicate important facts and key messages, while the media must communicate in a way that attracts their consuming public. These objectives are not inherently harmonious, but tact, skill and experience can promote a professional exchange that works well for both parties.

Practice, preparation and confidence are key ingredients for developing a successful relationship with the media and getting your agency's message across to those to whom it means the most - the general public.

SUGGESTED READING

FEMA Independent Study Program: IS-702 National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) Public Information Systems. Federal Emergency Management Agency, Emergency Management Institute (EMI). <http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is702.asp>. Accessed July 13, 2006.

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.