

# Chapter 14

## EFFECTIVE MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Reviewed January 2, 2009

One of the best ways of getting government's message across to citizens is through the news media. The news media thrive on covering government, "the people's business." Likewise, government relies on the news media because they create, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, "the atmosphere of public affairs." Whether you realize it or not, the news media are political educators and by their reporting, promote an image of the political process. Municipal officials can help make that a good image. Municipal officials can contribute to the quality of work the news media do in providing news coverage.

Here are some suggestions:

- Be forthcoming with information and in as much detail as possible. Help the reporter understand the story. Inability to do this often results in "bad press" for public officials and the public entity.
- All public meetings and work sessions should be open to the news media. In fact, Louisiana state law mandates open meetings. Promote the political process by encouraging news coverage of such meetings.
- Establish a relationship based on trust. Try to think of reporters as professionals, not adversaries.
- Don't attempt to impose your judgment on the news media. Do feel free to express your honest opinions about what you believe the news is, but don't get angry when a reporter has put together a story based on a variety of views. Reporters are paid to write fair and objective articles or air "balanced" features on television or radio.
- Document, document, document. When you prepare a news release for the news media, it is helpful to attach to it all relevant letters and maps and other documents that will help the news media understand the story. Reporters will appreciate this extra effort as it minimizes their research time.
- Understand the reporter's deadlines. Plan the release of news information to give reporters adequate time to write a story for the newspaper, or assemble a news feature for broadcast.
- The best time for a news conference usually is in the morning (at 9 a.m. to 10 a.m.) to be fair to all news media. If you plan a news conference, be sure to give news editors and assignments editors at least 24 hours notice. You should also indicate what the news conference will focus on.

- Don't be bashful about providing story ideas to reporters and editors. It is useful to point out current positive trends or developments. Do hold a briefing or provide documentation to encourage such news coverage.
- Never give an "off the record" comment. There is no guarantee a reporter will respect your wish to leave your comment from being published or broadcast. If you must decline to comment, state so and why. You could respond in some true manner such as "I don't have all the information on that yet," or "All the figures have not come in on that now."
- If you don't know an answer to a reporter's question, say so, and try to get that answer for the reporter before his or her deadline, or find someone who knows the answer. Never "fake" an answer or give an untrue answer. Honesty is imperative when dealing with the news media.
- Think twice before responding to speculative questions. If you are confident, proceed with caution. Otherwise, avoid responding to these questions. If you speculate and are correct, no one will remember. If you are wrong, however, no one will forget.

There is nothing more disheartening or disturbing than a meeting of a city council or board of aldermen that deteriorates into a "knock-down, drag-out" battle royal over the discussion of controversial (or even trivial) issues. Such a scene played out on newspaper front pages or in the lead story on television news shows betrays the public's high expectations of their elected leaders. The proper conduct of all public meetings, in addition to the kind of relationship you build with news reporters, can garner you much more favorable coverage.

Developing a good working relationship with the press NOW – so that they can rely on you and your staff to get them the facts, figures, and other information they need for their stories – can do much to place you in the best position when a crisis occurs and you have to face those same reporters.

Anything public officials can do to make themselves clear to reporters ultimately will make the work of government as clear to the citizens they serve. Public officials can help the news media promote a positive image of the political process through cooperation and a better understanding of the requirements of the news media. Understanding the news media will enable the men and women who are elected to serve the public trust to become more effective government leaders.

There are no guarantees, but these suggestions can do much to help the press and the elected municipal officials get their messages out to your citizens. Always remember that the reporter is neither your enemy nor your friend -- he or she is an intermediary between you and the people you need to reach.

## GUIDELINES FOR BETTER PRESS RELATIONS

**Take responsibility** for making sure your listener understands your message.

**Shoot squarely.** Honesty is always the best policy. Journalists can spot a phony or shady practice a mile away.

**Give service.** Provide the press with interesting, timely stories and pictures they want, when they want them, and in a form they can readily use.

**Maintain credibility.** Information presented to the news media must be truthful and complete.

**Be available.** Mistakes often wind up in print when reporters cannot check their facts with a knowledgeable source. Be sure reporters have a contact person at all times (not just during the workday).

**Correct mistakes.** Both journalists and public officials can make mistakes. If you realize you made a mistake during an interview, call back the reporter as quickly as possible. A newspaper news article often can be corrected before it goes to press. If the article or news story has been published or broadcast, ask for a post-story correction or clarification.

**Maintain press contact if something goes wrong.** The take-to-the-hills approach gives all the advantage to your adversaries and creates the impression that you are guilty of something, even if you aren't.

**Take the initiative** in all circumstances, whether the news is good or bad.

**Assume that you are on the record.** Unless you have a clear agreement to the contrary, whenever you speak to a journalist, assume your name and information will be used in the story.

**Be aware** of the connotations as well as the dictionary meanings of your words.

**Remember the Five "Fs":** Be fast, factual, frank, fair, and friendly.

**Don't withhold public documents or information.** Nothing will get you bad publicity more quickly or damage your organization's reputation in the long run. Don't run the risk of a lawsuit brought by local news media seeking public information.

**Don't beg or carp.** Don't beg to have stories used. Don't complain about the treatment of a story if it is used, although you should ask for corrections in the case of factual errors or misquotes.

**Don't ask for "kills."** The way to keep unfavorable stories out of the press is to keep situations that produce such stories from happening.

**Don't expect journalists to be your friends.** A reporter's only obligation is to present information and ideas to the public fairly, accurately, and in context.

**Don't believe a reporter is your personal friend.** Maintain a respectful, professional relationship, but leave some distance between yourself and members of the press and news media.

**Don't use invective or lose your cool.** This will always come back to haunt you.

**Don't say "no comment."** Instead, reply with a more neutral phrase, such as "I'm sorry, but I just can't answer that."