Managing News Media Relationships: What to Say and Not Say Before, During, and After Incidents, Accidents, or Events

Presented for CSAC-EIA by
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PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS:
Timely, Accurate, Updated Information

- Incidents
- Accidents
- Injuries
- Civilian or Line-of-Duty Deaths
- Mass Events
- Law Enforcement: Murders, Shootings, Children, Riots, Use of Force
- Disasters
- Weather
MEDIA INTERACTIONS

You will always want the best spokesperson in front of the media, who may or not be your boss, CAO, CEO, Department Head, or elected official.

Resist their egos. Choose wisely. The Internet never dies.

If you become the go-to person / PIO for your agency, ask for media training.

Best PIOs or media spokespeople: have media experience; have many journalism contacts in local and national media; are calm and calming; have a good speaking voice and camera presence; are fast thinkers, good on their feet; are not “slick,” but are polished, empathic, neutral, professional information-providers.
OLD-SCHOOL VS. NEW-SCHOOL JOURNALISM

Field reporters, cameramen, soundmen, producers.
Evening newscasts and 11 pm newscasts.
Not much crossover to print newspapers.
Few follow-up stories.
Loyal viewers.

MMJs who carry it all and do it all:
Drive to the story (in their own cars);
shoot video; do interviews; do a live shot;
shoot still photos; write captions;
write a blog; write the copy for air;
edit the video; do the story in-studio or as part of a package;
post it all on station social media platforms.

Never-ending newscasts; lots of media partners; fickle viewers.
“No comment; we can’t comment on that; we will have no further comment; our attorneys told us not to comment; we wish we could comment, but we just can’t.”

“It’s a personnel issue; it’s a personnel matter; you should know we can’t comment on personnel matters; it’s a privacy issue; it’s a confidential personnel matter; the employee in this case has the right to privacy.”

“We’ll let the courts decide; that’s up to the courts to decide; our attorneys will argue/fight/present our case in court; we believe once this issue gets to court, we will prevail.”

“Let’s not rush to judgment.”
BRIDGE!

Do what (skilled) politicians do: answer a tough question by bridging over to what you really want to say:

“Do you think your deputies used excessive force?”

“On a daily basis, the men and women of our Sheriff’s Department are faced with life-and-death decisions. Our community knows how hard their jobs are and how they have to make split-second decisions, as may have happened in this case.”
Instead of saying “NO COMMENT,” say . . .

“That part is not clear to us right now, but what we do know is this . . .”

“There are still some things we don’t know at this early stage, but what I can clarify is this . . .”

Instead of saying, “We can’t comment because it’s a personnel issue,” say “Our Personnel Department is conducting a full investigation, which will give us more clarity at that point.”

“That’s a question we’re still trying to answer at this early part of the incident or investigation. We’ll have more later once we know.”

“We feel confident in our response to this incident, and we want the public to know we’re actively investigating what occurred, with information and support from . . . or in support of our colleagues at . . .”
IS IT EVER OKAY TO SAY “WE’RE SORRY”?
PRESS CONFERENCES

Manage the batting order.

Stop thanking everyone!

Offer help from your IT people with their audio, lighting, and camera setups.

Provide press releases with the names of the speakers, key officials, and contact information.

Keep your face and tone neutral, friendly, professional, and polite.

Never lose your cool. Be patient with stupid, obvious, long-winded, and compound questions. Know they will always ask one more after it’s over.

Use your substitute “No Comment” phrases as necessary.
PRINT INTERVIEWS:
Newspapers, Magazines, Blogs

Usually done by phone. Ask them to record you, so you have some hope they will quote you accurately.

If not, speak slowly, provide one sound bite at a time, take breaks in between your ideas. Don’t assume they can take fast or accurate notes.

Stick to your themes. Use bridging and your “no comment” protocols.

Ask about their deadlines and be prompt in getting back to them.

E-mail over a press kit, either right before or right after.

Send a thank-you e-mail when they capture your words correctly and write a true and favorable story.
RADIO APPEARANCES

E-mail some questions to the producer in advance if you can. (Spell out your name phonetically if it’s unusual.)

Have a message in mind.

Prepare for the length: 30-second sound bite to one-hour long form.

Talk in complete sentences; give them short sound bites, not long speeches.

In-studio: test your mic, give short bites of information, be quiet and “on the record” in the studio.

Phone-in: use a landline, get an inside callback number, no background noise. Try not to do it from your car or with a speaker phone.
RADIO APPEARANCES

Be careful answering compound questions; break them up or come back to the second.

Don’t start your sentences with “Well, . . .”

Let the host(s) finish the question; only interrupt if they are way wrong.

Have patience while the host pontificates.

Talk quickly and clearly to get your point made in a short time.

Disagree with respect and don’t let them wrap up with bad information.

Try to drive listeners to your agency web site.

Thank the host on-air and send a thank-you e-mail to the producer.
TV APPEARANCES – IN THE FIELD

Give your business card and a press kit to the talent and/or the camera person.

Help them choose a good location – low noise, good light and background.

Discuss the questions they will ask in advance of the shoot.

Help them co-develop a theme for the story.

If you get tongue-tied, it’s okay to ask them to reshoot it and answer the question again (once, probably).

Know your 20 minutes will get edited down to 20 seconds.
TV APPEARANCES – IN-STUDIO

Dress carefully: no vibrating checks, big plaid s, or bright blues or greens (matches the Chromakey screens they use); no loose jewelry. Check hair, makeup, and outfit one last time. Sit on your suit coat.

Give everyone on the production staff your business card (so they spell your name right in the Chyron captions and crawls).

Keep your head and your hands still. Keep your face neutral at all times (you never know when the camera is on you). No side chats.

Like radio, answer in sound bites.

Jump in and disagree with an “opposing guest.”

Remember your bridging responses to provocative questions.
SKYPE APPEARANCES

Prepare the room lighting, camera view, and audio well in advance. Avoid the nose hair/double-chin view.

Set the look behind the camera – no distractions, movement, glare, inappropriate photos, posters, people goofing off.

Be ready to repeat your message more than once as they may have bad lighting or audio on their side.

Sit still and keep your hands down; Skype often has refresh rate issues.

Wait for the interviewer to ask each question before you start to answer.
SOCIAL MEDIA INTERVIEWS: Blogs and Bloggers, Political and Media Sites, Working With Freelancers

It’s okay to say no to sites you’ve not heard of, goofy freelancers, or groups you don’t know or trust to provide accurate stories.

Try to get a sense of the scope of their readership. Don’t waste your time with sites that will skew your words to match their agenda.

It may be safer to do all work with them by e-mail, so you have a record of what both sides said.

Ask them to take down stories that are factually inaccurate or write and post a new version.

Create a good list and a no-way list for the future.
Recognize the shortness of their news cycles. Update the story immediately for them. Send over press releases and press kits quickly.

They will be on to another story tomorrow. But don’t miss a chance to get them to do another, corrected story on your agency then.

Kill them with kindness; they’ll always have the last word.

Send thank-you emails to them and/or their bosses when you get fair treatment.

Update your media rosters; these people change jobs frequently.
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