

Working with the Press

By Thomas Williams

Not all organizations have public relations departments, or public information officers. You may have to work directly with the press, so it's best to know some basics. In this section we'll discuss:

- Attitudes
- Writing press releases
- Rule for interviews
- Operations Security

Attitudes

Many people view reporters in a negative light. Common stereotypes include that they're "liberally biased," and "always seeking bad news." These are no truer than the common stereotypes about government officials, such as they're "hiding something," or that they're "interested in image more than anything."

The people in the news media are not the enemy. In fact, they can be terrific allies. Set aside any preconceived notions and start building relationships with some reporters. Why? It's better to work with people who you know rather than meeting them for the first time when you're under the gun.

Writing Press Releases

Stop and think about the news stories you read every day – notice that there's a fairly straight forward formula that reporters follow to tell their story: The lead, a quote to make it personal, a sentence or two about why this story is important, and then (and only then) background. They know that the average reader only reads the first three or four paragraphs.

You should structure your press releases along the same lines. It's not uncommon for a small paper to adopt such products wholesale when they need to fill space.

The lead: The lead is the "who, what, when, where and why" expression (one or two sentences) that tells the entire story. It makes someone want to pay attention to what follows. When writing the lead, think about what you'd say to your spouse or a close friend.

Next, use a quote to make it personal.

Follow the quote with a few sentences or short paragraphs explaining why this story is important and why the reader should care.

The remaining paragraphs are for background information. You'll want to check with your local paper, radio or television station regarding how they'd like you to format your release, eg: can you email your news, who can they contact about more information, and when they can release your news.

Rules for Interviews

Whether you called for a press conference, or a reporter finds you at an event or incident site, the axiom that the press can be your ally remains true. It's your chance to tell your story!

Doing well in an interview is partly art, and partly science. We can teach you the science, but to develop the art requires rehearsals and practical experience.

In addition to following the seven step model (communications tip sheet) to develop your messages, you should put yourself in the reporter's shoes and think about what he or she might want to know. In other words, anticipate their questions.

Although you shouldn't assume you'll get all "softballs," you shouldn't let your imagination and fears run wild either. They're (as a general rule) not looking for "gotchas."

Nevertheless, here are some techniques that will help you come across as comfortable, polished, and in control:

1. Speak in full sentences using proper grammar and avoiding jargon.
2. Don't repeat negative phrases, and don't get defensive. If the reporter asks about "the crisis," or "missteps," focus on a talking point or key message, not on the word he or she uses to characterize the event. If you repeat their words, they'll be more likely to use them in the story, putting the "words in your mouth."

For example, if asked, "Why did you react slowly?" you don't want to answer, "I don't think we reacted slowly..." You just add weight to the negative characterization, appear as if you need

to defend yourself, and further anchor negative thoughts in the viewer's mind.

Answer with, "The actions we took during this exercise were..." and proceed to make your points in the language you chose.

3. Never speculate or talk about things you don't know for certain. If you don't know, say you don't know, but will look for more information.
4. Never lie.
5. Assume everything you say will be on the record. There are too many ways for information to get out and you don't want to be caught by the accidental hidden microphone or camera (or cell phone) saying something you'll regret.
6. Rehearse. You developed talking points, a sound bite, some anticipated questions...now work with a colleague to run some Q&A so you can get comfortable with your style and tone before you step in front of the microphone.

Security

In this day and age, you have to consider Operations Security (OPSEC for those who love acronyms) when you consider your communications plan.

Much of this should be old hat to first responders and people trained to work in government, but for everyone else it's always a good practice to think about what's okay for public consumption, and what's off limits. For example,

- Personal information about the people involved
- Capabilities of your equipment
- Specific information about your operating procedures

Non-Verbal Cues

Recall that communications is more than just what you say. It's what your audience hears or perceives. Things to consider:

How are you dressed? In your analysis (the Seven Steps) you determined your audience, and the key messages to reach these audiences in order to communicate your goals. Some of

your messages may be non verbal such as your dress and your posture.

Are you standing up straight, or do you look down and tired? Do you cross your arms and look defensive? Are you in a pressed suit and tie when everyone else is casual? (In other words, do you look out of place?)

The choices you make should be reflective of your goals and messages. If you brief everyone in street clothes but are trying to convey an "all hands on deck" attitude, you might do well. If, on the other hand, you're trying to convey confidence and presence, rolling up your sleeves and loosening your tie might make you look haggard and worn out.

Non-verbal communication is more than clothes and presence. Every action you take as the spokesperson will receive scrutiny. Arriving on scene in an expensive vehicle when you're trying to explain a lack of funding may cause derision – even if the reasons are legitimate.

Rules to live by in a crisis...

Former CEO Jack Welch dealt with more than a few crises during his tenure at GE, and from that experience he developed five immutable rules for the executive to live by when facing a bad situation:

1. Assume the worst. In other words, don't deny something went wrong or try to downplay and minimize what's happening. Be right up front with it.
2. Everyone will know everything. There's no such thing as containment. If there's something to expose, someone will expose it; it might as well be you.
3. Many will portray you and your organization in the worst possible light. This includes your internal audiences. Don't ignore any of them.
4. Assume there will be real and lasting change to both people, and processes.
5. You will survive.