

Role of Government Attorney versus the Media

Minimizing negative publicity and
maximizing positive publicity for your city
and department

History of the media



The media today

- Cable news, e.g., Fox, CNN,
- Internet; Facebook, Cheboygan
- The “Leakers: ” Daniel Ellsberg (Pentagon papers), Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning
- Media platforms: Facebook, LinkedIn, X, TikTok, etc.
- Security cameras
- Reporters: everyone with a camera cell phone

Today's Journalist

- The trained or educated
 - Objective? e.g., Fox News vs MSNBC
 - Public or civic journalism
- The amateurs, anyone with access to an iPhone, printing press, copy machine, or the Internet

What motivates the media?



Before disaster strikes

- Do the positives
- Prepare for the negative
 - You
 - Other officials

To do List

THE MEDIA WANTS (NEEDS)

- What, where, who, when (why)
- “If it bleeds, it leads.”
- Short, concise, unique, explosive
- Exclusive
- A comment or quote (from anyone): A policy regarding contact and comments to the media is needed.
- Exempt information – by law, juveniles, undue invasion of privacy, e.g., attorney-client materials

STEPS BEFORE DISASTER STRIKES

- Who are journalists/press, professional and amateur
- Remember, reporters may be/are lazy and pressed for time (they have to beat the competition). Make the job easy to write/produce in your favor.

STEPS BEFORE DISASTER STRIKES

- Find an excuse to meet, introduce yourself, exchange cards (cell phone numbers),
- Contact them with good news as well as bad news
- Don't show favorites
- Be prepared with “comments” before they call you.
- Follow up with a press release or comment with details.

AVOIDING A BAD RELATIONSHIP

- They can (and will) “burn” you. Don’t fight with someone who buys ink by the tank carload.
- Return calls, texts, and emails promptly.
- Never avoid the journalist and avoid taking the calls.
- Do not sandbag by withholding or giving incomplete information. They will eventually find out anyway.

QUICK RESPONSES (PROACTIVE) TO THE

- Anticipate an inquiry
- Your comments will be “on the record” for everyone to see and use, so think before you speak. “Measure twice, cut once.”
- Expect to be recorded/video.
 - MCL 750.539 Divulging contents of messages (“wiretap.”)
 - *Sullivan v. Gray*
 - Varies by state.

When disaster strike

THE ART OF THE PRESS RELEASE

- Maintain the integrity (public confidence) of the client - City, officials, and employees.
- Disseminate the news promptly - no one wants yesterday's news
- To get your side of the story with a positive spin
- Get the facts out correctly
- Educate the public.

The Art of the Press Release

- Put it into context
- Confront the untruths. Any lie that is not refuted is accepted as true.
- Provide “cover” – avoid blaming – especially for the elected officials
- Be truthful and forthcoming, e.g., an accident vs a malicious act.

Understanding the Audience

- Know who you are writing for
- Tailor the news release to the audience, whether its
 - General public
 - Industry/professionals
 - Specific stakeholders
 - Residents/taxpayers
 - Employees
 - Elected officials

Understanding the Audience

- Research the media outlets.
- Understand the type of stories they cover and the tone they prefer.
- One news release may not fit all news outlets.

Craft a Strong Headline

- Be concise and informative.
- Summarize the main point of the news release in a clear and engaging way
- Use active voice
- Make the headline compelling and action-oriented.

Write a Compelling Lead

- Answer the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, Why): Include the most important information in the first paragraph.
- Hook the reader: Use interesting facts or figures to grab attention.

Provide Detailed Information in the Body

- Organize logically
- Start with the most important information and follow with supporting details.
- Use short paragraphs
- Make it easy to read and digest
- Include quotes
- Add credibility and human interest with quotes from key stakeholders or experts.

Use an Inverted Pyramid Structure

- Place the most critical information at the top
- Ensure that if the reader only scans the beginning, they get the essential details.
- Provide supporting information and background later.
- This helps maintain interest and provide context.

Include Relevant Data and Statistics

- Back up your claims
- Use data to provide evidence for your statements
- Make it interesting
- Present statistics in a way that highlights their significance.

Add Multimedia Elements

- Use images, videos, or infographics
- Enhance the release with visual elements that make it more engaging.
- Ensure high quality
- Use professional-grade visuals to maintain credibility.

Write in a Professional Tone

- Be clear and concise.
- Avoid jargon and overly technical language unless your audience is familiar with it.
- Maintain a formal tone.
- Use proper grammar and style (consider utilizing tools like Grammarly or similar.)

Include Contact Information

- Provide details for follow-up
- Include a media contact person's name, phone number, and email.
- Offer additional resources
- Mention if additional materials or interviews are available.

Add Boilerplate Information

- Include background on your organization.
- A brief paragraph about your agency or organization provides context.
- Keep it concise
- This should be a standard part of all your news releases.

Edit and proofread

- Check for errors
- Spelling, grammar, and factual accuracy are crucial.
- Get feedback
- Have someone else review the release to ensure clarity and impact.

News release Takeaways

- Be prompt
- Be accurate
- Educate
- Look and sound professional and competent

The need for a comment



Before the interview

- **Understand the Purpose:** Know why you're being interviewed and the interviewer's angle.
- **Know Your Audience:** Tailor your messages to the media outlet's audience.
- **Prepare Key Messages:** Identify 3-5 key points you want to convey and find ways to integrate them naturally into your responses.
- **Research the Interviewer and Outlet:** Understand their style, previous interviews, and the outlet's tone.

Before the Interview

- Anticipate Questions: Consider possible, tough questions, and prepare your answers.
- Practice: Rehearse your answers, especially your key messages, to ensure clarity and conciseness.

Before the Interview

- Attire:
 - Video - Professional (suit and tie?) or in work mode (one click above). [blue collar shirt, tie, and sport coat hanging behind by my office door]
 - Radio or online - business casual
 - Hair
 - Throat lozenges in the pocket
 - No sunglasses or transition sunglasses
 - Mirror check just before (have one in your briefcase)

Prepare the script/comment. Examples

- Response to a death or injury to a citizen
- Response to a fire or structural damage
- Response to a lawsuit filed
- Response to an unfavorable court ruling.
- Response to an arrest or conviction of official/employees
- Others?

Example of a script:

- “This is for the record.
- I’m sorry to hear that we have had such an incident in our [municipality].
- Without knowing more,
- my sympathy goes out to the individuals who were injured and their families or who had damage or loss to their homes and property.
- I will find out the details of the incident and I or someone will let you know.
- It is our municipality’s mission to keep everyone safe and to protect everyone’s property.
- We will take aggressive steps to avoid such an incident in the future.”

During the Interview

- Stand up; you sound better standing
- Short interviews make it on the air
- Even shorter responses, usually less than 20 seconds, even shorter if follow-up. [may record longer and may be used later]
- Avoid the “off the cuff” comments, especially humor and sarcasm.
- Make a recording of the interview; don’t depend on the journalist to provide one.

During the Interview

- **Stay Calm and Composed:** Take deep breaths if needed and maintain a steady demeanor.
- **Listen Carefully:** Ensure you fully understand the question before responding. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification if needed. (The interview will be edited.)
- **Be Concise:** Keep your answers clear and to the point. Avoid rambling.
- **Bridge Back to Key Messages:** Use bridging techniques to steer the conversation back to your main points if necessary.

During the Interview

- **Be Honest and Authentic:** If you don't know an answer, it's better to say so than to speculate or provide incorrect information.
- **Avoid Jargon:** Use language that is accessible to the general public, avoiding technical terms unless you explain them.
- **There is no such thing as “off the record.”** Assume everything you say could be published. Avoid going off the record unless you are very experienced with the media.
- **Your Body Language:** You need good posture, always make eye contact with the camera, and use natural gestures.

Additional Thoughts

- See all of the above, especially “attire.”
- **Speak to the camera**, not the journalist – make eye contact with the viewer
- Be prepared to demonstrate
- Appropriate location,
 - In front of a public building
 - [in your driveway, but not with your house in the background.]
 - Lighting
 - Sound

Additional Thoughts

- At the News Conference
- Repeat the question before answering.
- Name (pronounce clearly) and provide spelling.
- Municipality.
- Title.
- Role related to this incident/matter.
- Make sure you hear and understand the questions.

After the Interview

- Follow Up: Send any additional information or clarifications if needed.
- Review the Outcome: If possible, review the published interview to understand how your messages were conveyed and to learn for future interviews.
- Copies to the “bosses.”

Your Takeaways

- Practice, practice, practice.
- Have a checklist close by.
- Speak loudly and enunciate clearly,
- Keep it short.

Finally

- Promote the good
- Prepare for disaster
 - The news release
 - The interview
- Be in control when disaster strikes
- After action report