

CONNECTING with the Media and Your Audiences



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As a leader, communications skills affect everything you do. Planning and delivering successful media interviews incorporates the broad strokes and fine lines of many types of communication and includes lessons that can be used in large group settings, one on one discussions and everyday interactions. The true, positive impact of those communications comes when you truly connect with your audiences.

Most media interviews are relatively simple and straightforward. Others rely on a headline worthy quote or angle that can sell the story. The key is trying to make that work to your advantage through strategic messaging—knowing what needs to be said and when it needs to be said—the big picture and the details.

Now, granted, a ten-minute media interview might net you ten words in the news report, but it also is a potential opportunity to tell your story, educate the reporter and get the correct facts to your constituents.

THE MEDIA NEEDS YOU AND YOU NEED THE MEDIA

The media cycle is 24 hours a day, and media interactions come in many forms at any time: a recorded phone call; an on-camera interview; a studio talk show with distracting lights and sound checks; a social media post; a sit-down interview at a radio station where you may get the chance to expand and inform; or public speeches and testimony. Everything you say is about passing the headline test. Will it represent you, your county and your residents effectively?

The key is understanding that you are being seen as the expert or a viable source at any moment in time. Tragedy, conflict and failure are scintillating, but most of the time you are responding to complex public health, budget and safety issues, or advocating legislative action. At first contact from a reporter, clarify as much as possible about the reporter's needs and their deadline so that you effectively can prepare. If the

media can get the story and you can get your message across it helps everyone involved. And remember, the media representative may only know what he or she has seen in other media reports. That information may be correct or incorrect, so this is your time to teach the reporter, something that may come in very handy down the line. If you are seen as the go-to person by media representatives, they will return. It's up to you whether they return for the right reasons.

STRATEGIC MESSAGING

The shotgun approach to messaging usually produces a scattered result—not necessarily a bad thing—but it may not lead to the best results. A strategic approach—the right message at the right time by the right person—usually makes better use of limited resources and time, as well as produces a concentrated effect. In the absence of information, people tend to make up their own, but timing is a call that can only be made by you and your fellow leaders.

Knowing your audiences while you are preparing the messaging is critical. You may be speaking to a media representative, but you are communicating with residents, legislators, employees, business partners and others. Many understand the issue, many do not. Getting to the ones who do not necessitates providing them with information in a way they can understand. Ask yourself, "Why is this important to the person with whom you are trying to connect?" Make people think about what they are not thinking about.

You also may be speaking with more than one voice; your official capacity in your county and/or your role as a member of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP). At times, they will require the same messaging; other times, something a little different. Keeping those voices clear goes a long way to accomplishing your goal and being perceived as reliable.

PREPARATION AND PERFORMANCE

If you don't have a media philosophy in your organization, it's time to clarify one. What could possibly be considered news? Should the subject matter expert speak with the media or is it someone else? Who does what, when and how? Know your process because you may not have much time to respond to a critical issue. Having a template of prepared responses to typical or important issues also helps, especially for emergency situations. However, nothing beats a word by word analysis of the sound bites, particularly since the most difficult task you face may be explaining extremely complicated issues in short sentences.

Whatever the message, try to use positive words in your sound bites; words such as actively, balanced, common sense approach, comprehensive, cooperative, effective, innovative, meaningful, reasonable, responsible, solutions, vigilant and working. Build your responses by using carefully thought out analogies and percentages that your audiences will understand. You must communicate in their language and give them context that can be understood. Express empathy and concern in a genuine manner. Sometimes, people don't care what you know, until they know that you care. Concern for their families and the future is why we do what we do, so say it, while you're getting the facts out. And, by all means, explain the positive actions, so your audiences know that you are working for them.

Control is the key. Control your methods. Control your messaging. Control your performance. You want to be credible, clear, concise and calm, so being prepared by understanding the past, present and future of the issues, knowing the red flags, and focusing on what's best for counties and their residents are crucial. That's where being informed, whether it be from CCAP communications or those with whom you work in your county, is crucial to you feeling comfortable while presenting the issue. The comfort and the credibility created from preparation will come across to your audiences, even in small ways. And, research existing media reports on the issue. As mentioned, that may be what the reporter is doing, so it will help focus on imparting the correct information.

It also may help to have someone on your team with you at the interview. They may be able to catch things you miss, spot trouble and gently interrupt, or offer advice for the next interview.

SCRUTINIZE YOURSELF

If you're new to the scrutiny of media interviews or even if you're not—practice, practice, practice. Learn how to control the nervous energy that sometimes accompanies these rather unnatural situations. Perform in front of a mirror, a trusted ally or mentor, or anyone who will give you an honest assessment. Have someone play devil's advocate. If the issue is big, perform a mock interview with negative questions. It may be uncomfortable, but it will help you with all aspects of your job.

Video the practice so you can see your facial expressions, hear your voice inflection and watch your body language. If you're on TV, people will first listen with their eyes. On radio, people not only hear your words, but also your commitment and professionalism. They listen between the lines. Seeing and hearing yourself helps to ensure that you are perceived as knowledgeable and genuine.

And don't forget to ask yourself questions. What are my strengths and weaknesses? Am I the best person for this particular response? Do I need an outline to review before I perform? Am I ready to sound natural and informative? Am I prepared for a friendly interview and a confrontational interview? Have I truly taken the time to anticipate the reporter's questions?

TELL YOUR STORY

Reach Out to the Media

Cultivating relationships with your local media representatives—the conduits to many audiences—is crucial to accurately tell your story and the story of your residents. Engage reporters via emails, face-to-face meetings, phone calls, news releases and social media. Send them newsletter, reports and website links. Invite reporters to commissioners' meetings, tours and events. Get to know their work and how they want to receive information. That will help to target which reporter may be interested in a specific story. Be their go-to person.

INFORM, ENGAGE, INFLUENCE, MOTIVATE

Know your strategic purpose for the outreach. Is it to share new information, give informed reactions to events, change perceptions, educate, correct misinformation, create partnerships, encourage legislation or market events? Pitch stories succinctly. Focus on why the reporter or the public should care, how the issue affects the community and the lives of your residents. Make it timely and relevant. Involve other voices, if needed, to explain complicated messages or build consensus.

You can't be seen if you're not visible. You can't be heard if you're not talking. You can't connect if you're not telling your story.

SAY ONLY WHAT YOU WANT TO BE HEARD

Let me repeat that—say only what you want to be heard! Know when to stop talking. There may be many facts that you need to emphasize but prioritize your three main points—three positive sound bites—and keep making them. It significantly increases the chance that they will be in the published report. Keep the reporter on track. Say the headline. Get your message across, not the reporter's message.

If you're taken off track, bridge back to your message by saying:

- The facts are ...
- Another way to look at this is ...
- The thing that everyone really needs to know is ...
- I can clarify this issue by ...
- Allow me to put this in perspective ...
- Our residents will benefit from ...

If a question begins with "Tell us what went wrong," don't start the answer with "Well, what went wrong was" It's a good time to bridge back to reason, facts and the primary sound bites. Practice explaining the negatives without sounding negative.

Part of knowing when to stop talking includes realizing it in mid-sentence. If you don't like where your sentence is heading, stop and start over. It will give you three seconds to gather your thoughts and say the right thing. The person who edits the interview probably wants a clean sound bite, too. If it is a live interview, it's also OK to start over. It makes you sound thoughtful and can avoid continuing a thought that may be interpreted negatively.

And remember, you always are on. Consider the recording device active, at all times, even before or after the actual interview. If you have a

microphone attached to you for the interview, remove it immediately afterwards and turn it off.

Speaking in sound bites is difficult, especially with complex issues. But, the more concise you are—the better the chance that you will not be misquoted. If an issue is complicated, as is usually the case, consider giving the reporter background information or a fact sheet in writing prior to the interview, so they have time to process it. It can take a lot of pressure off of you and help you to avoid saying too much. Just as with others in your daily life, you may interact with reporters who are difficult for various reasons. Be sure to clarify all aspects of the interview, issue and deadlines. Try to reach an agreement on the parameters of your communication. In some instances, a written reply may be best.

MEDIA INTERVIEW TIPS

- Be credible, clear, concise and calm
- Know your subject matter and the red flags
- Know your audiences—use examples that mean something to them
- Make your primary points first and keep repeating them
- Speak in sound bites
- Say only what you want to be heard; AKA: know when to stop talking
- Give the same answer over and over, even if the question is posed differently
- Use positive words and explain positive actions
- Do not repeat negatives
- Bridge to positive sound bites ... “County residents will benefit ...” “The facts are ...” “Another way to look at this is ...” “Allow me to put this in perspective for you ...”
- Do not speculate
- Say “I’ll have to clarify that issue and get back to you”
- Correct and educate the reporter
- Take a physical and mental breath
- Stop and start a sentence over if needed
- Pass the headline test!



DO NOT GO THERE!

The do nots are sometimes more important than the dos. You may be asked the same question in different ways in order to elicit a different response. Do not take the bait. Keep repeating the answer the same way over and over, if necessary. And, by all means, be prepared to correct any mistakes the reporter may have made in a question or comments. It's important to actively listen to the reporter even though ten other things are going through your head. At the same time, be prepared to speak through interruptions by saying, “I’ll be glad to answer that, but please allow me to complete my previous point.”

If you are not sure or don't feel comfortable answering a question, it's OK, even advisable, to say “I’ll check on that.” Get back to the reporter in time for him or her to complete their report. Showing the reporter that you want to give the best information helps to be viewed as credible. Speculating can lead to a negative headline but sticking to the facts and the positive message helps to get to the aforementioned big picture and details while accurately informing your audiences.

Do not surprise your associates. Nothing should be said that will come as brand new to others on your

team. Do not lie. Do not introduce red flags. Do not say “No comment.” There is no such thing as “off the record.” Avoid using jargon. Watch for saying “uh” as a placeholder. Do not allow the interview to run past the allotted time. Do not go beyond agreed upon topics. Avoid direct, negative sentences such as “We did nothing wrong,” “Our residents have to understand this,” or “This is someone else's fault.” Do not debate the reporter. And, do not get funny or risqué; that can backfire in a hurry.

PRONUNCIATION, ENUNCIATION AND BREATHING

No one is perfect, but the way you use words and pronounce them is important to being viewed as professional. How many times have you heard asterik for asterisk, expecially for especially, fizical for fiscal, jewlery for jewelry, library for library, nuculer for nuclear, or pitcher for picture? It's part of being aware of your strengths and weaknesses.

One last thought—this may sound odd—but remember to breathe. And by that I mean a physical and mental breath to prepare or compose yourself. Shallow breathing can distort your thoughts and throw off your timing. Steady breathing helps to keep your focus on the conversation, your eye contact with the reporter, and your overall balance to get the job done. Remember, your goal is to be credible, clear, concise ... and calm ... but with energy. With preparation and practice your insights and experience can help accomplish your county's goals and inform your audiences about the value of our services and our commitment to our constituents. 🍷