

Media Relations Tips for Newly Elected Officials

www.ca-ilg.org/working-media

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Working with the media is an integral part of being an elected official. The relationship is interdependent as elected officials need the media to amplify their voices and communicate to constituents.

Media needs local officials as an authoritative source of information. Interviews with local officials is an important source of information just as attending public meetings and reviewing agency documents.

Rapport with the media is essential in accomplishing the objectives of an elected official. An effective working relationship with the media (television, radio, print, blogs, etc.) can enhance the day-to-day work of an official and help in crisis situations. Accessibility to an agency and its elected officials also fosters a greater sense of public transparency.

Reporters Are People Too

As is the case with all humans, no two reporters are alike. They differ in their levels of experience and by the medium (radio, TV print and blogs) within which they work. It is the reporter's job to report accurate information in a relatively quick timeframe. The better one understands and work within the reporter's constraints, the more effectively one communicates with the public.

Print reporters are more likely to be assigned to a "beat" which may include local agency or specific issues, such as education, environment, business, health, and so on. A challenge that local agency officials often face is that the "local government beat" can be the starter beat for less experienced reporters. This creates an opportunity to help reporters learn the intricacies of government issues, functions and procedures. Pointing them to the Institute's "Local Government 101" materials for background is one option (www.ca-ilg.org/localgovt101).

Newspaper reporters typically need and/or want quotes, background, details, facts, figures, graphics, photos, etc. More often than not, daily newspaper reporters will do their interviews by phone in preparation for their story to run the next day. A larger story may not run immediately and the reporter may choose to conduct interviews in person.

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In contrast, broadcast reporters, both radio and television, are less commonly assigned to specific beats. This means they tend to know a little bit about a lot of issues and are often learning the issue as they are reporting on it. Providing them with background information before the interview can accelerate their learning curve. This can result in better interview questions on tape or camera.

Broadcast reporters have to distill complex issues into a very limited amount of time, typically less than a minute. They are not going to want or need mounds of information, so synthesize key messages into a few concise sentences. Also, whereas radio reporters capture words solely with sound, TV reporters also need visuals to go with their interviewee's words. Such visuals offer another tool to help convey information and key messages, so consider working with your agency's staff to supply them with the appropriate resources.



Additional Resource for Working with the Media

A companion piece to this tip sheet, "Short Sound Bite Secrets," is available on the Institute's website: www.ca-ilg.org/working-media

Best Practices for Working with Reporters

Reporters have a job to do. They are talking with local agency officials, and probably others, to gain information on a story they are producing. They will often ask difficult questions that may seem antagonistic, but are usually not. They are simply trying to get the job done. Regardless of their demeanor, it is important to stay calm and:

- **Be Responsive.** Reporters operate on deadlines. To do their jobs, they need a timely response. Understand reporters' deadlines and meet or beat them. Establishing a reputation for responding quickly to reporter inquiries will earn respect and appreciation. Playing hard-to-get may cause the media to wonder what one is hiding, which may encourage the media to dig for something to uncover.
- **Be Prepared.** Find out what information the reporter is seeking and then, whenever possible, take the time to prepare for an interview by gathering facts, figures and key messages that will be responsive to the questions the reporter is likely to ask. It is okay to have this information as a reference during an interview when not on camera. Unless one has to, do not wing it. In the instance of a crisis situation, it is wise to have a standard holding statement such as, "I want to help you with your story, but I need to gather more facts before I can answer any questions. I know we all want to get the story right, so I will contact you within the hour to give you an update." Then, be sure to follow through.

- **Be Accessible.** Reporters generally want access to elected officials instead of their spokespersons. Reporters not only want it, they need it to do their job. The quickest way to tick off a reporter is put up barriers.
- **Be Friendly.** The golden rule applies. Treat the media as one would like to be treated. Get to know the reporters that are covering local issues. The goal is not to be best friends with reporters, but to have a friendly relationship.
- **Be Real.** Authenticity matters to both reporters and constituents. The goal is to sound knowledgeable, use plain language, and be sincere. If more information is needed to respond, make the reporter aware and follow-up promptly.
- **Be Concise.** Reporters want and need good quotes. To be quoted (and not misquoted), keep statements (both written and spoken) short, relevant and interesting. Do not use jargon, acronyms or wonky terms. A written quote should be one or two short sentences. Radio and television will edit down a statement to sound bites that are only three to seven seconds long, on average. Avoid the temptation to talk too much. Don't speculate or speak in hypotheticals; stick to the facts.
- **Be Courteous.** Sometimes one may not have much knowledge or interest in a topic to provide what a reporter needs. In this case, say, "Thank you for thinking of me for your story, I don't think I am the best source for your topic." If possible, try to suggest another contact.
- **Be Proactive.** Sometimes it is appropriate to reach out to reporters if there is a story that needs to be covered. Do not hesitate to suggest stories or offer responses to newsworthy events before being asked.
- **Be Accurate.** Double-check and even triple-check any facts and figures used in interviews. Once inaccurate information is distributed, it's hard to pull it back. The risk is that accidental inaccuracy will be mistaken for dishonesty. Let the reporter know one needs to look up information and get back to them before the deadline.
- **Be Careful.** Assume that everything is "on the record" and will be attributed. Don't say anything that shouldn't be included in a news story. Never go "off the record." A reporter can get confused when reading back over his/her notes over what was "off the record" or they may just decide it's too good to pass up, and betray your trust. If one cannot say it on the record, do not say it.

"Our most tragic error may have been our inability to establish rapport and a confidence with the press.."

- Lyndon B. Johnson

- **Be Aware.** Be careful not to let a reporter put words in your mouth. Reporters may ask questions in a certain way, leading an official to repeat what he or she said. Any part of a response may be used in a story; be aware of tactics and say what is best for the issue at hand, not what the reporter is looking for. Be careful not to fill in long pauses by the reporter; stick to the question and answer concisely.
- **Be Cool.** Temperament is important in an interview. Staying calm and avoid expressing anger and/or frustration.
- **Be Honest.** Honesty is critical to both the media's and public's perceptions of local officials' integrity and trustworthiness. Avoid responding with "no comment" as it sounds as though there is something to hide.
- **Be Mindful.** Consider the interview environment in determining time, location and topic. If it is at home or office, take into account what you leave on your desk and walls.

What Makes News

The basic components of every news story are: who, what, when, where, why and how. But what makes something worthy of news coverage goes far beyond these basics. The following ten elements determine newsworthiness:

- **Controversy/Conflict.** Controversy is the #1 element that creates news. Conflict is in ample supply at the local level. Championing a worthy cause or resolving a difficult conflict is likely to be newsworthy.
- **Timing/Relevance.** News is new information. It can also be something that is happening right now or that has just occurred. News must be fresh and current to be relevant. Elected officials are wise to stay on top of what issues local media are covering, should they be asked to comment on the developments of the day.
- **Notoriety/Celebrity.** The better known the person, business or organization, the more newsworthy the story. Local officials are newsworthy because of their positions as decision-makers. Reporters closely watch what decision-makers say and do and what they have said and done.
- **Impact/Consequence.** Consequence is how the information contained in the release impacts viewers, listeners and readers. The more people affected, the more likely something will get news coverage.

- **Nearness/Proximity.** The closer the event is to the news audience, the more news value it has. Although state and national news gets covered in local media markets, the majority of coverage is on news close to home. Reporters sometimes want a local perspective on a state or national issue.
- **Change/Gridlock.** Change, the potential for change and, sometimes, a lack of change is newsworthy.
- **Action/Drama.** Doing something is more newsworthy than having an opinion about it. The more dramatic the action, the greater the news value. This is particularly true for television, which needs more than a talking head to create a story visually.
- **Tangible/Understandable.** The abstract has less news value than the concrete. Take the time to work with agency staff to make agency facts and figures understandable and relatable to the public.
- **Emotion/Human Interest.** A story about people that generates any type of emotional response – inspiration, awe, happiness, sadness, anger, and so on – has an element of human interest. People like to hear about other people’s triumphs and failures. That is why tabloids and daytime TV shows are so popular.
- **Rare/Unique.** A highly unusual, rare or unique situation has high news value as John B. Bogart famously observed “A dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news.”

Conclusion

Building and maintaining relationships with media is an important aspect of public service. Elected officials face a variety of challenges along the road of public service. In all occasions, having an effective relationship with media can serve an official and an agency well in efforts to distribute accurate and genuine public information. How an elected official relates to the media and reporters covering an agency will have a direct impact on the type of coverage that occurs.

As a newly elected official, learn the role and needs of media and reporters, as well as the demands of public office. If done authentically, the relationship between reporter and elected official will likely strengthen. When reporters have greater accessibility and confidence in the elected official and the public agency providing information, a mutually beneficial relationship develops and the public is better informed.

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ABOUT ILG

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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