



## Professional journalists are not out to 'get' you

■ Friend or foe? Ally or enemy? They may help you or hurt you. Who is it? The media. You, however, have the ability to make an impact and possibly even direct the final outcome of a media encounter.

First, who is the media? A few years ago, they were as easy to spot as plantain in Kentucky bluegrass. If it were a broadcast (television) journalist, usually two people showed up, one lugging a big, heavy camera on his shoulder and the other a well-dressed man or woman carrying a microphone. Or a print journalist might be carrying a 35mm camera, a tape recorder and a notepad. They might even have had a press card if they were with the local newspaper or a staff writer for a national magazine. No more.

Over the past 10 to 15 years with the growth of computers and hand-held video cameras and the popularity of journalism as a profession, the media can now be almost anyone—including a student on the local school or university newspaper.

What's the big deal about that? Student journalists—or any journalist for that matter—can be persistent in their search for a "big" story. They want that byline even though it might mean sneaking up on you to find the next Super Fund site on your property.

But most professional journalists are not out to get you. This insight may be helpful to you the next time you are called for an interview or a camera crew or writer shows up at your office or job site.

While environmental concerns may not seem to be first on reporters' lists at the moment, what with health care reform and

the problems in eastern Europe, they are not far from being brought back to the front burner.

So is it best to stall, hide or deal with the media in a straightforward manner? Here are some suggestions:

**1) Develop a plan.** Presume that at some point you are going to be interviewed by a reporter. A television reporter, of course, has the capacity to do you the most immediate harm or show you in the best light. Chances are very good that only 30 seconds of what you say—a "sound bite"—is going to be used.

Assistants and other employees should be included in the plan. Rather than letting one of them be interviewed—unless you have an articulate and knowledgeable staff member and have already worked with the person on possible interview scenarios—it would be better to stress that they direct the media to you.

Remember, journalists are trained to ask probing questions and do not like taking no for an answer. But many of them are impartial and will work with you if at all possible.

What happens in an "ambush" situation? Be courteous, but tell the reporter that you are busy and ask them to come back at an agreed-upon time. If possible, find out what direction the interview will take; if not, be wary of granting the interview. You might also ask for time to collect your thoughts rather than getting antagonistic with someone who may be looking for a negative response.

**2) Keep a file of the positive things you are doing.** Then all you have to do is use the information as a guide. This does not have to be elaborate: just hand-written notes on scraps of paper, reminders of successful projects or new things the company has done.

**3) Admit you don't know the answer.** What if you are asked a question you don't have an answer to? Say so. If you can suggest someone else for the reporter to talk to (for example, an 800 customer service telephone number), be helpful.

Many times, an initial request from the media is for background. The journalist might just need help getting information, and chances are that you won't be quoted.

**4) Go off-the-record.** During an interview, if there is something you want to tell the reporter, but do not want included in any articles, ask the reporter to turn off the video camera or tape recorder. Usually, your request is respected.

**5) Be yourself.** An interview with the media can be positive. Be helpful if you can. The time you take with the journalist may turn into some great free advertising.

—The author, John Calsin, is a freelance writer with headquarters in West Chester, Pa.

# and the media

## DOS AND DON'TS

### DO:

- ...be pleasant
- ...say you're busy, if you are
- ...control the circumstances
- ...ask for questions in advance
- ...say you don't know, if you don't
- ...keep a folder of positive things

### DON'T:

- ...be antagonistic
- ...abruptly leave
- ...be afraid to talk
- ...make threats
- ...be argumentative

—J.C.

## Good public relations like 'fire prevention'

by Greg Petry  
and Renae Waier

■ Effective media relations involves consistent communication with the media that provides accurate information on your agency or programs, presented in a straightforward, professional and timely manner. Public relations is different than general journalism. You're practicing "fire prevention" rather than "fire fighting." Your concerns and the issues on which you focus should contribute to the overall goals and objectives of the organization. You should try to be proactive, generating information on the organization's health, rather than only reactive, responding to unfavorable reports—in effect applying a bandage to the wounds.

Your job, as a media contact for your organization, is to get information reported factually. You may be the initial contact who directs media personnel to the proper, pre-designated spokesperson for a specific story, or you may be that source. The spokesperson must be well versed on all aspects of the issue, the event, the organization—or have access to that information. Remember, reporters prefer to speak to the people in charge.

You and the news media form a team. You need them as a con-

duit to deliver information to those you wish to receive it. They need you as a source of supply for the information they wish (or need) to deliver. Properly handled, it's a win/win situation.

In general, media personnel do their best to get across the most factual information they have. It's a difficult job, and those who pursue it honestly and faithfully deserve our respect. If you provide these individuals with factual information they will report it the way they hear it.

News media outlets are business entities; they must make money to survive. They must supply what people want to read or what people want to see and hear in order to generate the income to stay in business. Within that framework, they provide the service of delivering information to their audiences.

Know what is news, what is "unpaid" advertising and what is "fluff." News merits attention. "Unpaid" advertising and fluff generally will receive the lowest priority. News items will have two or more of the following attributes: be of interest, be important, be timely, have the potential of making an impact on the audience.

News reports need to deliver essential information: who, what, when, where, why and how. Address these issues quickly, in the first two paragraphs of printed stories or in the first minutes of delivery of verbal information.

There are a few basics to grab the attention of most people: themselves, their safety, their money, their children, their fun, their daily routine, their beliefs, and other people.

For the media, determining what makes news is a balancing act that takes into account the interests of the audience and the interests of the business. The stories delivered in print or on the air are those which address the concerns of the largest portion of the audience it is hoped will consume it. If the "product" addresses audience concerns, they won't change the channel or put down the paper.

Get to know your media contacts: the reporters assigned to cover your "beat," or general area of news; the editors who work with those stories; and the on-air news anchors who present broadcast news to the audience. Meet these people. Let them know who you are and what you do for your organization. Leave your business card for their files. Then stay in frequent contact to keep the lines of communication open.

It's up to you to find out how these individuals think, what their attitude is about your general area of expertise (such as parks, recreation, athletic facilities, or turf and lawn care services). The media outlet may have an "official" position, which may or may not agree with the attitude of those you will directly deal with. Theoretically, this attitude should not matter; news should be delivered in a straightforward, factual manner. But people are human; organizational and personal attitudes do "slip into" news reporting. If you know the attitudes of the media outlet and what type of information they feel impacts the

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concerns of their target audience, you can do a better job of delivering factual information in a form likely to attract attention and be used.

Find out the deadlines of each media outlet for the different types of information you may be providing. For example, coming events may need to be submitted one or two weeks prior to their occurrence; appointments or awards immediately following their presentation, or perhaps up to a week prior to the event so that on-site coverage can be arranged.

Then find out what format each media outlet prefers for receiving information. Written press releases may be issued by mail or by fax. Verbal information may be relayed by phone, in a personal visit or by pre-arranged interview. Black-and-white or color photos may be preferred to color slides or transparencies.

Be realistic in your expectations when presenting information to the media. Though an event may be a major part of your agenda, it may merit only a brief mention in the overall news of the day.

Ask for coverage; ask nicely; ask often. But don't be a pest, a complainer or one who cries wolf. Most media are flooded with information daily. Your item must not only stand out to grab the attention of media personnel, but must be ranked by them for its importance within the deluge of information received.

Be prepared for attention from the news media when problems occur; you are the established information source. Unfortunately, "if it bleeds, it leads," is a concept often followed by both print and

broadcast media. Don't try to avoid media contact at these times. Supply pertinent, factual, accurate information, including any positive aspects of your organization's role in the problem. Anticipate questions and be prepared with well thought-out answers. Monitor the situation and the media's reaction to it. Expect fair and factual reporting. Seek corrections of any inaccurate reporting.

Take advantage of slow news times. Become a source of information to fill in the blank spaces during weekends, post-holiday days, summer months, winter months, school vacation breaks or whenever local media are actively seeking stories. This may be your best opportunity to get across positive "feel-good" information, as long as it is newsworthy.

Keep track of news that is used. Clip newspaper articles. Record radio and television news broadcasts. Compare this coverage to the information you submitted. Note which information is, and is not, used in these media reports; which information isn't covered at all.

Follow up with your media contacts. Was the information in the right form? Was it on time? Do they need more details, or fewer? Refine your own information-gathering and dispersal process to give them what they want and need.

You and the media can make a winning team. But, as with all team efforts, it does take work.

—Greg Petry is superintendent of parks for the Waukegan (Ill.) Park District and president of the national Sports Turf Managers Association. Renae Waier is marketing and community relations coordinator for the Waukegan Park District.

## **BANG THE DRUM SLOWLY...**

■ When an interview with a journalist starts, you should first remember to speak slo-o-o-owly, according to Karen Cronin and Paul Lancaster of Virginia Tech. "The print media reporter will be writing furiously as you speak and will probably not know shorthand," they say. "You want to make sure you are quoted accurately, and speaking slowly may also help you stay calm."

If you are being interviewed by a television or radio reporter, you should also remember to speak very slowly, but somewhat energetically. You'll be surprised how natural it sounds when you hear it.

The pair also suggests "no hostile answers for hostile quotes" and these tips about your gestures, facial expressions and posture when appearing on television:

- Sit straight, lean slightly toward your host.
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer, not the camera.
- Don't shift eyes from point to point.
- Smile, unless you're discussing a very serious topic.
- Gesture frequently, using natural hand movements, but avoid hitting the microphone.
- Remove everything from your pockets, just in case.
- Don't swivel, rock or shift position in your chair, if sitting. If standing, don't shift weight from foot to foot or rock forward and back.
- Be cautious about nodding to indicate understanding of the question; it may signal agreement with a point you don't hold.
- Let your enthusiasm about your topic show on your face.
- Keep your head up, breathe deeply and demonstrate controlled energy in your demeanor.