

## Working With the Media

The news media has traditionally been the watchdog of government. It's important to remember that the media reports news. While the public does have a right to know an official's opinion, you may find that the local media will often pass over routine matters in favor of reporting conflicts and controversies that make headlines. However, a little effort spent on developing a good relationship with a reporter can have important benefits for the public official. You will most likely be fairly treated and the constituents will be well informed.

The relationship between a public official and a reporter may be based on stereotypes. The public official may assume that the reporter is ruthless and exploitative, and the reporter may assume that the official is distorting information to his/her advantage. Occasionally, erroneous assumptions are often so deeply ingrained that there is little chance for a good relationship. One solution for many public officials is to just refuse to speak to the media. There are several problems with that solution. First, it eliminates one of the best opportunities for communication between public officials and their constituents. If officials do not comment, their constituents will not know what their positions are. Second, a refusal to comment may suggest that a public official has something to hide. And finally, when a story is damaging or inaccurate, public officials who do not comment lose the opportunity to correct the story.

**Releasing Damaging or Sensitive Information.** There are times that despite the best management and the best intentions, problems arise. Many public officials find it difficult to release damaging information. It is, however, the one sure way to put the facts before the public. If a damaging story is bound to find its way to print, the public officials involved should participate in the first release of the story. This will insure that the news is accurate, even if it is not positive. Otherwise, officials will find themselves defending their actions in a follow-up story. The defensive posture may suggest that there is a cover-up, especially if the first story includes a refusal to comment. Public officials who come forward to discuss bad news, no matter how distasteful the task, retain credibility not only with the news media but with their constituency as well.

There are times when a public official cannot or should not release information to the news media. Labor negotiations, personnel matters, and cases in litigation are examples of sensitive news that, if released, may compromise confidentiality. Officials should be familiar with

Maryland's public information laws and know what constitutes public information. While public officials are under constraints not to disclose certain kinds of information, they should never misrepresent the facts. Misrepresenting public information is both unethical and illegal. An honest explanation about why a sensitive issue cannot be discussed will help build credibility.

When a sensitive or damaging situation develops, it would be wise for the governing body to consult with the municipal attorney and then plan a strategy that will get as much information as possible to the news media and the public.

**Correcting Inaccurate Reports.** After the news story has been published, the public official should continue to communicate with the reporter. If the reporter has written the story fairly and accurately, it is important to let the reporter know that. On the other hand, an official should correct an inaccurate or distorted story as quickly as possible. A public official who has been treated unfairly by a reporter has a right to complain. The official should direct the criticism to the author of the story in a timely manner so that the reporter can make the necessary changes for a later edition or broadcast. Even if the media does not release a corrected version of the story, the corrections will be on file so that inaccuracies are not perpetuated in future stories. If a public official finds that it becomes impossible to effectively communicate with a reporter, then the official can ask the editor or the news manager to mediate.

Unless there are gross inaccuracies that are likely to be highly damaging, a retraction or formal correction is not advisable. A retraction rarely gets the same attention as the original story. News editors are also hesitant to make retractions or corrections unless it can be clearly demonstrated that the story misrepresented the facts.

**Releasing News to the Public.** A lot of information about municipal services and programs and general municipal government involvement in the community is often overlooked when government leaves the job of reporting its activities to the news media. A way to remedy this situation is for the municipality to establish a publicity or public information function administered by a staff member or official who issues news releases, requests news stories, and arranges interviews.

For the regular release of news, it is important to identify a single source to serve as the outlet. Using a single source avoids confusion and misinformation caused when a municipality gives several versions of the facts. An in-house policy concerning media relations will help to ensure that the municipality releases news in the best possible manner. The

purpose of a media policy is not to discourage communication between government and the media but to create appropriate channels for it. The policy should authorize certain staff members and officials to deal with the media. It should make clear that other staff are not authorized to deal directly with the media.

This approach would be particularly helpful when a damaging or sensitive situation develops. It could help eliminate a reporter making a story more sensational by deliberately looking for a division of opinion of the governing body.

### **Do's and Don'ts During Media Interviews**

#### **DO:**

- Look at every interview as a glorious opportunity. Ask 10 questions when accepting an interview:

1. Topic?
2. When?
3. Where?
4. Interviewer?
5. Why me?
6. How long?
7. Alone or panel?
8. Live or taped?
9. When on the air?
10. Source of inquiry?

- Watch or listen to show or read articles by reporter to become familiar with style and format.
- Be honest, sincere, non-defensive, proud.
- Be brief—get message across in 20 seconds or less.
- Be energetic, enthusiastic, and entertaining.
- Be Positive—get in your positive points using positive words.
- Gesture which adds vocal variety to your voice.
- Tell several stories, anecdotes or analogies using word pictures.
- Say you don't know if it's true BUT promise to get information for them.
- Maintain eye contact especially during the first and last few seconds of answer—always look at whoever is speaking.
- Be friendly—use interviewer's name once or twice.
- Talk conversationally and simply, like talking to your mother.
- Audiotape every interview.
- Use bridges to get to your positive points; e.g. The real issue is ... Let me add ... A common concern is ... I'm often asked...
- Sit forward to show authority and interest.
- Correct misinformation quickly and state positive points.
- Wear conservative, clean clothes; accept makeup if offered. Men wear a gray/navy suit/sport coat, light blue shirt, red or maroon tie
- Women wear deep red, purple, royal blue, winter white, or gray.
- Visualize a good interview and you will give one.
- SMILE!

**DON'T:**

- Volunteer or repeat negative or inaccurate information.
- Look at the camera or TV monitor.
- Say "No Comment," or anything you don't want to hear on the air or read in print.
- Go "Off the Record."
- Use jargon, acronyms, initials, technical terms or percents.
- Ever lie.
- Guess or speculate.
- Wear anything distracting—no white, red, black, yellow, green or brown; no chunky, noisy jewelry.

## Public Relations

**Communicating with Citizens.** There are a number of ways to communicate information to citizens depending on the size of the government and the type of information in question.

*The Municipal Newsletter*—Many municipalities find that publishing their own newsletter is the best way to communicate with their citizens. Such newsletters can be as simple as a one page photocopied insert with the quarterly water and sewer billing, or a larger newsletter that is typeset, professionally printed, and mailed separately to every household in the city/town. The use of computers/internet in municipal government administration also opens up other possibilities in publishing newsletters.

*Cable Television*—Many cities and towns have their own cable television stations while others can communicate to their citizens through the Local Community Access Channel of the cable television provider in their area.

*The Local Media*—As an alternative to sending out a news release, a city/town could contribute a weekly column or write a guest editorial on a specific issue of importance to its citizens.