

Tips and Pointers for Working with the Media

- **Alia Rau, Tempe/Ahwatukee Editor, *The Arizona Republic*, Phoenix, AZ**
- **Shelley Hearn, Community Relations Manager, City of Tempe, AZ**
- **Steven Adelman, Esq., Attorney, Renaud Cook Drury Mesaros, Phoenix, AZ**

Building a relationship

- Learn about the media in your area. Every newspaper/TV station/radio station/magazine has different deadlines, different ways they want information submitted and different organizational structures.
- Get to know the reporters with whom you will be working directly. Get to know their direct editors, too. A solid foundation of mutual respect is much easier to establish before a crisis than during one.

Pitching ideas

- Most reporters don't mind you pitching story ideas to them - even positive stories. Keep the pitch brief, focus on the most interesting/newsworthy aspect of the idea and don't be pushy. You can always provide more information later if the reporter is interested.
- Make sure any press release you submit is brief, focused and accurately includes the vital details of who, what, when (date and time), where (including the address of the location), why and a name and contact number for more information.
- Double, triple and quadruple check your facts before submitting a release. There is nothing worse to a reporter than having to publish a correction because it was incorrectly submitted by a source. Inaccurate sources aren't sources for long.
- Keep deadlines in mind when you're submitting information. Some sections, especially feature sections, have firm deadlines that can be days or even weeks before publication.

Getting a story

- Editors/commentators have the final say on copy. Don't ask to review the final story or script before it runs; the answer will be no. However, if you're concerned that the reporter may not have understood a complicated issue or may have misquoted you, feel free to ask the reporter to read your quotes or the vital facts back to you in advance. Some reporters will be more willing to do this than others.
- Don't expect a reporter to be able to promise when, where or even if your material will be used. It often depends on other news happening, available space that day and other circumstances beyond their control.
- Often the reason for a newspaper not covering something is that they simply don't have the staff to do it all. Find out how your media contacts feel about you submitting a column, story or photos from an event for publication consideration.

Conducting interviews

- If you don't know the answer to a reporter's question, don't make it up, don't give a vague answer and don't ignore the question. Tell them you don't know and will either find out the answer or will refer them to someone who can provide an answer.
- Most reporters would much rather quote the person directly involved in an issue than an agency's flak – it almost always makes for a more accurate, interesting story. Whenever possible, arrange for them to talk to the expert instead of passing the information through a spokesperson.

- When talking to reporters about a story, remember the three key components they are most likely the most interested in: What's the news? What's the impact to the community/reader/viewer? What's the context surrounding this issue?
- Avoid industry jargon at all costs.
- Be familiar with your state's public record laws before telling a reporter what they can and cannot have. A little advance education will be much cheaper than your lawyer.
- Before asking a reporter to go "off the record" or "on background," make sure you and the reporter agree on what exactly that means and when it's happening. Many people have different interpretations of those phrases.
- Don't hide when there's bad news. "No comments" and "did not return repeated phone calls" never make anybody look good. The harder you try to hide or avoid information, the bigger an issue the reporter will likely make of it.
- You have the right to expect to be quoted accurately and every reporter should be held to that standard. If you are ever inaccurately quoted, the reporter isn't doing his or her job and you should address it with them and, if necessary, with their editor.
- Sometimes reporters get it wrong. But a good reporter will admit to a mistake and should be quick to correct it. If not, talk to his/her editor. Media needs to be held to a standard of accuracy and you shouldn't feel bad about insisting on that.

Message points and handling tough questions

- Know your message. Use message points to tell your story and refer back to them.
- Be sure you have all supportive information.
- Think, in advance, about the potential hard questions and be prepared to respond.
- Speak with authority, enthusiasm and concern where appropriate.

If there is a spokesperson, who should that be?

- One consistent person or the expert on the subject.
- The spokesperson should be prepared to address all questions on the subject.

Interviewing on camera

- Dress professionally. You are the image of your organization.
- Maintain direct eye contact.
- Be aware of your posture. Sit/stand up straight.
- Don't cross your arms. Use your hands for gesturing or keep them in front of you.
- Keep to the subject and refer to your message points.

Panelist contact information:

Steven A. Adelman, Esq.
sadelman@rcdmlaw.com

Shelley Hearn
shelley_hearn@tempe.gov

Alia Rau
alia.rau@arizonarepublic.com