

APPENDIX 6

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

Hollidae M. Robinson

To be or not to be involved with the news media is not a choice that is open to local government officials. The role the media play in the democratic process necessitates a relationship between media and local government representatives. The quality of the relationship is often determined by the level of local government officials' respect for the role of the media in a democracy and their willingness to be active partners in the relationship.

The most important goal of a media-relations program is to develop a two-way relationship between the government and the media in which government plays an active role instead of simply responding to inquiries. Taking an active stance is important if local government is to function effectively in encouraging communication and the sharing of information on all sides of important community issues.

An active stance is even more crucial to local government's efforts to disseminate factual, objective information about public services, special events, public hearings, voter registration, and the many other matters of which governments would like their citizens to be informed.

The purpose of this chapter is to help local officials in their efforts to develop and maintain an effective media-relations program. This chapter covers the following subjects:

- ▶ Developing a media-relations program;
- ▶ Building a working relationship with media contacts;
- ▶ Basic tools in media relations;
- ▶ Effective news releases;
- ▶ News conferences and briefings;
- ▶ The interview;

Author's Note: This chapter is primarily a compilation of information taken from the following two guides: *Dealing Effectively With the Media – What Local Government Officials Need to Know About Print, Radio and Television Interviews*, a Local Officials' Guide from the National League of Cities (NLC) and *Effective Communication – A Local Government Guide* from the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). All rights and permissions were granted for use of the material in this manner.

- ▶ Dealing with “problem” journalists;
- ▶ A primer in communications law, and
- ▶ Public information training.

DEVELOPING A MEDIA-RELATIONS PROGRAM

The successful practice of media relations by local government is based on several basic principles:

1. Knowing the news media in general and the characteristics and needs of the local media in particular;
2. Being willing and able to understand the journalist’s viewpoint;
3. Building credibility through honesty, consistency, and availability;
4. Respecting the agenda of the media, even though it is often at variance with that of local government; and
5. Dedicating sufficient staff time to plan and implement campaigns, develop and distribute information, and make media contacts.

The planning and organization of a media-relations program should follow essentially the same process used in developing other local government programs. The first task is to set realistic goals and objectives, considering the particular needs of the local government and the community as a whole, and establishing priorities within the constraints of staff time and funds.

An important initial consideration, particularly for small local governments, is deciding who will be responsible for developing and implementing the media-relations program.

The important thing is to assign someone primary responsibility for media relations. Doing that will give reporters, editors, and news directors a source to call on when they want authoritative information from the local government. It will also give the local government a measure of control over its image in the community.

The long-term goals of the public information program, which includes media relations, should include the following:

- ▶ Developing and maintaining an informed citizenry that participates in the local government’s decision-making process and uses city or county services effectively;
- ▶ Ensuring that local government services meet the needs of the various components of the community;

- ▶ Ensuring that citizens are aware of the depth and breadth of services of local government and the qualifications and dedication of the people providing those services, and
- ▶ Fostering a sense of community among local citizens.

An effective relationship with the news media can contribute to the fulfillment of the above long-term goals. In the short term, you need to develop media plans that deal with specific issues or promote individual, services, or facilities.

BUILDING A WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDIA CONTACTS

To function effectively in the dual roles of being (1) a news source and (2) an aggressive promoter of the local government's services and activities, staff members who work with the media must develop and maintain credibility. The basis of credibility is honesty. Reporters and editors value consistency and reliability above all other qualities. They respect the news source who admits it when he doesn't have the answer to a question and then comes back as soon as possible with the requested information, or puts the reporter in contact with someone who can help. Once stung by a source who "wings it" or, even worse, intentionally misleads them, reporters are wary of future contact.

Professionalism is also important in developing credibility. Reporters expect their sources to be familiar with format requirements, deadlines, and the organization of various media, and to share the information with others in the local government who work with the media. One newspaper reporter, for example, says she often receives criticism for a headline or for the placement of her articles from government officials who apparently do not realize that she has no control over those factors.

Besides understanding the general requirements of the various news media, you must also become familiar with the local media. What are the deadlines for the various editions of newspapers, for radio and television broadcasts, for regional magazines? What are the requirements of different radio and television stations for public service announcements? What is the least hectic time to call a television news assignment editor to ask for some discussion of a local issue or to talk about an event?

To be successful in media relations, staff members must read local daily and weekly newspapers, noting bylines and issues currently being covered; watch the news and become familiar with interview, talk, and public affairs programs on local TV; and keep up to date on the format, public service policies, and interview and talk programming of local radio stations. This kind of close observation of the local media yields several types of information:

- ▶ Reporter's current beat assignments;
- ▶ Issues and trends already being covered;
- ▶ The ages and interests of the audiences of certain media outlets;

- ▶ The frequency with which specific radio stations use public service announcements, the time of day they are aired, and their typical format and wording, and
- ▶ The existence of local interview, talk, and public affairs programs on radio and television that offer opportunities for coverage.

The Human Factor in the Equation

Local government officials need to get to know key people in the print and broadcast media – reporters, managing editors, editorial writers, news managers, wire-service staff, and even camera crews. Keeping information on contacts current is a time-consuming and continuous process because of the news media’s tendency to make frequent changes in format and personnel; however, it will bring rewards. By cultivating relationships with journalists, you are likelier to be rewarded with fair, substantive coverage of issues important to your local government.

Local government staff members who work with the news media should also be sensitive to the constant space-constraint problem facing newspaper editors and the time limits of the broadcast media. Failure to use a news release or to cover an event should not be regarded as a personal put-down. Sharing information about media constraints with other local government employees – such as the fact that a local television station has only one crew on weekends and is thus limited in the number of events that it can cover – helps prevent misunderstandings and enhance cooperation.

It has been said that “good media relationships can be best achieved by the practice of a few basic principles: (1) shoot squarely, (2) give service, (3) don’t beg or carp, (4) don’t ask for kills, (5) don’t flood the media, and (6) keep updated lists.”¹

Here are several other helpful suggestions that elaborate on these basic principles:

Always be honest. Mark Twain said we should always tell the truth, because it will please half the people and astonish the other half. This doesn’t mean that you have to tell media representatives everything you know – only that everything you tell them should be true. Deliberate attempts to mislead the news media will almost always backfire.

Don’t play favorites. It is always tempting to give preferential treatment to one reporter or editor over another, especially if that person seems more sympathetic. Over time, this approach generates resentment among others in the media.

¹ Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center, and Glen M. Broom, *Effective Public Relations*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 431.

Be consistent, no matter when the news is good or bad. It's a bad idea to court the media when times are good and then hide when things go wrong. Remember your public role. You are representing your municipality and not yourself. Don't use media relations as a means of self-promotion.

Be available. The media contact for the municipality (whether it is the city clerk, a deputy clerk, the director of communication, or the public information officer) should be available around the clock. The media should know who this person is and have phone numbers for his office, home, car, and beeper. The contact should take all calls from the media or return calls as soon as possible. In cases of emergency, the contact – or someone else temporarily designated as the media contact – should be available at the scene of the emergency or in an easily accessible center.

Develop two-way relationships. Getting to know the people in the media during times when there are no deadlines or crises builds rapport. Go to lunch with an editor, or set aside some time to talk with reporters in a relaxed setting to explain a complicated issue that soon will be in the news. Get to know them and their interests, and let them get to know you.

Be sincere in your approach. Make sure the relationships are genuine. As with anything in life, trying to develop phony friendships is just a way of trying to manipulate a situation, and it will sooner or later backfire. It's a good idea to give media representatives candid feedback about their news and feature reports, being as specific as possible about the good points and the weak points of their reports.

Be positive in your attitude. Don't complain about every story in the newspaper and on television. Tell the media representatives when they do things right as well as when they do things wrong.

BASIC TOOLS IN MEDIA RELATIONS

Staff limitations may prevent some municipalities from assigning even one person to handle media relations full time. This limitation does not, however, prevent such governments from being accessible to the media. Local governments can use several methods – with little impact on either resources or staff time – to assist the news media in covering the city beat.

Media representatives point to a calendar of city events as the most basic piece of information they need. A calendar is useful because it alerts editors and reporters to the times, places, and dates of public hearings, board and commission meetings, voter-registration deadlines, and other public activities.

Although calendars are less informative than news releases or public service announcements on individual events, they do have several advantages. They can be assembled quickly and easily, and they provide a lot of information. Also, the news media can be directed to the appropriate point of contact for each event in case they need further information.

Another service that the media regard as basic is being mailed an agenda several days in advance

of each council or board meeting. Editors and reporters review agendas to decide whether they should cover a meeting. Often the agendas alert them to issues and legislation likely to merit future coverage.

Sending out background material on agenda items several days before meetings is helpful to reporters who cover local government. This service gives reporters time to review materials in advance so that they can follow discussions of the issues more easily and gather supporting information they need for their stories, which are often written to meet tight deadlines. Generally it is to the advantage of local government to provide as much information as possible to reporters. The direct result is that local residents will receive more accurate and substantive news accounts.

To add depth to their stories, the media need access to the municipality's elected officials and to top-level staff from whom they can obtain more information and statements. Reporters also need direct quotations from key officials – a feature as important to the vitality of a news story as dialogue is to a novel.

Elected officials and staff should make every effort to speak to reporters when they call or else to return their telephone calls promptly. A return call after the deadline for a newspaper or a news broadcast has passed is worthless. Failure to return calls promptly is the most frequent complaint among reporters about local government officials. Could these officials be the same ones who continually complain that the media never tell the government's side of the story?

Regardless of size, nearly all municipalities face some hard work persuading editors and reporters to cover softer issues, to do stories on routine government programs and services, or to be interested in the noncontroversial items or “product publicity.”

Besides becoming familiar with the general demands of the various media, learning particular requirements of the local media, and developing personal contacts, there are specific techniques that are helpful in working with editors and reporters in the various news media. Although local methods may vary, the following suggestions will be generally helpful:

Learn what news is, from the media's point of view. Many local government officials give in to the temptation to define news as what they would like to see printed or aired – a sure way to invite conflicts with editors and reporters. Many definitions of news have been offered, but most incorporate the ideas proposed by pioneer journalism educator William Bleyer: “anything timely that interests a number of persons, and the best news is that which has the greatest interest for the greatest number.”

Tie news stories to today's interests. To do this well, you must stay informed on current issues, social trends, and social change on both the local and the national levels.

Look for a human interest or an unusual angle. Such material is interesting to people simply for its own sake, regardless of its effect on them. Stories appealing to the emotions or exhibiting irony or coincidence have human interest. The cliché that children, old people, and animals are winners for coverage still holds true.

Place news of important decisions made at evening council meetings on the local wire service or fax it to appropriate media that night, when it may be difficult to reach reporters. This diligence can bring coverage on late evening radio and television news broadcasts, on high leadership drive time radio news programs, and in morning newspapers. Follow up the next morning with individual calls to the principal broadcast and print media to provide additional information.

Give reporters copies of complex documents such as budgets, with accompanying news releases, as far in advance as possible. That will allow time for reporters to digest the materials and for visuals to be filmed for television. It is possible to give reporters information with a release date in the future, as long as they agree to the release date in advance. Make sure they clear this arrangement with their editors.

Follow up on major releases. Reporters and editors urge local government communicators to make follow-up telephone calls after mailing news releases, because of the vast amount of mail received by the media. Follow-up differs from nagging in duration, frequency, and level of insistence.

Keep media lists up to date. If at all possible, address releases by name to reporters, critics, editors, or news directors. If you don't know the name of the person to whom to send, it is preferable to address public service announcements to titles like "Public Service Director," and send calendar notices to "Calendar Editor," etc., rather than persist in sending information to staff members long gone to other jobs.

Send releases only to appropriate media. In addition to categorizing media mailing lists by editorial position, organize lists around such topics as performing arts, sports, business, and real estate, so that the appropriate media receive only releases of interest to them. Sending releases about the symphony to business editors or information about recreation programs to real-estate editors projects an unprofessional image. Worse, recipients of irrelevant releases soon will toss away all unopened relevant mailings from that source.

Don't take the first no as the final answer. Rejection of a story suggestion by a reporter does not preclude contacting the lifestyle editor of the same newspaper; nor should a turndown by a broadcast reporter mean that the news director cannot be called.

Schedule requests for coverage to correspond to slow news periods. It is usually easier to get coverage in Saturday, Sunday, and Monday issues of daily newspapers.

EFFECTIVE NEWS RELEASES

News releases will vary in form, depending on their intended purpose, information packages, and subject. But, in most situations, the traditional inverted-pyramid style will be the most appropriate form for releases to newspapers. The term inverted pyramid is a graphic description of the form of organization of the standard news story. The most important information is placed in the first few paragraphs (at the apex of the pyramid), with following information in descending order of importance. The who, what, when, where, why, and how (the "five Ws and

the H”) of the story are explained in the first few sentences.

News releases that follow the formula provide some related advantages for local government officials. Reporters and editors need only a few paragraphs to obtain the gist of the release and to determine whether they will print it, cover the event described, or take any other action that the release elicits. If the release is used but must be cut, the makeup editor will probably cut information that the writer considered the least important.

Although some public relations textbooks recommend limiting news releases to a single page, for important stories more detailed information is both appropriate and appreciated. In some instances you should distribute a detailed release on a subject such as the budget, but soon afterward follow it with a brief version that provides only the highlights and some new information, such as dates for public hearings. Some newspapers may use both; others that will not devote space to a long budget story may use the shorter version.

Using Calendar Publicity

Calendar editors should also receive announcements about events. Such information should not necessitate a treasure hunt for the who, what, when, and where. A short paragraph or two, with a telephone number for additional information, is adequate.

The closer any release is in length, degree of detail, style, and format to that of the finished newspaper product, the better the chance that it will be used.

To provide a sense of identity, your municipality can develop a standard heading for preprinted news-release stationery, probably a variation on government letterhead. The news release stationery should provide space for the date of writing and the release date, which specifies when the release may be printed or aired; at least one, but preferably two contacts, with telephone numbers; and the address. Although many news release headings also include headlines, they are almost never used.

Developing Useful Fact Sheets

A handy complement to the news release, for journalists, is the fact sheet. Fact sheets can be used to summarize important information, giving the who-what-when-where-how in a simple format. A relative of the fact sheet is the question-and-answer (Q&A) format, in which key questions are anticipated and succinct answers provided. That information can be supplemented by other background information such as biographical data, brief histories, examples, and case histories.

All of these components – the news release, fact sheets, Q&A sheets, and background information – can be packaged in a news kit. Some local governments have preprinted news kit folders that can be used for many occasions. Others simply buy blank folders from stationery suppliers and then put a label on the outside when appropriate. News kit folders are especially useful when several sheets of information are to be given to each representative of the news media. They are also useful to the local government in packaging information to be retained by

reporters and editors for background.

NEWS CONFERENCES AND BRIEFINGS

Anyone who has been responsible for a news conference on a subject and briefings that the media did not find worth covering can attest to the embarrassment for everyone involved. In general, the fewer the news conferences the better. The general rule is that when you need to give the same information at the same time to everyone in the media, and when it is information that they want and need quickly, then a news conference is in order. When in doubt about calling a news conference, don't call one.

Local government officials may find it appropriate to call news conferences to announce important economic development proposals, to discuss labor/management disputes, to bring the media up to date during natural disasters or other crises, and to provide briefings on other timely and complex subjects.

The Types of News Conferences

A news briefing is a low-key alternative that can provide the advantage of offering additional information to the media without the fanfare of a news conference. Reporters can be given a news release and background material in advance and told that if they wish further information, a briefing may be held, depending on the response.

A similar approach is to distribute materials and tell the media that the mayor, city manager, or other spokesperson has cleared his calendar for a specific period and will be available to handle inquiries from the media concerning the topic. This sometimes is referred to in the journalists' trade as a "media availability."

Localities that reserve the full-fledged news conference for topics appropriate for such a buildup can be more confident that reporters will attend when conferences are scheduled.

Having determined that a topic warrants a news conference, local government staff members should plan carefully to ensure its success.

An agenda should be set, speakers selected, and time set aside to brief staff who will be involved in the conference. Likely questions should be determined, information gathered, and the local government's stance defined, if appropriate. In many instances it is wise to have a practice conference, with staff asking questions of the planned speakers. This type of exercise can be helpful when the city faces any controversial issue, whether or not a news conference is called. It helps clarify the government's position and can reveal any inconsistencies or gaps in the available information before policy statements and news releases are developed, reporters are faced in interviews, or inquiries from the public are fielded at hearings or forums.

Practical Preparation for News Conferences

When scheduling a news conference, consider deadlines for print and broadcast media. The specific restrictions on weekly newspapers should also be a consideration if their reporters are

the ones who cover local government most regularly.

Before making the final decision on the day and time for the conference, check into the possibility that other events already scheduled will compete with the conference for media coverage.

Phone representatives of appropriate media to inform them of the news conference. Even if written announcements are distributed by mail or fax, follow-up calls are a good idea, both to remind the media and to give local government an idea of who plans to attend.

Select a room for the conference that is appropriate for the number of reporters, photographers, and video crew members expected to attend. When in doubt, go small. It is much better to pull in some extra chairs if the turnout exceeds expectations than to provide a huge room for two or three reporters and a lone photographer.

Depending on the subject of the news conference, a news release may be supplemented with background material, photocopied documents, photographs, artist's renderings, and color slides or even videocassettes for television. The media packets should be given in advance to the speakers to allow time for review. The packets can also be sent to reporters unable to attend the conference.

If possible, provide something of greater visual interest at the conference than a row of people behind a table. Models, maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, and other props are important for both television coverage and newspaper photographs. In selecting props, remember that any copy should be easily readable, that small details will most likely be indiscernible, and that the fabrication should be of high quality. If television coverage is expected, provision should be made for cameras, lights, and microphones.

Allow some time after the conference when speakers will be available for taped interviews with radio reporters, videotaping for television, or mini-interviews with newspaper reporters who want to develop special angles that were not presented during the news conference.

THE INTERVIEW

If you thoroughly know your subject and if you have confidence because you have prepared and practiced for the most difficult of interviewers and questions, a media interview can actually be an enjoyable and satisfying experience. Even though you are dealing with a professional using that person's medium of communication, and most times are on their home turf, *you have some important and unquestionable advantages over the interviewer.*

First Contact

When a contact is first made with you or your office about the possibility of your participating in a scheduled media interview, be mindful of the following considerations:

- ▶ Don't be pushed or pressured into making a decision at that very moment unless, of course, you are familiar with the program or publication contacting you and already

know that you would like to participate. Buy yourself a bit of time to think about the offer, but be available BEFORE their deadline.

- ▶ Before replying, give yourself ample time to decide if you are the right person for the interview, if the program or publication is a good match for your message, and if your appearance at this time would be most advantageous to you and your community.
- ▶ Usually the person calling you doesn't expect an immediate answer unless that person is working on an urgent news story for that day's broadcast. A reporter may try to use a deadline to try to pressure you. If the story is truly urgent, but you don't have an answer, ask for the deadline time and make sure that you respond – however incomplete your response may be – by the deadline. But remember that you are not obligated to solve the reporter's problem if doing so might damage you, your message, or your city.
- ▶ Take the time to check out anyone who purports to be a reporter or journalist. Never do an interview over the telephone until you have verified the person's credentials. You can do this by calling the place where the person is employed.
- ▶ Avoid at all costs dismissing the media caller without the courtesy of an explanation. If you are able, help the person find another possible interviewee, perhaps a person with a similar viewpoint or someone better served to handle the particular interview subject.
- ▶ If the media person contacting you is seeking a comment from you to use as a quote on a topical issue, or if he wants a quick interview on a current sensitive matter, never respond "No comment." To be associated in any area of the news with the words "No comment," or "A city spokesperson refused to comment," is to be perceived by the public and the media as having something to hide that is very negative, not in the public interest, or downright dishonest. Publicity of this kind is exactly what any elected official or municipal employee doesn't need.

Before the interview, be aware of the following points:

- ▶ No matter how well the interviewer has done his homework, *you will always know infinitely more about your city and the issues.*
- ▶ You can think much faster than the interviewer can talk.
- ▶ It is virtually impossible for a straightforward, pleasant, and cooperative person who looks and/or sounds professional to make a negative impression on an audience.
- ▶ You know exactly what you want to get across in the interview. You know the full facts, the good news, the positive aspects of your community or cause.
- ▶ No reasonable question should come as a surprise. In fact, you should be able to think of many more questions specific to the subject than the interviewer's research could ever have developed.

- ▶ If an unreasonable question is asked of you, audience members or readers will normally recognize it and not expect you to dignify the question with an unblinking response. They will expect a reaction and an answer appropriate to the question.
- ▶ You have no obligation to keep an interview moving. That is the interviewer's responsibility. You don't have to keep talking once you've fully answered a question or made a point. "Dead air" on radio and TV broadcasts is not your concern and cannot make you look bad to the audience. (If appropriate, use a long pause to move on to another main point.)
- ▶ You are under no obligation to tell something that is damaging to you or to your community.
- ▶ You can make positive points to your advantage regardless of the pattern of questioning or the interviewer's lack of preparedness.
- ▶ One or two memorable comments by you can be of inestimable benefit to you. On television and radio, the audience will hear those comments. (Unfortunately, in a print article the readers may or may not read them, depending upon the writer's decisions.)
- ▶ On television and radio, if the interviewer interrupts often or doesn't allow you to answer fully, or is generally rude and obnoxious, the audience will recognize what's happening; and their sympathy will quickly go to you.
- ▶ By virtue of being interviewed, you develop instant credibility and importance. In fact, you are perceived as being much more important than the interviewer. You are needed by the media. Think of yourself in this way.

Production and Staff Personnel

Do your best in a sincere way to be pleasant to all the personnel with whom you come in contact. Production and staff people can be of great assistance to you on the day of the media event. They have the answers to practically all the questions you might ask, and they will be helpful in their own rushed way if treated in a pleasant, professional, non-demanding manner.

Be prepared to deal with a wide variety of types of all ages and levels of experience. And keep in mind that these people have some input as to whether or not you will be used again.

Interview Guidelines

- ▶ Never lie! Never say "No comment." Never go "off the record."
- ▶ Be yourself. Don't try to develop a different persona for media interviews. Don't attempt to become what you think you should be as a media guest. Rely on your own character, personality, and experiences.

- ▶ Stress the positive. Relate good news and helpful information as much as possible.
- ▶ Settle on what you think is a proper and comfortable way to address the interviewer. Opinions of experts vary on this matter. Some say use the interviewer's first name. Do what is most sincere and spontaneous for you, but don't get too friendly. Doing so will weaken your position with the audience. Certainly, friendly exchanges are appropriate for many topics on talk shows and for light, informational articles.
- ▶ Keep your message simple. Comments should be brief, to the point, and easily understood by the general public and the media people with whom you are dealing. If you do this, your words are more likely to be remembered and you'll have more time to make more points. Long, rambling answers and comments should be avoided.
- ▶ Don't use jargon. If you must use terms not generally known to everyone, briefly define or explain them.
- ▶ It's always better to say something important more than once than to say several unimportant things.
- ▶ Don't try to make too many complex points, especially in a television interview.
- ▶ Don't be afraid of not answering a question, but explain why you can't. Viewers, listeners, and readers don't expect anyone to know everything. If otherwise credible, you will many times gain added credibility by saying "I don't have the complete data at this time, but I'll get it for you tomorrow." Follow up on your promise. As long as it's obvious that you're not trying to be evasive, you become more believable in general by admitting there are things you don't know.
- ▶ Don't allow the interviewer to take up valuable time on matters that are unimportant or unrelated to your goals. Politely interrupt, if necessary, and bridge to your positive points.
- ▶ In general, the tougher the question, the shorter should be your answer and the calmer your demeanor.
- ▶ Never lose your temper, shout, or yell. Always remain calm and courteous. The more inflammatory the interviewer or fellow panel member, the cooler you should be. Remain firm in your comments and always in control.
- ▶ Don't volunteer negative information or opinions that may damage you.
- ▶ Immediately correct any statement that is inaccurate, especially if the statement weakens your position. This includes statements made by anyone – the interviewer, other guests, audience members, callers – even you. If you do make a meaningful error, admit it, apologize, quickly explain, and then go on.

- ▶ Don't let the interviewer misinterpret your statements. Politely interrupt and set the interviewer straight as to your meaning.
- ▶ Don't legitimize loaded or negative words by repeating them. In your response either point out the loaded words or change them so as to disarm them.
- ▶ Keep in mind that you don't have to use the words used by the interviewer. Paraphrase the interviewer's questions or comments in a positive way that will better suit your purpose.
- ▶ Don't let the interviewer interrupt often. If you raise your voice slightly, then continue, most radio and television personalities will back off. The exception is the host who is known for harassing guests. If you've done your homework, you'll know about this fact long before your appearance on the program.
- ▶ Once you have fully answered a question or made a point, stop talking. Don't be pushed into adding something that is unnecessary or that you don't want to add just because the interviewer remains silent. Inexperienced media guests are sometimes fooled by this technique to get you to reveal information beyond what you intend.
- ▶ Don't be sucked in by hypothetical or leading questions. Turn them aside with "I wouldn't want to speculate on that," or "I find that discussing hypothetical situations takes time and energy away from more important, real-life situations," or "That's really a leading question, and I find that a leading question often leads to a misleading answer," or "I don't have a crystal ball, but I do know that . . . ," and state a positive point.
- ▶ Provide evidence to support your points and claims. For example, don't say "We're concerned for the safety of your children," or "We are very ecologically conscious," unless you can describe actions by you and your city that illustrate such statements.
- ▶ Develop or locate anecdotes, analogies, quotes, and metaphors that illustrate and enliven the points you want to make. People love stories. Think up a slogan or easily remembered catch phrase that plants an idea in the minds of audience members or readers. You can't tell too many stories or give too many examples.
- ▶ Have a ready supply of visuals (photos, videotape, film clips, charts, illustrations) for television producers, audio tapes for radio producers, and high quality photos and other materials for print journalists and writers. Be sure to tell the television producers about them before the interview – by several days if possible – in case they want to use a special camera or special equipment on them, or put a phone number on the screen. None of this can be done at the last minute. The media people may or may not use your material, but it is best to have it available. TV, radio, and print editors and producers are always looking to add variety in a program or article.
- ▶ Let the viewers or listeners know if you're surprised on a program by material that is not

yours and that you didn't expect and had no opportunity to peruse before the program. Don't respond to it until you have read it. Promise to read it and respond to it, and do.

- ▶ Normally you should have no notes or papers with you during a television interview unless some very specific and complex information is to be discussed. Don't read prepared answers or statements except during press conferences.
- ▶ During any type of media interview, don't allow distractions to throw you. Crew conversations, background motion, and other extraneous noises are easy to disregard if you expect and anticipate them.
- ▶ When dealing with other guests or panel members during an interview, treat them with dignity and courtesy no matter how they behave. Be assertive, but not overbearing, in getting your share of the time allotted. Try not to interrupt or contribute to otherwise disruptive behavior. Politely but firmly get the time you need.
- ▶ It's good to show genuine emotion, but don't allow the emotion to take over. Laugh, show surprise, disappointment, even indignation, if doing so helps you accomplish your goals in the interview or shows a positive facet of your character. Just don't let an emotion cause a flood of words that will detract from your message or image.
- ▶ During an interview, repeat key points several times in slightly different words.
- ▶ Sometimes possessing a great deal of knowledge on a subject makes people forget to simplify. Always simplify all your comments and answers. Pretend that you are talking to a 13-year old.
- ▶ Try to have the last word in a television or radio interview. Don't allow the interviewer to end on a note negative to you and your interests.
- ▶ Sit still and in place at the end of a television interview until you are certain that you are off-the-air and that your microphone is off. Make no additional comments! The same audio rule applies to radio interviews.
- ▶ Being in control is important, but trying to be in control may cause you to tighten up. Control does not result from trying. A natural form of control results from the quiet confidence and calmness that you develop in knowing that you have thoroughly prepared and practiced.
- ▶ Never lie! Never speak "off the record." Never say "no comment." (These bear repeating.)

After the Interview

The first thing you should do after any interview is to thank the people involved. Most of the time, it's very easy to be motivated to do this. There will, however, be times that you will not

feel like thanking anyone. Nevertheless, thank everyone who is conveniently near and available. If there's time and it's appropriate, you can seek out those who have been particularly helpful.

Build up a supply of videotapes, audiotapes, articles, and pictures that demonstrate your best work, your style, your expertise in a certain area. When you feel you've done particularly well on a broadcast, ask the producer for a tape of the program. Offer to pay for it or supply the correct format tape prior to the broadcast.

These media materials are tools for obtaining more exposure. It is wise to keep updating them, even to the point of having your best recent television and radio appearances edited into brief composite video and audio tapes.

Viewing or listening to tapes of your appearances, or rereading articles in which your words are featured, is a much different activity than second-guessing. In privacy, you should occasionally take time to view and listen to past interviews. Look for indications of not being properly prepared, not dressing appropriately, not listening attentively, missing opportunities to make a main point, your apparent comfort level, and other major points. Learn from the past, but don't live in it.

Keep a journal and, after each media appearance, write down all the pertinent information about it. Be punctilious about recording the names and positions of major players in the event, especially those who impressed you or on whom you sense you made a good impression. Be sure to include any other guests or panel members in your journal. Any or all of these people could help you in the future. There is a great deal of movement within the industry. Keep track of people who move up or out to another media outlet.

DEALING WITH "PROBLEM" JOURNALISTS

Most local government officials and journalists work hard at developing relationships built on trust and respect. Sometimes, despite the best efforts of everyone, journalists seem to distort the news and (perhaps intentionally) make local government look bad. Here are some useful steps to deal with problem journalists:

- ▶ Talk with the journalist first. Explain exactly why you are concerned. Point out specific passages in news stories, features, or editorials. Do it on the phone or in person, as soon as possible after the item in question is printed or aired. Don't mention threats or penalties. Listen to the journalist's response. Describe how you feel about the situation (angry, embarrassed, disappointed) and ask the journalist how he feels. Give him the benefit of the doubt (at least the first time). Give the journalist feedback the next time he writes or airs something about you – especially if it seems to indicate that the situation, from your perspective, has been corrected.
- ▶ Discuss the situation with a friend or colleague. If the situation persists, have a confidential talk about it with someone you trust – preferably a third party who is not affected by the subject of the news item. Seek that person's advice as to whether you are being too critical or sensitive, and ask for his evaluation of the seriousness of the situation.

Ask the third party if he thinks you are justified in taking corrective action.

- ▶ Talk with the journalist's editor or boss, either in person or by phone. Be calm and analytical. Explain exactly what the problem is, as well as the results of your discussions with the journalist. Ask if others have complained about the journalist's reporting. Expect the editor to defend the journalist to a point and don't press for corrective action on the spot. Give the editor a chance to look into the situation, talk with the journalist and get back to you. Listen carefully to the editor's feedback.
- ▶ Continue trying to work the situation out. Don't panic or feel paranoid, especially if the situation gets worse in the short term (as it well may do). Continue to speak specifically with the journalist to make it clear what you expect him to do. Continue to test your feelings and instincts with third-party friends. Keep in touch with the journalist's editor.
- ▶ If nothing seems to work after a few months, take action within your city to rectify the situation. Make efforts with other journalists to get your story to the public, or (even better) develop direct communication links with the target publics to get your message across. Treat the problem journalist with special care – consider telling your staff to refer all inquiries from that journalist to you. Tape conversations with the journalist or have a third party present when you talk with him. (You may want to check with your city attorney to make sure you are not violating any of the journalist's rights – such as access to public information.) Tell the journalist what you are doing and why and make it clear that you are not seeking preferential treatment, that you only want the journalist to treat you professionally and impartially.

A PRIMER IN COMMUNICATIONS LAW

As a local official, you have found that your words and actions are constantly spotlighted, publicized, and scrutinized. As an official, it is essential that you understand the laws affecting communications. Here is a brief summary of significant communications law areas. Have your city attorney periodically brief you and your staff on the latest developments in the following areas of the law:

Defamation: Referred to as “libel” if printed or broadcast and “slander” if spoken, it includes communication that exposes an individual to hatred, ridicule, or contempt; lowers him in the esteem of others; causes him to be shunned; or injures his business or calling.

Libel per se indicates the specific words of the defamatory message. **Libel per quo** occurs when facts extrinsic to the exact words add additional meaning that results in defamation. The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* held that public officials may successfully sue for defamatory communication that focuses on their official conduct only if they can prove either:

- ▶ Known falsehood – the communicator knew the statement or comment was false.
- ▶ Reckless disregard for the truth – the communicator acted recklessly when considering

the truth of the message.

Sloppy reporting is not the same thing. Look for fabricated quotes, headlines that defame by distorting the meaning of a story, and other actions that show blatant disregard or ill will.

Intentional emotional distress: In many states, an alleged victim who can prove an act or a pattern of communication behavior intentionally designed to cause emotional distress may sue for damages. A temperamental official may be a quick ticket to the courthouse.

Privacy: Privacy is best defined as the right to be let alone. “Invasion of privacy,” as the tort is known, generally involves one of four types of actions:

- ▶ Making any private matter public in violation of state or federal privacy laws or community norms.
- ▶ Intruding on a person’s physical solitude, as in trespass.
- ▶ Portraying an individual falsely. Examples include placing a person’s name on a petition, or falsely alleging their support for a view or program.
- ▶ Using an individual’s identity without his consent for commercial gain.

Check Mississippi’s privacy and confidentiality laws to make certain your city’s policies and staff actions comply with them.

Copyright: Proprietary communication is protected by copyright. This may include written and spoken communication, video and audio recordings, software, art, and other works. Be certain to obtain written permission before duplicating and distributing copyrighted work to your staff or the public.

Freedom of information: Freedom-of-information (FOI) laws are written to provide public access to government information.

While often considered a press tool, FOI laws should be given a broader view: they are written to serve everyone. A wise public manager recognizes that cooperation with FOI laws can generate public support, whereas a secretive approach may raise doubts and distrust.

Also recognize the research opportunities that state and federal FOI laws offer you and your staff. Use the opportunity to gather timely information.

Be helpful. Develop a “Glad you asked” attitude when dealing with FOI requests. Such an attitude can generate public interest and awareness and stimulate public support.

Regulations of the Federal Communications Commission: The increased use of public broadcasting and government cable-television channels by localities calls for awareness of the rules of the Federal Communications Commission. If you work for a large city, have your city

attorney include broadcast regulations as one of his specialty areas.

A CHECKLIST

- ▶ The most important goal of a media relations program is to develop a two-way relationship between local government and the media in which the local government takes an active role.
- ▶ A media-relations program will be significantly more effective if it is carefully planned and organized and one person is made responsible for coordination with the media.
- ▶ Be sure to consider carefully the range of choice beyond straight news stories – public service announcements, reader-exchange columns, and talk shows, for example – as you seek the most effective way to get your message across in each instance.
- ▶ Effective media relations depend on knowledge, professionalism, and, above all, honesty in dealings with reporters and editors.
- ▶ Keep in mind that the various media – newspapers, radio, and television stations – have differing patterns of organization, different formats, different deadlines, and different news policies. It is important to be aware of these differences and work within them consistently.
- ▶ Learn to think and write like a reporter to increase the likelihood that your news releases will get used by the various media.
- ▶ News conferences and media briefings provide opportunities for exchange and discussion of issues and should be used only for topics that warrant the discussion format.
- ▶ All local government staff members who have contact with the media should be aware of the legal implications of their actions.

PUBLIC INFORMATION TRAINING

The following organizations can direct local government staff members to training in the field of public information:

City/County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA)

409 Third Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20002-4414

Continuing Education for Professionals and Organizations (CEPO)

6990 Soquel Drive
Abtos, CA 95003

International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)

One Hallidie Plaza, Suite 600
San Francisco, CA 94102

International City/County Management Association (ICMA)

77 North Capitol Street, NE
Suite 500
Washington, D.C. 20002-4201

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)

33 Irving Place
Third Floor
New York, NY 10003

Local colleges and universities are also increasingly likely to offer courses and even degree programs in areas such as corporate communications and public affairs.