

Media management – Ensuring the media bark is not worse than the dog bite

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Abstract

The media can be a huge asset to any organization, giving the opportunity to tell the public about its work, its attitudes and its successes. It can also destroy the reputation of an individual or an organization if it is not managed appropriately. It is entirely possible to carry out exceptionally good work and have the program portrayed as a total disaster incurring the wrath of the public. Conversely, when things do not go to plan, if the media is on-side the public will be more tolerant and understanding. Most people form their perception of reality and events on media reports, not scientific journals or carefully checked information sources. The aim of this session is to provide some guidance on interacting with the media to ensure that your side of the story is heard and that you and your organization are portrayed in the best possible way.

Introduction

Like any other skill, good media management requires training and practice. Many organizations consider media training to be discretionary expenditure – until they are burnt and learn the hard way the impact the media can have on public perception. The first and most important piece of advice I can give any organization is nominate media spokespersons and invest in training them. I promise, it will be money well spent.

Your organisation and the media

Virtually all medium to large organizations, including councils, have media protocols and a media unit with a manager who is usually well experienced. It is advisable to get to know those protocols and people – before you need them. They are usually very helpful because they want to keep you and the organization out of trouble. Similarly, most medium to large organizations have training sections. Between the media and training units, many would be able to provide in house training for those likely to require it.

If you work for a council, it is important to understand the role of elected members as spokespersons. During election periods a lot of “councilor views” are expressed that are not council policy statements but rather their personal perspectives. Sometimes, a new or junior journalist will pick one of these up and seek more information from the council department involved. Before saying anything, check with the media section to find out which elected member is saying what. If the source and context is not clear, you may find that one elected member’s personal opinion becomes confused with future policy directions agreed by the whole council and your department could start proceeding down completely the wrong track.

If that sounds political and confusing, we have just begun!

Looking at It another way ...

The media are people who are trying to do a job. If you have some understanding of their needs and priorities, you will be better equipped to work with them.

- **Deadlines.** Deadlines are absolute. Therefore, if you promise to ring back or meet a journalist by a certain time, make sure you do so and are not late.
- **Balance.** In general the media tries to give both sides of the story, but if one side chooses not to comment, only the other side can be shown. “No comment” is often interpreted as guilt. An incorrect comment can be seen as a cover up even if it is an honest mistake.

- **Trust.** Like anyone else, journalists know who they can trust and who is unreliable. Never lie. If you are honest and open you will be portrayed that way. If your credibility or integrity is questionable, you will be portrayed as “shady” or, the bad guy.
- **Contacts.** A good journalist never loses a phone number. If they have good experiences with you, they will come back. Even if it is not your area of expertise, help them by suggesting who to contact and giving them the number. Not only does this maintain your relationship, it means that you can suggest people who will portray your organization in a positive manner. (But never give out a private or mobile phone number unless you have asked the person first)
- **Entertainment.** The media have a difficult role of educating and entertaining people simultaneously. If a story is interesting or important it will usually be run but if it is quirky or tears at the heart strings, it will nearly always be run. They also want different “spins” on the story – so their coverage is not exactly the same as every other news outlet, or the impact that the issue will have on the “little man on the street”.
- **Expertise.** Journalists are not experts on every story they cover. They spend between a few minutes and a few hours learning the subject on which they are reporting. Help them. Explain the background, the issue, the implications and why certain decisions have been made and do so in simple non-technical language. If they understand, the report will be more accurate. Often misleading or inaccurate stories are not out of malice but simply because the reporter did not understand the issue.

Finally, like everybody, reporters like to be treated with courtesy and respect. They are under pressure and doing a difficult job. If you like the way they portrayed a story, tell them. If you think it was inaccurate, be polite and explain why. Like any profession there are some journalists who are malicious and driving their own agendas, but the vast majority are honest people earning an honest living.

What the media needs

The different forms of media have very different requirements for a “good” story. Often a story will fit one medium better than another or a story can be tailored to make it fit.

Print Media

There are four types of print media

- Broad distribution newspapers (eg Sydney Morning Herald, The Advertiser)
- Limited distribution newspapers (eg Mt Barker Courier, Adelaide Review)
- Specialist distribution newspapers (eg The Stock Journal, The Veterinarian)
- Periodicals (eg Australian Geographic, Women’s Weekly)

Obviously, the broader the distribution the less interest the publication will have in local issues. Newspapers usually want a quote from a person in authority and good photos. An article in a morning newspaper is often followed by radio talk-back.

Radio

Not all radio interviews are the same either. There are basically five types of interviews.

- **Regional radio.** Regional radio tends to be chatty and heavily focussed on that region. An interview will often extend for

fifteen minutes. These are the easiest interviews because you have time to explain what you are talking about and, because it goes live to air, it is not edited. The only real danger is allowing yourself to be side-tracked and speaking on subject which is either not within your area of expertise or your area of authority.

- *Live to air suburban.* These can be difficult particularly at breakfast or drive time. The interview usually only lasts a couple of minutes. Make sure you know what you want to say and you do not try to cram too much in. Often, you only have two or three sentences.
- *Pre-recorded interviews.* Pre-recorded interviews are edited and used in news services. Often, a different grab will be used in each news service for the next few hours. Depending on the grab is used, the meaning may change significantly. If doing a pre-recorded interview, frame responses in fifteen second “grabs” so whichever part of the interview is used, it makes sense and gets your point across.
- *Talk back.* Talk back interviews can be fun if you know the subject matter. The radio station usually rings just after a news service, does a live to air interview and then any caller can ask questions for the next half hour. If you can’t answer virtually any question on the issue or if there are questions you do not want asked, do not do the interview. If the audience or the interviewer is on your side, talk back gives you the opportunity to expand on the subject and be seen to be open and consultative.

Whatever the interview type, remember that radio is a very personal medium. You are talking to thousands of people but in groups of one or two so speak to them as individuals. Be human and be friendly. It is fine to relate an issue to personal experience, for example “Yes, I totally understand. My son had the same problem ...”

Unless you are talking about something terribly serious, smile before you speak. It changes the tone of your voice and makes you sound like a “nice” person to whom the audience can relate.

Television

Again, there are about four different type of interviews.

- *News bulletins.* Most commercial news services are thirty minutes in length. In this thirty minutes are three ad breaks totaling about five minutes, five minutes of weather and ten of sport. The actual news content is only ten to fifteen minutes. You will be lucky to have more than fifteen seconds air time. For this reason, say what you want to say briefly and succinctly. If you ramble, only part of what you say will be used and you will not know which part.
- *Current affairs and documentaries.* There is more time in these programs so more opportunity to present your case. Almost invariably, the crew will interview several people with different viewpoints and may not tell you who they are. Answer the questions honestly and do not be led down paths you do not want to go. Again, do not make the interview too long because it will be edited and what you say may be out of context.
- *Kids TV.* Children’s television is harder than it looks. It is difficult to use simple language to explain complex issues. Do not try to give detail but just a general overview of the issue.
- *Daytime talk shows.* These are the equivalent of the live to air radio interviews. They tend to be chatty and relaxed giving you plenty of opportunity to explain the issue.

The “Talent”

The media use the word talent to describe the interviewee. It is not condescending or derogatory, merely the term used in the industry. The talent is the face of the organization – the public will judge the

performance of the organization purely on the performance of the talent. It may not be fair, but it is a fact.

The qualities of good talent

Everybody knows a good talent when they hear or see one, but it is difficult to define the qualities that make them good. In addition, what “good” means depends on whether the person is quoted in the paper, heard on radio or seen on television.

General qualities

The spokesperson for an organization must:

- *Have the authority to speak on its behalf.* Never speak to media without authorization. You may not know the full story, or the reasons why something happened or the organizational policy on an issue. The quickest way to get yourself into deep trouble is to say the wrong thing without permission.
- *Know the issue and background.* Make sure you are fully briefed on the issue – or know it like the back of your hand. It is really embarrassing to be asked a fairly obvious question and not know the answer.
- *Unless you are empowered to do so, do not debate policy.* Elected members of State and Local Government determine policy. It is the role of staff to implement the policies of the elected members. You can explain the policy or why the elected members made that decision but never debate whether or not that decision was the right one. Never get into an argument with an elected member.
- *Make sure you are the most appropriate spokesperson.* Even if you know the subject inside out, if there is an election coming up, the Mayor may wish to break the good news. Perhaps there is a new media person being groomed, and this is an easy interview so the organization would like to give that person the practice. Even if you are the obvious choice, you may not be the best choice.
- *Portray the organization in the manner in which it wants to be portrayed.* If the organization wants to be seen to be corporate and in control, wear a suit. If it wants to be seen out there and working in the community, wear an open necked shirt. If it is taking a hard line stand on the issue, do not smile. If it is a feel good story about a dog that has been returned to a child or something, pat the dog and speak to the child. Basically, work out how the organization wants to be seen and reflect that. Uniforms are great. They are corporate but also give the impression of a worker who is out there doing things.
- *Speak well.* Speak clearly. Strong accents, speech impediments, fiddling, habits like saying “umm” are all distractions that make it difficult to get the message across effectively. If a person is nervous, they tend to speak too quickly, you may have to consciously slow down. Do not mumble, use a strong clear voice and pretend to be confident even if you are not.

Just off the record ...

Off the record does not exist. A journalist makes a living by finding good stories. Anything you say to a journalist may be used and you cannot get the words back again. If you do say something to journalist in confidence and it is a good story he has to use it. If he doesn’t, there is a very chance he will lose his job – especially if another network picks up on it. It is not fair to force someone to choose between breaking your confidence and becoming unemployed. If you know you should not say something, don’t say it.

Which brings up a couple of other points.

- If the interview is at your computer – what is on the screen? Is it a confidential or newsworthy document? A good journalist will check.

- If it is in your office, what papers are lying around? If you are in your office now, have a look on your desk. There is a good chance there are at least a couple of documents that a journalist would like. Remember Freedom of Information, the journalist would not steal the document but they might put in an FOI application for it.
- Every microphone is always turned on – well, not really but assume that they are. At the end of an interview, the journalist will usually thank you and proceed to leave. If you then say something like “All of that is really crap, the truth is ...” you can bet anything that will be the occasion that they did not switch off the microphone. If they suspect that you might say something like that, they may deliberately leave it on.
- Journalists are journalists even at social events. Don't discuss things that you should not discuss. Parties with plenty of alcohol are great hunting grounds for the media.

BUT, despite all that, if you are sensible and careful, the media is an asset, not an enemy.

Tips for print media

Print is probably the easiest, but the most impersonal form of media. Newspapers will often want a quote from the Chief Executive or similar and will usually find a variety of people to give an opinion. Usually each one only gets a couple of lines.

- Give concise answers that can be used as quotes.
- Provide or suggest photo opportunities if possible
- Provide contacts for other people that can give comment (particularly if you know those people will support your organization's position)

Tips of radio

Obviously, a good speaking voice is the primary requirement for radio interviews. But there is more to it than that.

- *Give fifteen second answers.* A good interview is like a game of ping pong. The interviewer asks a question, you speak for ten to twenty seconds then give the interviewer the chance to ask another question. Just saying “Yes” or “No” is boring radio. It is almost as bad when the interviewee keeps on talking and the announcer cannot get a word in. A good interview is the result of both the journalist and the talent having good manners.
- *Know what you want to say.* You never know if the interview will go for thirty seconds or thirty minutes. Make sure you deliver the most important points first.
- *Don't cram too much in.* You cannot fit a dozen messages into one interview. Only try to deliver two or three messages at most.
- *Don't be side tracked.* If the interviewer goes off on a tangent, pull the interview back to the topic. If they persist, you can say something like “I would be happy to discuss this with you on another occasion, but today I think it is more important for your listeners to know that ...” or “That is not my area of expertise, but I can certainly provide you with the contact details of someone who could answer your question.”
- *Use people's names – but get them right!* The producer will always tell you the name of the person who will be interviewing you. Use it. People tend to be less aggressive to a person who greets them by name, and it makes you seem more personable.
- *If possible, go into the studio.* It is really difficult for an interviewer to be aggressive to a person who is sitting in front of them. It is much easier over the phone. If it is a long interview, or a talk back session or a difficult topic, it is much safer to go to the studio.

The radio station also likes this because the sound quality is better and they know you made an effort, which they always appreciate so they will give you a fair go.

Tips for television

All the above apply, but for television interviews, you also have to look acceptable.

- *Do not wear white or striped shirts.* White glares and stripes strobe under television lights giving a really strange effect
- *Be clean and pressed.* If your dress looks sloppy, your credibility is questionable (unless you are dragging a child from a fire or something – in which case disheveled is fine). Iron a shirt, comb your hair, make sure your tie is straight and your zip is done up. Pretend you are going into a job interview.
- *Be careful of jewelry* Just like radio, avoid distractions. Things like big earrings, chunky necklaces and bracelets, body piercings etc. are distractions.
- *Don't overdo the make up.* Heavy make up is not part of a corporate or worker image.
- *Hair.* For outdoor interviews, hair should be short or tied back. If it is blowing around and you are pushing it out of your eyes, it is hard for you and the audience to concentrate on what you are saying.
- *Hands.* Sometimes it is hard to know what to do with your hands particularly if you are nervous. Sometimes carrying a folder or book helps.
- *Suit coats.* Do not do up the buttons of a jacket, especially if you are sitting. The suit bunches up and looks really untidy. If standing, only ever do one button up.
- *Sitting.* Sit straight, do not cross your legs and do not slouch. Make sure both your feet are on the ground, otherwise you will probably start kicking one foot after a few minutes. If the media want to make you look stupid, they only have to pan in on your foot.

Media strategies

All this might give you the impression that a media strategy is a good corporate idea. Well, you are right. The more work, time and effort and organization devotes to the media, the better they will appear to the public. Ultimately, it is the public who decides which organizations continue to exist and which disappear.

Media contact can be proactive or reactive. Often the reactive media is difficult to control but proactive media coverage simply takes a bit of time and thought.

Proactive media

The media is always looking for items of public interest and will run with good news stories if they are interesting. Consider doing seasonal press releases – most things occur on an annual cycle. Not only does this provide the public with the information you want them to have but it also helps to develop a relationship with the media which will be invaluable when things go wrong. A council annual timetable may look something like this -

Date	Subject	In conjunction with
January	Behavior on beaches	KESAB
February	Caution around school crossings	Police
March	Dogs die in hot cars	RSPCA
April	Annual microchip day	
May	Council Mothers Day family day out	
June	Council achievements this financial year	
July	Dog registration reminder	
August	Swooping magpies	National Parks and Wildlife
September	Kitten season – desex cats	Animal Welfare League
October	Fire prevention	CFS
November	Swimming centre reopens	Local swimming club
December	Register pets given as Christmas presents	

Superimposed on this schedule will be other proactive releases for example:

- a reminder to vote in the council election, or the results of the election
- the plans to develop a local park
- development plan applications
- council officer given a bravery award
- the Mayor speaks out in favour of developing a skate park
- school program to help senior citizens with their gardens

or whatever. Basically, give the media as many releases as possible so they know the good things that are happening and residents know that their council is doing things for them.

Through regular contact with the media, you will get to know individual journalists and their particular interests. Give these people exclusives on those subjects – or just give them a quick phone call and tip off if something is happening that would appeal to them as individuals. It is far better for a journalist to owe you a favour than for you to owe him one. After a while, they will ring you looking for stories to fill “slow news days”. That is advertising that money cannot buy.

When to (and not to) invite the media

If you are doing something interesting, consider inviting the media to come along. This can be a great way to get them on side or it can be totally inappropriate, cheap and nasty. Never invite the media if:

- *You are unsure of the outcome.* In situations that may be difficult to control, like demolishing buildings, rescues, or emergency responses, you may be unintentionally inviting them to watch you or your staff fail miserably.
- *There is somebody else involved.* People have the right to choose whether they are seen on television or interviewed. If you suddenly appear with the media in tow, particularly at a traumatic time for somebody else, it puts unfair pressure on that person
- *There are legal implications.* Until those implications are known, leave the media out of it.
- *The media will impede the operation.* Your first obligation is to do your job. If having a media crew in attendance will make that more difficult, do not invite them.

If all these bases are covered, it is worth considering. For example, if a new skate park has been built, ask the Mayor to open it, invite the local skaters and BMX riders to a free sausage sizzle (so they will turn up) and invite the local newspaper. This allows the media to ask the kids what they think – and having a bunch of teenage kids supporting the Mayor’s initiative is always a good thing.

Reactive media

If it is not a “slow news day” and the media call, more often than not it is bad news. Remember though, at that first contact, the journalist has not heard your side of the story. You have the opportunity to give it to him – and if your relationship is already good, he will listen to you.

Get clearance before you say anything, but especially if it is an issue that could make your organization look bad. The journalist will fully expect you to say something like “I will make a couple of quick calls and ring you back within the hour.”

Anything you say could end up being used in a court, or a coroner’s inquest or in a civil suit against you or against your organization. Your personal legal position (as well as your employment position) is dubious if you decide to speak on an issue that impacts on your organization without the knowledge and consent of senior management.

A few more ‘don’ts’

- *Don’t lie.* It only makes a bad situation worse – you will be caught out.
- *Don’t accept liability.* That is for the courts to decide, not you.
- *Don’t deny liability.* You might just be wrong – your organization may be liable.
- *Don’t make promises.* Especially if you do not have the authority to keep them.
- *Don’t respond without knowing the facts.* The journalist might be completely wrong
- *Don’t lay blame.* Until you know the full facts of the matter.
- *Don’t assume it will just blow over.* Turn reactive media into proactive media.

Managing a bad situation

Immediately you hang up from the journalist, contact your manager and the media manager. Depending on how important the issue is and who is available, you may need to contact the CEO warn them and explain that you have promised to ring back within the hour. If you are told that the CEO or someone will handle it, ring the journalist and tell him that the CEO will be in touch this afternoon (or whomever and whenever the case may be). That way the journalist will know that you have kept your word.

If you are asked to deal with the matter, the next thing to do is find what happened and if your organization was at fault. This may involve speaking to a fellow employee, an aggrieved resident, a lawyer, the police or anyone else. Even when you have all the facts, assume half of them are wrong. When people respond on a short timeframe, they do not have time to check. If it really isn’t clear within the hour, ring the journalist and say so. Statements like these may be appropriate:

- “At the moment the police are still investigating, until their situation report is received, it is impossible to know what is happening. I will keep you in the loop.”
- “The officer whom Mrs Jones alleges swore at her is not in the office today. Until I can speak to him, I really cannot comment. He is due back on Wednesday so I will ring you then.”
- “Council takes these allegations extremely seriously. They are being investigated and I would expect a result by the end of the week. The CEO will make a statement on Friday at 3.00 pm in the Council Chambers.” (This one could be a press release as well)
- “Any loss of life is a tragedy. The Coroner will be examining the circumstances surrounding this incident and will make a public report in due course. It would be inappropriate for me to comment until such time as that report is finalized. In the meantime, on behalf of the council, I extend my sincere condolences to the Jones family at this time of terrible loss.”

If the situation is clear and the council is in the wrong, do not try to duck for cover. Be open and admit the mistake. For example:

- “It would appear that there was a break down in communications and the standard repairs were not made as quickly as they should have been resulting in this unfortunate string of events. The repairs have now been undertaken and the council sincerely apologizes for any inconvenience or distress caused. Council staff have been instructed to review the communications systems to ensure that an event of this nature does not reoccur.”

It is also important to know when to say nothing. Sometimes the media will have it half right and it is very tempting to argue the council case.

It is unusual for the media to correct a story because they do not want to admit they got it wrong – so if it was half right they are unlikely to back down. If the organization argues the point, the issue will stay in the media longer. Sometimes it is better to just let it go and get on with the job.

Obviously, if it is a major issue the organization should respond in writing for two reasons. First, a written statement can be checked by a lawyer and second, it cannot be misquoted.

Which brings us to our next topic ...

Media releases

The major news outlets receive dozens of media releases every day. Most end up in the bin. To improve the chances of “getting a run” consider the following tactics.

- *Take advantage of “slow news days”.* Weekend news is full of sport so it is unlikely that your story will be run (unless it is really interesting or important).
- *Images.* Newspapers like photographs. Try to think of a photo opportunity or supply photos. Similarly, television stations are unlikely to run a story without vision. Make sure you arrange something they can film. For example, a warning that snakes are on the move is not really a story, but with footage of a snake emerging from a gum boot this story was covered nationally. (The photo opportunity was arranged with a wildlife park).
- *Media contact.* Make sure that the media contact is actually contactable. Many press releases have an office phone number which is useless for breakfast, drive time and weekends - which are the peak audience times for radio in particular. Include a mobile phone number and confirm that the contact will take calls out of business hours.
- *Order.* Put the most important information at the top of the release. If the first paragraph is not interesting, a journalist will not read any further.
- *Accuracy.* Make sure the information you provide is true. If you are not sure, leave it out.
- *Brevity.* Avoid going over one page. Journalists do not have time to read reams of paper.
- *Language.* Use common language, not jargon and make sure your spelling and grammar is correct. A sloppy release gives the impression of a sloppy and incompetent organization.

The good, the bad and the ugly of media management

In watching and listening to news services, many examples of brilliant and poor media management are seen. It is full of the good, the bad and the ugly. One example of each will assist you in seeing the difference.

The good ...

Within hours of the bombs detonating in the London transport system, Ian Blair, Superintendent of the London Police held a press conference.

He was incredibly calm, well presented and gave the impression of authority. His basic message was that the police were taking control of the situation and the people of London were in safe hands. He reiterated this in several forms, did not predict who had done it or why and kept away from the politics of the situation. Everything about his demeanor inspired confidence. He was well briefed and gave Londoners the information he had and that they needed. He cleverly did not allow impossible expectations to develop by saying there was undoubtedly loss of life and the numbers were unknown. Soon after, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair left a heads of government meeting to condemn the atrocity and extend condolences.

His press conference was far more political and emotive. At one point he said that if he would like to wring the necks of whomever did it – which was a perfect statement for a caring PM but would have been quite inappropriate for a Superintendent of Police. The final masterful stroke was Tony Blair's second media conference with the leaders of the world's most powerful nations standing behind him saying that terrorism would not be tolerated. This gave the world the image of the nations standing strong together and backing up Britain.

The bad ...

Mark Latham, the Leader of the Opposition had been unwell and was recuperating in Bali at the time of the Boxing Day tsunami. He did not issue a press release extending sympathy for the tsunami victims and was strongly criticized for it. His media secretary issued a statement saying he was on sick leave but did not say he was in Bali. The next day, media reports highlighted that Mr Latham was on a tropical island with his family and implied that he was “too busy” to care. If he had made a statement from Bali in the first place, the issue may not have arisen. Virtually as a direct result of this media coverage, the Leadership of the Opposition changed and Mr Latham became the “Latham Experiment”.

The ugly ...

The most bizarre and ugly media coverage occur far too frequently. A child is ripped apart by a dog or viciously beaten and raped and then a journalist sticks a microphone in the face of the mother saying “... and how did you feel when you watched your daughter being brutally murdered?” What do they expect the mother to say?

... and the regrettable

On the day that Diana, Princess of Wales died, a radio announcer made a statement to the following effect:

“And we just have news from Paris that Princess Diana has been involved in a car accident. My, I hope she has not broken a finger nail.” As the events of that day unfolded, I bet he wished he could retract that sentence.

Conclusion

Dealing with the media is dealing with people. It requires tact, honesty, discipline and work. It can be fun and rewarding or it can be a nightmare. Sometimes you have no control, but if you have done the groundwork, the damage can be mitigated. As stated in the introduction of this paper, training and practice are the keys to success. Do not underestimate either.

Deb Kelly

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