

Working with Local Media

This Tech Tip was compiled using information from the Institute for Local Government; the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2011 Publication: Techniques for Effective Highway Construction Projects in Congested Urban Areas; the Purdue Online Writing Lab; and the Cornell Local Roads Program

Learning to work with the media is an important part of being an elected official. The relationship is interdependent as elected officials need the media to amplify their voices and communicate to constituents while news organizations need local officials as authoritative sources of information. For the media, interviews with local officials are just as important for producing a story as attending public meetings and reviewing agency documents.



Accomplishing the communications objectives of your department can be much easier when you have a good relationship with the media. An effective working relationship with the media (television, radio, print, blogs, etc.) can enhance the day-to-day work of a department and help in crisis situations. Accessibility to an agency and its elected officials also helps foster a greater sense of public transparency which in turn builds trust.

WHY GOOD LOCAL MEDIA RELATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

In local highway and public works sectors, local media relations can be especially important. Informing the public about road conditions, projects, weather-related operations and more can go a long way towards assisting a department's operations. When communicating with the public at the local level, there are few better, or more cost effective methods available to a highway or public works department than local media.

Already, at the state level, utilization of local media has become an integral component of communicating critical information to communities where projects are planned or underway. According to a 2011 National Academy of Sciences Study, 83% of state agencies surveyed relied on key media people to access audiences and get the word out about complex urban projects and agencies indicated that they relied on free access to television and radio over paid messages at a 4:1 ratio.

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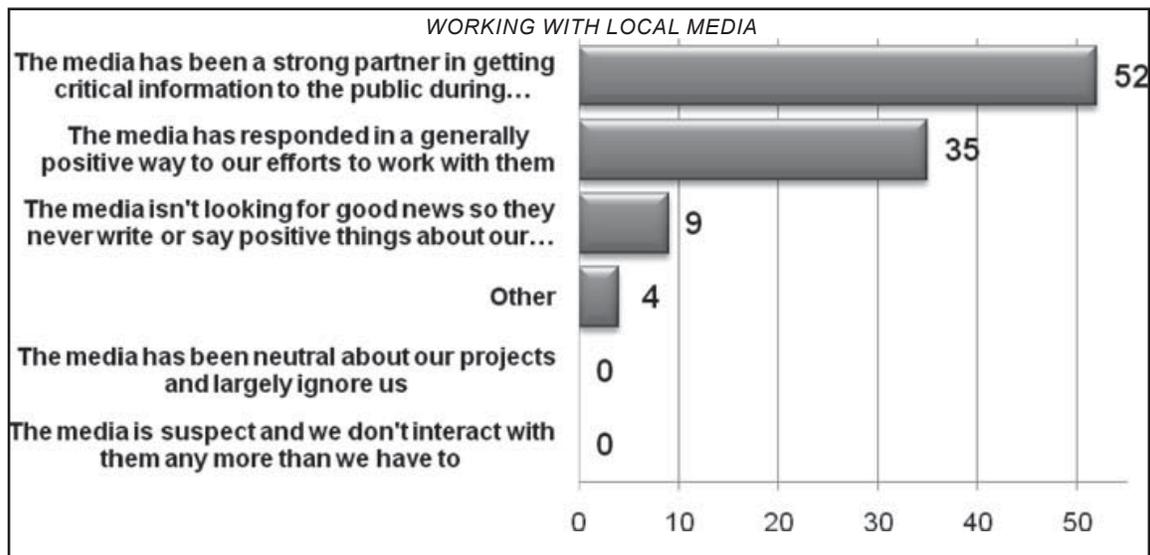
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Tech Tips are published by the Cornell Local Roads Program with support from the Federal Highway Administration, the New York State Department of Transportation, and Cornell University. The content is the responsibility of the Local Roads Program.



Best description of agency's view of relationship with the media, 2011 National Academy of Sciences State DOT Survey On Techniques for Effective Highway Construction Projects in Congested Urban Areas

WHAT MAKES NEWS

The basic components of every news story are: who, what, when, where, why and how. But what makes something worthy of news coverage goes far beyond these basics. The following ten elements determine newsworthiness:

- **Controversy/Conflict.** Controversy is the #1 element that creates news. Conflict is in ample supply at the local level. Championing a worthy cause or resolving a difficult conflict is likely to be newsworthy.
- **Timing/Relevance.** News is new information. It can also be something that is happening right now or that has just occurred. News must be fresh and current to be relevant. Elected officials are wise to stay on top of what issues local media are covering should they be asked to comment on the developments of the day.
- **Notoriety/Celebrity.** The better known the person, business, or organization, the more newsworthy the story. Local officials are newsworthy because of their positions as decision-makers. Reporters closely watch what decision-makers say and do or what they have said and done.
- **Impact/Consequence.** Consequence is how the information impacts viewers, listeners and readers. The more people affected, the more likely a story or event will get news coverage.
- **Nearness/Proximity.** The closer the event is to the news audience, the more news value it has. Although state and national news is covered in local media markets, the majority of coverage is on news close to home. Reporters sometimes want a local perspective on a state or national issue.
- **Change/Gridlock.** Change, the potential for change and sometimes a lack of change is newsworthy.

- Action/Drama. Doing something is more newsworthy than having an opinion about it. The more dramatic the action, the greater the news value. This is particularly true for television, where a story needs more than a talking-head to create a truly visual narrative.
- Tangible/Understandable. The abstract has less news value than the concrete. Take the time to work with agency staff to make sure facts and figures are understandable and relatable to the public.
- Emotion/Human Interest. A story about people that generates any type of emotional response – inspiration, awe, happiness, sadness, anger, and so on – has an element of human interest. People like to hear about other people’s triumphs and failures. That is why tabloids and daytime TV shows are so popular.
- Rare/Unique. A highly unusual, rare or unique situation has high news value as John B. Bogart famously observed “A dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news.”

HOW TO WORK WITH REPORTERS

Most media relationships are professional and built on trust. Reporters (and editors and photographers) have a job to do, just like you. As is the case with all humans, no two reporters are alike. They differ in their levels of experience and in the medium (radio, TV, print and blogs) they work. It is the reporter’s job to report accurate information in a relatively quick time frame. Today, lines have become blurred with the advent of “citizen journalists” and bloggers, so it is wise to know who you’re talking to and whether they are representing a known news organization.

Understanding the reporter’s working environment is important. If you’ve ever been in a newsroom when a print or broadcast deadline is nearing, you’ll understand why most reporters won’t even pick up the phone, much less have a chat with you during busy times.

Establishing two-way trust does take time and commitment. Most reporters are trying to tell interesting stories that will capture their readers’ or viewers’ attention. Stories about people provide greater interest than stories about plans and programs. Interesting images and facts help sell a story.

Different Types of Reporters, Different Types of Reporting

Print reporters are more likely to be assigned to a “beat” which may include local agency or specific issues, such as education, environment, business, health, and so on. A challenge that local agency officials often face is that the “local government beat” can be the starting place for less experienced reporters. For reporters, starting out covering local government creates an opportunity to learn the intricacies of government issues, functions and procedures.

Newspaper reporters typically need and/or want quotes, background, details, facts, figures, graphics, photos, etc. More often than not, daily newspaper reporters will do their interviews by phone in preparation for their story to run the next day. A larger story may not run immediately and the reporter may choose to conduct interviews in person.

In contrast, broadcast reporters, both radio and television, are less commonly assigned to specific beats. This means they tend to know a little bit about a lot of issues and are often learning the issue as they are reporting on it. Providing them with background information before the interview can accelerate their learning curve. This can result in better interview questions on tape or camera.

Broadcast reporters have to distill complex issues into a very limited amount of time, typically less than a minute. They are not going to want or need mounds of information, so synthesize key messages into a few concise sentences. Also, whereas radio reporters capture words solely with sound, TV reporters also need visuals to go with their interviewee's words. Such visuals offer another tool to help convey information and key messages, so consider working with your agency's staff to supply them with the appropriate resources.

GIVING GOOD INTERVIEWS

Anticipate the questions of: who, what, where, when, why, and how much. Many public works officials don't like that last question. It's complicated, it may be controversial, and it's probably not on your short-list of key messages. Despite these legitimate concerns, consider answering cost questions to the best of your ability because funding for local government will most likely involve public dollars.

There are also questions that you should be asking of the reporter regarding an interview. Who else will the reporter interview? How much does the reporter know about the interview topic? How long will the interview take? Where's the interview location? When will the interview run?

For telephone interviews, don't take an interview call "cold." Ask a few questions. Give a specific time for you to return the call. Think about sound quality, especially if you're using a speaker phone or cell phone. Consider standing up while on a phone interview—it can help keep you from slipping into a casual conversation.

Sometimes relationships with the media will be tested, not only because you may not have had as much time to prepare as you'd like, but also because the story is not positive. In these situations, the agency's reputation is on the line, and even if you have developed excellent relationships with reporters, the interviews can be tough. Candor, confidence, consistency, and control can help get you through these difficult interactions with the press.

Be honest and accurate. Double-check and even triple-check any facts and figures used in interviews. Once inaccurate information is distributed, it's hard to pull it back. The risk is that accidental inaccuracy will be mistaken for dishonesty. Let the reporter know when you need to look up information and get back to them before the deadline. Avoid responding with "no comment" as it sounds as though there is something to hide.

Remember to have confidence in knowing you're the expert and you have the information people need. You've thought about your key messages and you're ready to put them to good use. You care about the people you serve, and the media helps you speak to those people.

To ensure consistency in tough interviews, stick with key messages. Pick a spokesperson and stay with that person. It is helpful to establish control in tough interviews by repeating and transitioning to key messages. Take your time answering, and don't give spontaneous, poorly thought-out responses. Control your physical space if the reporter or photographer tries to crowd you, and look at the reporter while not playing to the camera.

When on camera, it's helpful to think about the background of the shot, which might include job safety. Express confidence and professionalism in your posture, and be as relaxed as possible.

Sometimes you need to say "no" to an interview. Be prepared to say why; your refusal may be the news story. If you're not the right person to be interviewed, try to help the reporter by finding a better choice.

Finally, you can protect yourself and your organization by making notes, or tape recording interviews to refer back to if needed. When doing radio or TV interviews over the phone, ask whether the information is being broadcast live or taped. For the reporters with whom a professional relationship based on trust has not been established, consider replying in writing to a set of written questions. Always correct errors—don't let them become "facts."

When you are answering interview questions, keep answers simple, but not condescending.

- Use key messages
- Avoid jargon.
- Give most important facts first. This is called the inverted pyramid, where interest and attention start strong and quickly fade.

When interacting in face-to-face interviews, remember cameras and microphones are always on, so stay energized and on guard. Talk to your audience through the news media, and watch your body language.

TRACK YOUR COVERAGE

One of the best ways you can promote the good deeds of your department, or learn about where you need to improve, is by tracking your press coverage over time. The promotional or morale-building value of positive press coverage can be invaluable. Getting into the habit of amplifying good coverage by distributing it through whatever channels you have available to you is always advantageous to your department's overall image. It is also important to not ignore negative coverage. Reviewing press coverage that is critical and tracking it over time is an important way to recognize trends, and verify improvement.

If you have the ability to post positive media coverage online, either on a department website or via social media, do so. Your department should not go unrecognized and a positive story can bolster your standing in the community.

CONCLUSION

Building and maintaining good a relationship with the media is an important aspect of public service. Elected officials face many challenges in serving the public. How an elected official relates to media organizations or the individual reporters covering an agency will have a direct impact on the type of coverage that occurs.

If done authentically, the relationship between reporters and elected officials will strengthen. When reporters have greater accessibility and confidence in the elected official and the public agency providing information, a mutually beneficial relationship develops and the public is better served.

Additional Resources

Institute for Local Government Media Relations Webpage

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations>

Spring 2017 Cornell Local Roads Program Nuggets & Nibbles Newsletter “Effective Media Relations” Article

<https://cornell.app.box.com/v/clrp-nn-2017-spring>

Purdue Online Writing Lab - Writing Press Releases

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/journalism_and_journalistic_writing/press_releases.html

Techniques for Effective Highway Construction Projects in Congested Urban Areas (2011)

<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/14485/techniques-for-effective-highway-construction-projects-in-congested-urban-areas>