
Best Practices for Dealing with the Media

As county employees and officials, you may from time to time find yourself dealing with the media. Whether local papers, special interest bloggers, or TV networks, the media relies on information from public officials as an authoritative source. Therefore, it is important that your organization have a consistent voice and firm policies in place that govern any contact with the media.

Best Practices

Below is a list of tips for government officials adapted from *Media Relations Tips for Newly Elected Officials*, a report put together by the Institute for Local Government, a non-profit organization based in California.

Be Prepared. Find out what information the reporter is seeking and then, whenever possible, take the time to prepare for an interview by gathering facts, figures and key messages that will be responsive to the questions the reporter is likely to ask. It is okay to have this information as a reference during an interview when not on camera. Unless one has to, do not wing it. In the instance of a crisis situation, it is wise to have a standard holding statement such as, “I want to help you with your story, but I need to gather more facts before I can answer any questions. I know we all want to get the story right, so I will contact you within the hour to give you an update.” Then, be sure to follow through.

Be Concise. Reporters want and need good quotes. To be quoted (and not misquoted), keep statements (both written and spoken) short, relevant and interesting. Do not use jargon, acronyms or wonky terms. A written quote should be one or two short sentences.

Radio and television will edit down a statement to sound bites that are only three to seven seconds long, on average. Avoid the temptation to talk too much. Do not speculate or speak in hypotheticals; stick to the facts.

Be 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 if you need to look up information and get back to them before the deadline.

Be Careful. Assume that everything is “on the record” and will be attributed. Do not say anything that should not be included in a news story. Never go “off the record.” A reporter can get confused when reading back over his/her notes over what was “off the record” or they may just decide it’s too good to pass up, and betray your trust. If one cannot say it on the record, do not say it.

What This Means for Counties

It can be beneficial to have a good relationship with local media; however, you must be mindful of any messages you convey to the media. This is especially important should an incident occur which might expose the county to any possible liability. Limit the number of people who are authorized to speak to the media on behalf of your organization, and take the time to research and prepare before issuing any statements. For more tips about dealing with the media, please contact CTSI at 303 861 0507. [ctsi](http://www.ctsi.org)