

# Working Successfully with the Media

How to Instill Trust and Confidence in your Community Through the News

Stephanie Marquis, President, SME LLC



Rolling out a new ordinance. Tornadoes and dangerous storms. A public health outbreak. A tragic accident or active shooter. Conflict among board members. Taxes.

If you have an important issue or emergency in your community, expect media to come knocking on your door. This article will provide advice on how to work with reporters, and why it is so important that you do so successfully.

The first step is acknowledging the face of news has changed with the onset of 24-hour news channels and social media. According to the Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of Americans now get their news from social media channels such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

With the fast pace of social media comes the desire of each news outlet to beat its competitors to a story, which means you'll be asked to respond to requests faster than ever before. And, stories are inherently built upon conflict. So, how do you put your best foot forward?

## Media Stories Shape Perception

Your overall reputation is shaped by what gets reported in the newspaper, on TV, or on the radio. This perception directly impacts the ability to carry out your mission successfully. If your department is perceived as being unsuccessful, ineffective, or wasteful, it can be a challenge going forward. It can take only seconds to damage or lose a good reputation, and years to overcome a negative perception.

Therefore, it is essential to understand how to be honest, ethical, and forthcoming in your interactions with reporters

and media outlets, while getting your message across and protecting your community.

## Communication Goals

Whether responding in a crisis or emergency situation, or simply trying to determine the best way to communicate an issue or policy, these communication objectives apply:

- Build knowledge and understanding
- Motivate and influence behavior
- Set the stage for future messaging
- Build trust and credibility

In addition to educating the audience, you may wish to affect behavior such as getting your community members to stay away from a scene, register to vote, attend a meeting, follow the direction of police or fire officials, and much more. You may also need to set the stage for future messaging, essentially preparing for additional stories.

As an example, if a tornado hits, the damage will be the focus of initial news coverage. Follow-up stories will feature how people are getting back on their feet and rebuilding their homes, so you could note in the first story how the community is strong and working together, but cleanup will take some time. Future messaging is essentially setting expectations for what may come next.

Perhaps the most important communication objective is the opportunity to build trust and credibility with your citizens

through the media. You can instill confidence with the public based upon how you respond to news outlets.

## Interview Tips

» **Be the first to break the news.** When there is an issue that could cause angst or a strong emotional response from members of your community, be the first to share it. This instills trust because you come across as an informative, upfront leader. It also provides the additional advantage of being proactive in explaining the topic from your point of view instead of being responsive to questions.

When confronted with an emergency, quickly get the right people around the table (in person, virtually, and/or on the phone) to discuss and determine an initial course of action. Do not wait for email.

o **EXAMPLE:** Unfortunately, cyberattacks are now more commonplace. If you get hacked, you may prefer to wait to talk about what happened until you have all the background details. But, from the community's perspective, I'm going to be really angry if you wait days or weeks to divulge that my personal information could have been accessed. This severely damages trust. You can be first

with the facts you know at the time and share what you're doing to protect citizens from any further impact.

» **Word choice matters.** Facts are important, and so is word choice. You have the ability to calm or inflame a situation with your words, and when people are stressed or upset, their ability to comprehend information drops to about a 6th grade reading level. So, as you're developing your statement or preparing for an interview, avoid acronyms and jargon. Keep it simple and easy to understand – plain language.

o **EXAMPLE:** Would you be confused if I said the local TV station called and they don't know if they want a VO/SOT or package, but they will definitely want b-roll? It is much easier to comprehend, "The TV station called; they want to interview someone, and will also need video footage." That's taking jargon and translating it for the audience. Feel free to use acronyms and lingo with your peers, but be mindful of your word choice when communicating with others.

» **Use a spokesperson who can express empathy.** Again, people shift from facts to perception in times of high stress or emotion – what they think is happening. This could be based upon their own assumptions or the rumor mill. *Your community members want to know you care about*

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*them before they can truly hear and comprehend the rest of the details.*

Empathy comes first, and the compassion must be genuine. Recognize the emotions and feelings of your audience before moving forward.

- o EXAMPLE: Your municipality will be raising taxes to meet budgetary demands. The reporter will ask how much money you need, what it will be used for, etc. Before explaining all the ins and outs of your new tax policy, start with empathy. It could be as simple as saying, “Raising taxes is never popular...” or “We understand people are concerned about what this means for their own pocketbook....” This type of statement recognizes what community members may be feeling, and then you can continue into why raising taxes is important, such as preserving important police, fire, and sanitation services.

Whoever you choose to be spokesperson should be the same person throughout the event, whether it lasts one day or one year. A consistent, recognizable face provides consistency.

If needed, consider two spokespeople: one who can express compassion and deliver the message, and another who has the technical knowledge. A nice advantage for municipalities: the closer a spokesperson is to the community, the more he or she is viewed as trustworthy. For instance, you have more credibility because you are part of the local community vs. someone from the state or federal level.

#### » Practice, practice, practice...and then practice aloud.

There will be a variety of audiences to consider: residents, the general public, victims, other governmental officials, employees, stakeholders, and more. Identify the common questions and concerns these audiences have, and you will be able to anticipate at least 95 percent of the questions you’ll get from reporters.

Once you get a media request, **take at least a minute or two before doing an interview.** Practice your answers out loud in your office, your car, in front of your mirror – even better if someone will play the role of reporter for you. Preparing aloud helps focus your mind, so that what you actually say during the conversation is what you intended.

- » **Talk in soundbytes.** Remember how media outlets are trying to get the scoop on a story? Talking in soundbytes – or snippets that last about 15 seconds – is helpful for two reasons:

- o First, talking in soundbytes helps keep your answers in context because, if your answer is short, it is more likely to be used in its entirety. If you talk and talk and talk, the reporter decides which part of your quote to use. I promise you will be asked more than one question, so you will have multiple opportunities to make your point instead of trying to say everything in the first answer. Express empathy right out of the gate, respond to the question, and continue on from there.
- o Second, reporters appreciate soundbytes because it makes their job easier when filing their news story. If you provide short and complete answers, the reporter can sort through the information more easily. Again, keeping it brief increases your chances of having your entire response included.
- o The exception: a live TV or radio interview. During those interviews, the host is expecting you to expound further when you answer.

- » **Do not speculate. If you’re wrong, it can take years to build back trust.** At some point, you’ll be pressed to answer a speculative question. This type of inquiry is often followed by, “Can you just tell me yes or no.”

- o EXAMPLE: if there is a heating fuel shortage, the reporter may ask, “Is it possible that people in the community won’t be able to get the fuel they need to heat their homes this winter – yes or no?” If you answer this speculative question with a “yes” or “maybe,” how will the headline read?

Instead, focus on what you *do* know. “At this time, we are working with our citizens to help them find the fuel they need. We will continue to monitor this situation closely, and want residents to contact us if they need assistance.” You answered the question, kept it short, and gave the community an action step – you motivated behavior. If asked again, repeat the answer, and then ask if they have another question to keep the interview moving forward.

- o When I was leading communications related to a building fire that displaced hundreds of government employees, rumors were rampant about what caused the fire. When I was asked by reporters if the cause could be X or Y, if I would have said it was *possible* that X triggered the fire and was then wrong, the next time I was asked a factual question, my credibility would have been shot. In addition, it was important to turn this question over to the correct source to answer: the fire department.

## Feature

o **CARDINAL RULE: NEVER say “no comment.”** This makes a person seem guilty or that he/she is hiding something. I want to be responsive to the taxpayers and maintain my relationship with the reporter, so instead, I personally say something along the lines of, “Thank you for reaching out, but I do not have anything to add to your story.”

» Develop relationships with media now. Become familiar with your local paper, TV, and radio reporters. Grab a cup of coffee, or pitch good stories to the news outlets when you have them. These relationships can go a long way when an emergency or other important issue arises because you will have developed a working relationship in advance.

My hope is you will develop trust and build a strong reputation with your community when working with media.

### About the Author:

Stephanie Marquis, President of SME LLC, is a high-impact public relations strategist with 25+ years' experience.

She has extensive knowledge as a speaker, instructor, and consultant on a variety of topics including strategic, risk and emergency communication, media relations, marketing and brand development, communicating with customers, and much more. These tips are excerpts from her crisis and strategic communications training, as well as her experience in developing emergency response plans. Contact Stephanie at [hello@stephaniemarquis.com](mailto:hello@stephaniemarquis.com)

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