

Section 6.6

Strategic Communications

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide an introduction to developing a communications strategy, and some basic techniques on how to work with the media. Readers are advised that this is just an introduction to the topic. There are a number of valuable programs available in Nova Scotia for anyone wishing to develop their skills in media relations and municipal administrators are strongly advised to take advantage of such courses whenever possible.

While this document focuses mainly on crisis communications and preparing for interviews, it is important to note that communications strategies should go beyond dealing with crisis situations. Municipalities need to have a long term vision, the foundation of which is to keep the community informed as to what is going on with council through minutes, news releases etc.

**Like the boy scouts  
“Be Prepared”**

As a municipal administrator or elected official, you may find yourself asking the question “Is the media your worst enemy, or your best friend?”. The answer to that question is quite simple: neither! How your relationship with the media unfolds depends largely upon you. Whether or not you want to deal with the media may be irrelevant, the choice may not be yours to make. However, that being said, you can prepare in advance, take a proactive role, and develop a two-way relationship which will encourage communication and sharing of information on important community issues instead of simply reacting when the media comes knocking on your door.

A successful and satisfactory relationship with the media does not occur by accident. It is the end result of careful planning and advance preparation. In order to generate a mutually satisfying experience with the media, and ultimately with your potential audience, it is essential to develop an understanding of how the media function.

***A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN should be specific, outlining a well-articulated chain of command, with some indication as to who the decision makers and experts are. This can be of great value to any member of the municipal staff, however it is essential for the communications team in the event of a crisis.***

## COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Although you can't always anticipate events that might attract media attention, you can be prepared for almost any situation if you have some basic fundamental strategies in place beforehand, including a well-developed communications plan.

Having one spokesperson for your organization will ensure consistency. It will also provide staff, who answer telephones or come in contact with the public, with a single contact to direct any inquiries. All staff should be briefed on the procedures to follow as outlined in the communications plan.

Simple key messages should provide the underlying theme behind all comments to the media. Have no more than three such messages, and have them prepared in advance of any interaction with the media. Be enthusiastic about your key messages. A positive attitude can be contagious.

The communications plan you prepare should be short, clear and concise so that it will be read by those who need to be familiar with it. It should clearly define when the plan needs to be activated, and should include a step by step outline of how information should flow from your organization to the media, or to other staff in a crisis situation. It should also contain contact information regarding the key personnel in your organization. Appendix A contains a sample communications plan adapted from information offered on the Media Trust website at <http://www.mediatrust.org>.

Once your basic strategy is in place, the next thing to consider is establishing a communications team that will be prepared to handle communications both internally with municipal staff, and also to liaise with the media as required. With a well selected, and well trained team in place, your organization will be in a position to offer reassurance to the public that their community's administration has the expertise and ability to handle whatever situation might arise.

### **SELECTING A SPOKESPERSON**

*Take a look at the people currently in your organization and take note of those staff members who already communicate well, and who project the kind of image that you would want representing your community. Remember, it's important to select team members who are able to think on their feet, can show sensitivity to delicate or potentially negative situations, and who are capable of keeping a calm demeanor under pressure. The chosen spokesperson should project integrity, honesty and candor. He or she should show an understanding of, and genuine respect for the role of the media. He or she must be able and willing to take some criticism and be prepared to accept a certain amount of risk. Also, although the spokesperson will be expected to be well informed, he or she will not be expected to know everything, and should be prepared for the difficult questions that might arise.*

*Other considerations that will become important in the selection of a spokesperson include: experience, poise, an articulate speaking style, and the capability of reassuring people in chaotic situations. These are the ideals, and unfortunately, not all communities would have such a person on staff so one solution is to select the best qualified person available, and provide sufficient training before they are put into a crisis situation. It may also be a good idea to have an alternate spokesperson trained for those situations that might arise when the primary spokesperson may be unavailable.*

### **Personnel contact list**

Strategic information that the communications person should have at their fingertips would include a list of:

- mayor / warden, municipal councillors, and areas they represent,
- administrative personnel, including:
  - the CAO or municipal clerk,
  - municipal legal advisor,
  - human resource director,
  - finance officer,
  - head of public works, and
  - other municipal staff who might possibly be called upon in a crisis.

It might also be helpful to include a brief outline of the areas of responsibility for each, and definitely should include phone numbers where they may be reached quickly in an emergency situation.

In addition, the HR department should have an accurate and up to date list of names, addresses and telephone numbers for family members or close contacts for every municipal employee in case of an emergency. One scenario to avoid is having family members learn of an emergency through radio or television reports rather than through personal contact.

It is also a good idea for municipal employees to know who to contact

**Keeping the information in your communications plan up to date is crucial!**

at work in an extreme emergency to find out where they should report to work, or whether they should remain at home.

This sort of list, of course, is only of value if it is kept current at all times. A thorough awareness of the command structure in the municipal organization can avoid potential problems of authority and conflict in the confusion of the aftermath of a major crisis. With these kinds of details ironed out in advance, the municipal organization will appear, professional, capable, well organized, and in control of the situation.

The culture in your organization can have a significant impact on how your relationship with the media will unfold. Ensuring that managers and staff are comfortable working with the communications team, can ultimately result in a successful interaction with the media. An open culture, and good working relationship among staff will strengthen the organization. Under scrutiny, any weaknesses, conflicts, or sore points in the municipal organization will be easily brought to light.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA**

The media can be a valuable asset to municipal governments in reaching the general public, stimulating public debate and generating support for local government programs and initiatives.

In order to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with the media there are a number of things to keep in mind.

- Get to know the media, particularly your local media. Know their characteristics, the types of stories they usually cover, and what their needs may be.
- Put yourself in the journalist's shoes, try to understand their viewpoint.
- Credibility is the cornerstone of the local government/media relationship. Be professional, always be honest, be consistent, and be available when they call.
- Although at times their intent may seem to be at odds with local government, remember to respect their role and what they are trying to accomplish.

*The goals of the media are not dissimilar to yours*

- *A well informed community*
- *A community that participates in local government.*
- *Ensure that local government is meeting the needs of the community*
- *Foster a sense of community and build on community identity.*

Municipal government officials who wish to build a good relationship with the media need to be aware of the requirements of the various media such as what the deadlines are for the various editions of local newspapers, as well as for radio or television broadcasts. Find out when is the best time to call a media representative in order to discuss local issues or to inform them of what is going on in the community.

One of the first things to consider in cultivating a successful relationship is to encourage the communications team members to read the local papers, and to listen to and watch local news programs in order to become familiar with the personalities and the programs. Being familiar with the personalities and their styles will be of great benefit when the time comes to do an interview with them.

### **WHAT MAKES A STORY NEWS?**

There are a few basic story elements which are likely to attract media attention. Colourful local stories can generate audience interest throughout the region and across the country and may bring your municipality recognition on a national scale. Also, national stories which can be viewed from a local perspective can generate a good deal of media attention. For example, water quality concerns resulting from the Walkerton situation in Ontario in 2000, have led local journalists to investigate the status of local water treatment facilities and make comparisons.

### **WHAT IS A REPORTER'S JOB?**

A common complaint from people who have had contact with the media in one form or another is that the reporter somehow missed the point. However, that is usually not the fault of the reporter. A basic understanding of what a reporter's job is can help to make your relationship with the media a little more satisfying.

### **Choosing the right method for getting your story told**

**Reporters take information from a variety of sources and use it to tell a story in an interesting and sometimes controversial way**

The reporter’s job is to talk to a number of different people, with different perspectives on a story, and then combine all of those interesting and important elements into a condensed form that might last just a few seconds on the air, or take up just a few inches in a newspaper. Choosing an interesting or controversial angle to present the story is also part of the reporter’s job. All of this is done under the pressure of meeting a deadline. Considering all these factors, and numerous other things that come into play, it’s not hard to understand why a reporter cannot possibly tell everyone’s side of a story in a way they would like to see it told.

The job of the person being interviewed, on the other hand, is to provide sufficient relevant background information and to answer the reporter’s questions in a manner that will get across a key message in such a clear and interesting way that will make it into print, or on the air, hopefully with a minimum of editing.

It would certainly be helpful for municipal staff to become familiar with what constitutes a news story from the perspective of the media. What you might like to see in print is not necessarily what the media would consider a good news story.

### **NEWS CONFERENCES AND BRIEFINGS**

When an issue arises of significant interest to hold a news conference or media briefing, there are a few things to keep in mind. First of all, if you are in doubt about calling a briefing, don’t. Let the media be the deciding factor on whether to hold a briefing or not. If you have information that the media wants or needs quickly, and they have shown significant interest by phoning or coming to your office, then that is your cue that it might be time to call a media briefing or conference so that you can get the information out to everyone at the same time.

A low-key approach to this type of event is to provide a news release and background information to the media and let them know that the mayor or CAO will be available to respond to inquiries at a specific time and place.

In advance of the event, an agenda should be set, speakers selected and all staff involved should be thoroughly briefed on what is to be expected. Schedule some time at the end of the presentation for questions that may not have been covered.

The location for the media event is also important. Select a room appropriate to the number of reporters, photographers, video crew etc. that you expect to attend. If you are unsure of how many people to expect, it's better to go small rather than large. It's better to bring in a few chairs etc. than it is to have a huge room with only one or two reporters show up.

Try to provide an interesting backdrop for the event. Use a site with a visually appealing background, or provide props such as maps, charts, graphs, diagrams, etc. Use good quality props with easily readable text as small details may be indiscernible.

## **THE STORY IN PRINT**

### **The press release**

**What is a press release and when is it used?**

How can you ensure that your press release will stand out enough to catch an editor's attention? You need to catch their attention in order to have the press release even read. There are no guarantees, but there are some basic tips that may help to make your news release stand out a bit more from the myriad of potential news items that cross an editor's desk.

**Keep it Simple**

First and foremost, keep the press release short, compelling, to the point, factual and balanced. Include sufficient detail to entice the reader to read further and get a good picture of the essence and importance of what you have to tell them. Give one or two facts, but not all the facts. If you can provide enough information to stimulate interest, you might entice the reporter to come and investigate for themselves. At the same time, remember if it's too lengthy, it may not get read, or may be edited in a way you might not like.

*A press release may be best used when you have breaking news to release to the people in your community. The information in a news release should be timely, and relevant enough to invite immediate coverage by the news media.*

**Press Release Format:**

- **Conclusion**
- **Relevant facts**
- **Less important information**

Generally, press releases should be written in an inverted pyramid, with the conclusion coming first, followed by relevant facts and the

**“The 5 W’s”**

less interesting or least important information coming at the end. A short catchy title, can serve as a “lead” to grab a reporter’s attention, and identify your organization, and provide a sense of what the article is about. This will help to stimulate interest and encourage the reader to continue to read through the article. One benefit from following the formula of an inverted pyramid is that if the release needs to be cut, the reporter or editor will probably cut information that the writer feels is less important.

Writing the words “**Press Release**” in bold letters at the top of the page clearly identifies what you are providing. Be sure to include the date so your release will be timely and relevant. There is limited space available in newspapers so it is essential to keep the writing concise, informative, and interesting.

The first paragraph should be quite brief, yet clearly answer the ‘Five W’s’ - who, what, when, where, and why. The second paragraph can provide additional details to the basics provided in paragraph one, or could introduce new information. Third or subsequent paragraphs should be added only if absolutely necessary. Although it is not generally recommended to include quotes in press releases, if quotes are used, keep them short and to the point to ensure that they won’t be taken out of context. Quotes may offer a personal perspective to the story or can provide an expert opinion.

When writing a press release, keep the writing to one page double spaced if at all possible. If it is necessary to go to a second page, indicate *-more-* or *-continued-* on the bottom of the first page so that the reporter will know to look for a second page. This can be especially important when the release is faxed to the media. At the top of the second page, indicate clearly that this is the second page of the release.

Try to find an interesting angle to tell your story. If you can make it unusual as well as interesting, you might just have a reporter assigned to cover your story which could bring much more coverage than a simple press release. Emphasizing the financial significance of the event or announcement may help the editorial staff to understand how important your news release will be to the readers.

Contact information including name, title, telephone number, email address or other relevant information is vital, and should be included in bold type at the bottom of the page.

**Who to send your press release to:**

- **Beat reporters covering specific issues (municipal events, sports, cultural events, education etc.),**
- **Television or radio assignment editors or producers for shows that cover the type of**

**A picture is worth a thousand words**

**Photographic punch**

Newspapers in particular are looking for good graphics that can attract attention as well as tell a story. Photographs of professional quality, combined with a well-written caption may get you published more quickly than a text only release. Avoid if at all possible, boring photographs such as a cheque being handed from one man in a business suit to another. Editors are looking for graphics that will enliven their publications and capture their readers' attention. Give some thought to what might provoke interest, and whenever possible, offer a selection of photos for the publication to choose from. Andy Marken, in his article "Let's Do Away With Press Releases" suggests sending along a selection of photos complete with concise, descriptive captions. He points out that the type of photograph you send should reflect the types of photos that media outlet normally publishes. Mr. Marken offers some words of caution that nothing is more irritating to an editor or reporter than receiving a phone call from someone wanting their story published, who knows nothing about the type of news or information covered in that publication

**Media Alert**

If your municipality is about to embark on something truly newsworthy, perhaps you should consider a media alert instead of the more lengthy news release.

A media alert is a short, to the point announcement of whom, what, when, where, why, and how in a format designed to grab attention. It is more like an advertisement than a story. An announcement of this type, combined with a press conference can provide good media coverage for significant events in your community.

**Public Service Announcement (PSA)**

Public service announcements provide a method for educating the

**Beyond the News Release**

public concerning an issue of some importance in the community. It may be a notification of changes in winter parking regulations, or a warning of a situation that could prove harmful or dangerous. Such announcements are most often aired, or published, at no cost and can provide a very effective method of promoting events, soliciting volunteers, informing and educating the community, or simply raising awareness about issues of local concern.

Many local newspapers and radio stations provide community bulletin boards where items of local interest can be publicized at no cost. Written PSA's should be submitted for announcers to read on the air and should be approximately 10 seconds in length. This may vary to 30 seconds or even 60 seconds, depending upon the requirements of your local station or paper.

**PSA Example:**

*The Community Garden Society will be holding a fund raising garden party and plant auction on Saturday, April 30, from 11am to 4pm at the local mall. Funds raised from the auction will be used to purchase supplies for the community garden to provide fresh vegetables for needy families in the community.*

Public service announcements which are geared toward raising consciousness, or educating people on issues require more planning and consideration than simple community bulletin board items. It is important to frame your message in a way that will reach the intended audience. Some considerations, when planning this type of announcement include identifying:

- what specific audience you intend to reach,
- Which medium is best suited to reach that audience,
- what particular aspect of the issue you want the audience to be aware of,
- what myths or misconceptions you need to dispel,
- what actions you wish your audience to take.

Whichever method you choose to get your information out, it is essential that the message is constructed in a concise and clear manner.

## **The Media Kit**

Busy reporters and editors do not have the time nor the inclination to wade through lengthy press releases trying to discover what it is you're trying to promote.

### **Media kits**

A media kit or information package prepared in advance can be a useful item to have on hand for occasions when you want to provide information to the media. When a situation arises, you might be overwhelmed with a number of issues requiring your attention at one time. A well-prepared press kit which is on hand and available to hand out to the media in times of crisis can provide background information on the community, and may even answer some of the reporter's questions for you. At the same time it may just take some of the pressure off municipal officials in times of stress when your attention may be better invested on other matters of importance.

The news kit can be as simple as a blank folder available from any stationary supply store that has a label on the outside. Labels can be printed up with the municipal crest and logo and will be useful for a multitude of other purposes besides the media kits.

Media kits, or information packages, may serve a variety of purposes, other than providing background information to reporters covering a story in your area. The package can contain photographs, fact sheets, pamphlets or brochures, of interest to businesses thinking of locating in your community, or to give to distinguished visitors. Having a standard media kit or information package on hand is a helpful tool, but it needs to be personalized for each particular recipient.

Once you have the basic information package with the essentials, add pertinent information related to each particular situation. What you put in an information package intended to encourage business or industry to locate in your community may contain much of the same information you would provide to a reporter covering a story.

- What to put in a media kit**
- **Photographs or brochures highlighting the assets and/or attractions in your community,**
  - **Fact sheets with statistics on demographics,**
  - **Biographies or historical background,**
  - **Important press articles about your community,**
  - **Statements or summaries of the policy question being discussed,**
  - **Contact information.**

**Evaluate the coverage**

**Evaluation of Media Coverage and Content**

It’s important to monitor the media coverage on any story you might be involved in so that you will be prepared to clarify, provide a rebuttal or to verify the facts. If you’re not keeping abreast of what the media is saying, you might lose a valuable opportunity to get your message across and ensure that it’s accurate.

Some things to keep in mind when doing an evaluation of media coverage:

- Is the content of the media coverage accurate, timely, relevant?
- Has the media coverage provided the depth of information that the audience needs or wants?
- Has the spokesperson accomplished the job effectively and portrayed the competent, reliable, trustworthy, and professional image you had hoped?
- Is there any policy change that should be considered as a result of the media coverage?
- Do you need to follow up with a phone call?

The Middle Tennessee University Journalism Department has a website devoted to writing for the media and includes grammar and usage as well as tips for how to write for different media. The “**Media Writing Tips**” website can be found at:  
<http://www.mtsu.edu/~kblake/171/tips.htm#top>.

## **PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW**

### **When the reporter calls**

**Like the boy scouts,  
“Be Prepared”**

Your communications team is in place and you’ve been selected as the media spokesperson. How do you prepare for that first big interview? When the lights are shining in your eyes and a microphone is pushed in your face, it’s a little late to prepare. A little advance planning however, can make an uncomfortable situation much easier to handle, and much less stressful.

**What you need to  
know before you  
talk to a reporter**

When a reporter telephones to ask for an interview, it’s good to build a rapport. Developing a good relationship with the reporter may help to get you their attention when you have a message you really need to get publicized.

In order to be well prepared in advance of doing any interview, you should have the answers to the following questions:

- Who is the reporter you will be speaking with, and who do they work for? Never, ever do an interview over the phone without checking on the persons credentials first.
- What is the reporter calling for? Is the reporter looking for an interview, or are they looking for background information on a story?
- What exactly is the story they are looking for? And, more specifically, what angle are they taking with the story?
- Whenever possible, rather than take the call immediately, get their phone number and tell them you will call them back in 10 to 30 minutes. Use that time to prepare for the interview. Speak to appropriate department heads or other relevant sources to ensure you know the facts. Be sure you do call them back when you say you will, remember, if they don’t get the facts from you they will get them somewhere else.
- What is their deadline? Ask what the reporter’s deadline time is and use that time to prepare yourself. You may be able to do some background preparation, gather the facts, or speak to the individuals involved before you speak with the reporter.
- What is the interviewer’s style? It can be most helpful to know

**The reporter's job may not always be compatible with yours**

the reporter's style of interviewing in order to have some inclination as to how they might approach the interview. Some reporters may be more aggressive, others may be looking for a human interest angle.

- Who else is the reporter talking to? Find out if possible who they are speaking to so that you will have rebuttal information if required. Try to determine what the other people might have said.

In order to derive optimum results from a relationship with the media, you need to have a good understanding of whom the reporter is and what their job entails. The reporter is your link or channel to the people you need to connect with. The reporter's job is not merely to pass on your story to the audience, but also to make the story interesting enough to attract as large an audience as possible. In order to attract that audience, some reporters may attempt to make the story more interesting, more controversial, or more entertaining by pursuing a controversial angle to the story.

***Hollidae Robinson, in Municipal Government in Mississippi: A Handbook for City Officials suggests a number of things to remember that might help in preparing to face the media.***

- ***You are the expert on your municipality, that's why the reporter is calling you for the interview. No matter how well he or she has done his homework, you will know more about your community and the issues.***
- ***A straightforward, pleasant and cooperative person who looks and sounds like a professional will rarely make a negative impression on an audience.***
- ***If you have done your preparation well, there should be no surprises.***
- ***If an unreasonable question is asked, the audience will recognize that the question is unreasonable. You will not be expected to dignify such a question with a response.***
- ***You are under no obligation to continue an interview longer than you are prepared to.***
- ***You are not expected to reveal anything that might be damaging to you or your community.***

To a large extent you can control how the interview will go. Keep in mind the following three words which can help you stay on top of the situation.

- **Influence** - Exert your influence to steer the tone and direction of the interview and the story that will ultimately be broadcast. You can do this by having a sharply focused agenda prepared in advance. Know the message you want the audience to hear and remember. Look for ways to bridge back to your key message during the interview to reinforce what it is you are saying.
- **Practice** - Use whatever time you may have available to practice your key message aloud before you talk to the reporter, and if possible have someone practice with you. Have someone throw questions at you, especially any negative questions that might possibly arise during an actual interview so that you will be better prepared to handle them in the actual interview situation. Prepare some examples or analogies that might help to reinforce your message, make your story more interesting, or memorable, and to ensure that your message is understood.
- **Responsibility** - You are responsible for the story the reporter gets. Don't rely on anyone else to ensure it's accuracy. It's your reputation on the line so be very careful to get the facts right, be honest, be forthcoming, be clear, and be concise. Remember, especially with radio and television, you need to think in sound bytes.

### **How to handle a hostile interview situation**

If you are unfortunate enough to find yourself in a hostile interview situation, you could hear rude or abusive remarks which are specifically intended to provoke you into saying something you will later regret. For this reason it is crucial that you do not lose your temper. Keep your cool, and maintain a positive and respectful demeanor while speaking with reporters no matter what might be said to provoke you.

One of the most important things to remember when dealing with the media is to give the reporter only accurate and clear facts that can be verified if the reporter checks other possible sources. Never, never lie to a reporter, because they will find out, and you will be placed in the embarrassing situation of having to explain yourself in public, and probably to a much larger audience than your original statement. State the obvious, and never assume that the audience knows the

background. Your story could be picked up nationally and although a local story might be well known in your community, it might not be so well known in other locations. If you leave it to reporters to speculate on the details, the story that goes on air will almost certainly not be one you intended.

During the actual interview, you may get questions you don't yet have answers for, don't let them throw you, and don't ever speculate on the answers. Be honest if you don't have the answers at hand, tell them that you don't have the answer to that, but you will check into it. Keep cool and calm, and let them know you will provide further updates as information becomes available.

End the interview gracefully before the reporter goads you into saying something you might later regret.

**A Few Reminders:**

- *Use key messages,*
- *Don't say more than you planned, or feel comfortable saying,*
- *Use complete sentences,*
- *Don't ramble,*
- *Repeat your message in a different way,*
- *Don't try to be something you're not - the audience will spot a fake,*
- *Don't fidget or play with pens, pencils, change in your pocket etc.*
- *Be enthusiastic about your message,*
- *Know your audience and your interviewer.*

**PRINT INTERVIEWS**

Although they may use some quotes, normally a reporter will tell the story through their own perspective supported by the background information you and others provide. In working in print media, a reporter may take notes in a notebook, or they may record the interview on tape. Either way, it is imperative that you speak slowly and clearly, and allow sufficient periods of silence for the reporter to take accurate notes.

**Doing an interview for print media**

Newspaper, magazine and other print media interviews are often done face to face. Increasingly, however, they are done over the telephone which has the disadvantage of not providing you with the opportunity to observe the interviewer's body language and therefore enabling you

**Not just a normal  
phone conversation!**

to judge his or her reactions to your comments. Often you can get a feel for how your message is being understood, and how the story will come across in print, by carefully observing the interviewer's reactions. This can give you an opportunity to clarify things or even to offer more background information to support your position. Telephone interviews in particular need to have clear key messages supported by enough background information to ensure that the message is understood.

Despite the drawbacks, telephone interviews also have some advantages. Without the added pressures of dealing with lights, cameras and microphones, this type of interview can feel more comfortable, relaxed and less pressured than other forms of interviews. Often the nervousness that accompanies tape recorders, cameras and microphones, is not present and it can seem like a regular phone conversation. One word of caution though, never forget you are speaking with a reporter, and **there is no such thing as "off the record"**.

### **RADIO and TELEVISION INTERVIEWS**

Advance preparation is even more crucial with radio and television. Before you go on the air, do some research to find out about the program you are going to be interviewed on. Is it a hard hitting news program, or a morning coffee and chat kind of program? Will your interview be live or pre-recorded? What sparked their interest in the topic you will be discussing and what might their angle be? Find out in advance if possible, just what questions you will be asked so you can be prepared with the answers. Also, give some thought as to what questions they may ask that they may not give you advance warning about. Reporters sometimes like to take you off guard. Always be prepared for the tough questions.

Be aware of who the audience is for this program. This can give you the opportunity to provide information geared towards a particular audience. For example, if you are being interviewed about budget cutbacks, and you are being interviewed by a local sports reporter, you might prepare yourself in advance with information concerning local ball fields, parks, arenas and other recreation facilities and how they might be impacted by the budget cuts. Will there be a reduction in the maintenance on these facilities, or a reduction in the hours that the facilities might be available.

**What you wear affects your message on television**

Television interviews require that you pay particular attention to your dress, grooming and overall appearance. Avoid jackets or suits with close-checked, striped or herringbone patterns that can cause a strobing effect. Avoid very dark suits with white shirts as these tend to drain colour from your face. Pastel colours are a flattering choice for shirts on camera. Simple styling, and neutral colours work best and can provide a more professional and authoritative look.

**What you do with your body affects the message too**

Body language is crucial during television interviews. When in front of a camera, don't allow your eyes to wander. Keep focused on the interviewer. If the interview is done standing, it helps to stand with one foot in front of the other so that you won't have the tendency to sway back and forth, which can be very distracting and draw attention away from what you are saying.

If you are seated for the interview, remember your posture. Don't slouch! Sit up straight, but not too stiffly. Don't cross your arms. This is a defensive position that might give the impression you have something to be defensive about. Lean slightly forward in your chair so that you will appear interested and involved in the conversation. Try to relax, but don't go too far with it, and remember, you are on camera for the whole world to see and judge. You may even be judged more for how you look than what you say.

**Good Visuals provide more appeal to the broadcaster and the audience**

Television broadcasters are always interested in good visuals. If your interview or press conference can be located at a location where there is visual interest it will be much more appealing both to the broadcaster and to the audience. For example, if you are being interviewed about the opening of a new sports arena, or children's playground, the interview will have considerably more impact at the actual location where children are playing and obviously enjoying the new facilities. An interview done in a television studio can seem bland and uninteresting by comparison. Filming an interview on-site may have the added benefit of bringing more people out to enjoy and support the new facilities.

Keep the interview conversational and try to avoid jargon, technical terms, and acronyms if at all possible. Imagine that you are talking with someone who is intelligent, but who knows nothing about the subject. Don't assume that the audience knows the background details that you might be thoroughly familiar with, but, at the same time don't be patronizing or talk down to your audience.

After the interview be sure to thank the people involved, even if the

## Handling a Crisis

situation was an uncomfortable one. Ask for copies of the video tape or the recording. These can be a great help in refining your interview style for future interviews. Watch the videos, and listen to the tapes to see what kind of impression you made. You can often spot simple ways of improving for the next time. Use these tools to find where you might have missed an opportunity to get your message out, or to come up with more appropriate responses.

### **RESPONDING TO A CRISIS SITUATION**

A situation or event that presents a threat to people, their homes, businesses, or community is often referred to as a critical incident. The amount of effort you put into advance preparations for the possibility of a critical incident occurring in your municipality will pay dividends, and can actually help you manage the situation as it unfolds.

The advance preparation you do in developing your communications plan, and in particular the personnel contact list, will prove its value when a crisis situation arises. (See page 3)

When a crisis occurs and the media is camped out on the doorstep, there are a few things to keep in mind as you begin to inform your residents of what's happening

- Have your crisis management plan ready to go before the situation arises,
- Ensure that your media spokesperson is well prepared and available to meet with the media at all times,
- Monitor the media coverage so you know what information is already out there,
- Have your communications team prepared to respond to inaccurate information,
- Assume that the reporters are in contact with many other sources of information,
- Never lie to the media,
- The priority must always be the successful resolution of the situation, not laying blame or finding out why. The "why's" can be addressed at a later time.

**Conclusions**

There is a wealth of information available through the internet and other sources which can help build a successful relationship with the media. Training is essential to the communications team and there are a number of very good media relations courses available in Nova Scotia and it would be beneficial to take advantage of such programs whenever possible. This article is intended only as an introduction to the basics, in order to develop the skills required to become an effective media spokesperson further training and development is recommended.

Familiarize yourself with the legal aspects of communications. If you are in any doubt, consult your municipal solicitor regarding the legal definition of libel, defamation, and especially Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy.

## **DO'S and Don'ts**

- ***Do use “bridging” to bring the interview back to your key message. If a reporter asks you a question that leads you into an area you are not prepared to go, use bridging techniques to return to your key message.***
- ***Do provide factual information. No matter how you are pressured, resist any temptation to speculate, wait until you have the facts you need before providing information.***
- ***Don't place blame. It makes you look bad, especially if you turn out to be mistaken when all the facts are uncovered.***
- ***Don't ever say “no comment”. If you can't provide an answer, at least provide an explanation as to why you can't answer at that particular time. It's better to say that you don't have the information at this time, or that you are not at liberty to say.***
- ***Don't say anything “off the record”. Any comment you make will be pursued. A reporter will seek out other sources to corroborate your comment.***
- ***Don't be rushed into answering. Pausing is a method employed by reporters to encourage you to say more. Often, to say more than you had intended to say.***
- ***Do use pauses to your advantage and think carefully about what you are going to say, and say only what you have prepared.***
- ***Don't legitimize loaded or negative words the reporter may have used, and never repeat them. In your response, point out that what was said was loaded or negative to turn the focus around to disarm them.***
- ***Don't lose your temper or yell, keep your calm and stay courteous. The more inflammatory the question or the interview, the calmer you should be.***
- ***Do correct any mistakes or inaccuracies immediately. Don't allow your statements to be misinterpreted. If necessary, politely interrupt the interviewer and set them straight.***
- ***Do sit still and be quiet at the end of the interview. Don't make any additional comments because you think you are off the air. You might not be.***

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