

# Positive Media Relations Requires Special Effort

By Elaine Cogan

Friend or foe? Adversary or advocate? When asked what they dislike most about their jobs, many planning commissioners and their staffs put having to deal with the media near the top of the list. What is your record in media relations?

If you have been in the public sector any time at all, you probably can cite at least one example where the media appeared to distort the truth, follow its own agenda, and generally impede good relations between your public agency and the public.

The media, on the other hand, most likely can show at least one example where your agency's representatives appeared to be less than completely open, shaded the facts, and generally acted as if they had something to hide.

The key word here is "appeared," for there likely is truth on both sides. As a public official, you should never consider the media your friend. Then you will never feel "betrayed" by what they do. With the exception of public television and radio, all media are businesses whose owners expect them to make a profit. Self-serving declarations to the contrary, their primary mission is not to carry your message except as it gets them more readers, listeners, or viewers. However, profit need not translate into profligacy, and there are many fine examples of the media as good community citizens. It does mean, however, that they do not have to provide coverage for your agency, no matter how newsworthy you think you are. Still, the facts of everyday public life are that the media are an important conduit to your constituency, and you ignore or treat them lightly at your peril.

Other than being driven by the profit motive, there are many important differ-

ences between the electronic and print media. Print — primarily your daily or weekly newspaper — is less transitory than television or radio and can cover situations in more depth. Still, you can have trouble when their deadlines do not coincide with yours. Many planning commission meetings last well into the evening or early

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morning. If the reporter leaves to meet a deadline before your deliberations are over, you may be horrified to pick up the morning paper to find that coverage is confined to only when the reporter was present. Unfortunately, if that time was devoted to dealing with a complaining contingent of citizens and an amicable decision was reached after the reporter left, only the negative part of the story will appear. If confronted, the reporter and editor can plead innocent. They could not hold up the presses because of your marathon session. On the other hand, you are reasonably provoked because the public is being given the wrong message.

What to do? First of all, know the deadlines of the press; if they cannot stay for an entire meeting, arrange to phone the reporter or editor as soon as the decision is

made. They often will save space if they know fast-breaking news is coming. Another way to obtain full coverage of a controversial issue is to schedule an earlier meeting time or take up that agenda item first. If you are on very good terms with the press, you might ask to have the report of the meeting delayed a day so that the complete story can be written.

When the ubiquitous television cameras come to call, accommodate them as best you can. Assign a staff person, if possible, to find them a place that will not obstruct the public's view. Be prepared when, out of a two-hour meeting, the television reporter picks out just thirty or sixty seconds' worth of a story — and its not flattering to your agency's point of view. To help deter such a situation, offer to meet with the assigned reporter before the meeting when you can provide an outline of the issue under discussion. Whenever you deal with TV, talk in short, succinct sentences. They give only sixty seconds to important pronouncements of candidates for President. Why should they give you any more time?

The radio audience is even more fickle than television viewers. Radio listeners are most likely in the car, the shop, or the kitchen — in other words, doing something else. To communicate well over radio, speak clearly and in a friendly, informal voice. Local talk shows are a good vehicle for two-way communication with the public.

There will be times when no matter how hard you have tried to meet the media's needs, they will print or air a misleading or damaging story. Your first reaction should be to do nothing. Allow yourself or your staff time to be angry or upset without getting on the phone or sending an irate letter to the editor or manager.

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Then, talk it over with others who are not as intimately involved. If they do not think any harm was done, forget it.

If everyone agrees you have cause to complain, coolly assess all the facts. Was the entire treatment of the issue untrue? Half-true? Or were the facts correct, but the emphasis detrimental? Were names or titles misspelled or comments misquoted? Does the story unfairly damage your reputation or that of the agency?

If you answer yes to most or all of these, first contact the reporter. Perhaps she or he misunderstood and is willing to print or air a correction. If you find no satisfaction there, proceed to the editors or managers. They probably will back the reporter, unless it is a case of outright, provable lies, but they may be receptive to printing a guest editorial or a letter, or giving you rebuttal time on the air. Oftentimes it is more effective to have sympathetic citizens rather than elected or appointed officials carry the message.

Above all, do not burn any bridges. Take care of the incident as best you can and move on. You need the media, and they need you. By constantly trying, you can nurture a symbiotic relationship that benefits all.

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