

FACE THE PRESS

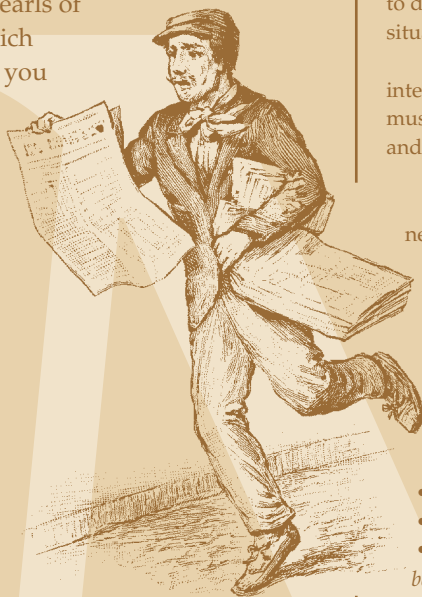
A Client's Guide to Dealing with the Media

Introduction

Levy & McRae not only act for many media companies but we are regularly involved with clients or events, which generate media interest.

Piper Alpha, Lockerbie, Dunblane, the Chinook crash on Mull of Kintyre and the Saudi Nurses are some of the bigger events but in these news hungry days even relatively modest situations can find the unsuspecting company or individual unexpectedly facing the press. The purpose of this guide is to give you some basic information about dealing with the press. It is not a substitute for Media Training nor is it a "do it yourself guide" to Public Relations. It is no more than a few pearls of wisdom, which should keep you free of the pitfalls, which so often befall the unprepared.

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You may not want it to happen, but there will be times that you will have to deal with the media.

An Overview

This guide provides some ideas on working with the media, dealing with the media in times of crisis, handling press releases and becoming comfortable in dealing with the media.

There are plenty of times the media wants your news. The flow of information is a two-way street. Giving story ideas about forthcoming news worthy events and getting to know the media will help if you ever have to deal with them in a crisis situation.

The criteria for media interest in a story vary. News must be interesting, relevant and timely.

Some criteria for newsworthy stories are:

- *Timeliness; let them know as soon as it happens*
- *Proximity; localise a national story; make your story of importance to your community*
 - *Consequence; this will affect your community*
- *Disaster*
- *Conflict*
- *Progress; things are getting better*
- *Human interest*
- *Novelty*
- *Tradition; an annual tournament or recognition event*
- *Spectacle*
- *Prominence; important people are involved*

Reporters are not unlike you. Don't be intimidated. In fact, they will often look to you to help them with your expertise. Do that!

Remember these things about media:

- *They are under time constraints, are often assigned to stories they may not fully understand, and deal with a dozen different issues in the course of a week. Be clear with your facts and make sure they understand you.*

- *Reporters like a good story. They also like colourful, interesting*

quotes and straight answers.

- *Answer any queries promptly, as reporters are working on deadlines and appreciate someone who doesn't make them wait all day. Call back even if you have to say you need time to gather more information. Ask about their deadline and be helpful and understanding as to their situation.*

• *Don't evade the media. Withholding comment can be more dangerous than talking to the press. Get your side of the story told. Reporters should be given as much information as you want known, without disclosing confidential information or jeopardising your reputation.*

- *Don't expect miracles or be disappointed when the story isn't exactly what you wanted. Try to*



"It's a fact that the facts, whatever they are, are seldom as damaging as misinformation or misunderstanding."

think of it in terms of any news being publicity for your organisation.

- *Do try to make it easy for the reporter. Make them feel you're getting the information they need as quickly as possible.*

Don't expect miracles or be disappointed when the story isn't exactly what you wanted.



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Some of the more important do's and don't's to watch out for when dealing with the media.

DO'S

- Do have a story to tell.
- Do be fully informed on the facts and background.
- Do be as brief and to the point as possible, but always be polite.
- Do offer quotes from key people whenever possible.
- Do provide photos or photo opportunities if appropriate.
- Do be sure of exactly who you are talking to.
- Do check and keep to media deadlines.
- Do answer questions directly.
- Do use linking phrases: "Yes, but don't forget..." add your message.
- Do monitor the various media to really know their character and flavour.
- Do respond promptly to calls and questions.
- Do target your media selectively.
- Do establish good personal relations with individual journalists.
- Do seek to be regarded as a reliable contact and source of information.
- Do be sure that you or a colleague is contactable whenever needed.



DON'T'S

- Don't disclose confidential information.
- Don't guess or speculate in response to questions.
- Don't respond to hypothetical, "what if?" questions.
- Don't ever say "No comment" but inform or call back.
- Don't fail to call back as promised and to time.
- Don't assume too high a level of knowledge.
- Don't use jargon or unfamiliar terms, initials or acronyms.
- Don't be afraid to correct yourself if you have made a mistake.
- Don't make promises you cannot keep.
- Don't argue, be factual.
- Don't ignore questions in the hope they will not be repeated.
- Don't "hype" or over-promote your story: that can be counter productive.
- Don't talk "off the record" - this may not be respected!
- Don't assume journalists are irresponsible.
- Don't comment superfluously merely to fill silences in conversation.

There will be times when working with the media is to your advantage, whether that's to promote yourself or to let the public know what's happening.

There are three ways to generate media publicity:

- Provide information and written materials such as a press release;
- Provide a spokesperson and conduct interviews;
- Stage an event or hold a press conference.



News is anything that interests other people. If you have something interesting or relevant going on, tell people!

Editors and reporters are always looking for story ideas. Let them know if you're holding an event; telling a story; creating or participating in something; supporting, opposing or even observing a trend or activity. Accurate and timely information is a key.

The media will welcome your achievements and your ability to publicise them. Where possible make sure you are articulate and present yourself as serving the community, not just seeking publicity or trying to gain attention or an advantage for your organisation.

There are also two types of news:

- Hard news, immediate and important; and,
- Soft news, more features and human interest.

If you can make your story relevant, whether it's hard or soft news, and show what it means to the community, you may get coverage. This is especially true for local media.

It's a good idea to have a communications strategy or even a policy in place. Is there someone who can be a spokesperson, or

someone willing to promote what's going on? If you build a positive relationship in the good times, the media will trust you, listen to you and turn to you in bad times. The public who sees the positive messages may do so as well.

In your policy, make it clear who is responsible for what when it comes to media relations. A spokesperson can make most official statements to the media on behalf of your organisation. You can also spell out procedures, formulating a specific policy, for individual members when speaking to the press.

If you're the spokesperson, try to develop a relationship with the media. Keep your relationship friendly but professional. Give them information and be credible, but don't plead or offer some sort of personal benefit.

An organisation without a policy for meeting the communication needs in a crisis is already facing a crisis.

In Bad Times

There should be a policy on crisis situations. Four major elements will be present in a crisis:

- Emotions;
- Rumours;

- The news media; and,
- Your organisation must respond.

The media is certain to get wind of bad news. Have a media policy worked out in advance.

A policy for crisis involves the following components:

- A designated crisis manager.
- An ongoing means of gathering information, both facts and rumours.
- A commitment to investigate the situation to separate fact from fiction.
- A system for communicating what is learned back to your organisation.
- A decision-making process.

In a crisis situation:

- The first rule is to set the record straight; otherwise your organisation will suffer from a loss of trust.
- Determine a spokesperson who will handle all requests. Let everyone know when the crisis occurs exactly who that person is, and that no one else is to talk



Dealing with the media doesn't have to be a painful process. Often they're not sure of the subject matter and may feel as intimidated as you are!

M The care and feeding of the media folks are like in-laws; you don't have to love them, but you better learn to live with them.

to the media. Let secretaries, etc., know that calls must be routed there.

- Ensure the person in charge knows the facts and responds to media requests promptly. Not saying anything is worse than saying 'I don't know.'

- DON'T avoid the media in bad times.

- Prepare a statement dealing with the crisis situation. Distribute the statement to the media when requests come in. This ensures accurate information goes to everyone.

- Keep staff informed as to what's going on. They may not make official statements, but if friends ask what's happening, an informed staff will help avoid rumours.

- Try to find out the facts and the fictions of the situation. You can easily dispel rumours if you know what they are.

- Contact the media and make a statement to set the record straight.

- You can publicise the fact that it's looking into the matter. That may calm the atmosphere.

- Once a decision is made, communicate it as well.

- After a crisis, or at periodic intervals, evaluate your policy and how it works.

In times of trouble, don't react like the man who jumped on his horse and galloped off in all directions. Plan your official statement and stick to it.



Dealing with the media doesn't have to be a painful process. Often they're not sure of the subject matter and may feel as intimidated as you are!

Here are a few tips:

- Designate someone to act as the media 'spokesperson.' This step does not always have to be taken, but it's a good idea if the issue is sensitive or controversial and you want one person who can deal with the issues. Choose someone who is well spoken and knows the facts but speaks in layman's terms. This person does not have to be the top person in charge; the position is not necessarily the most important criterion.

- When dealing with the media, you'll have to answer the basics: Who; what; when; where; why; and how.

- Be prepared! Know your facts.

- Try to familiarise yourself with the publication or show you'll be on.

- When talking to the media, tell only what you want the interviewer to know.

- Take time to think of your answers.

Don't rush to speak and then regret what you've said. Be careful what you say, and remember that EVERYTHING you say can be used.

- Going 'off the record' is NOT recommended. It's dangerous and there aren't any guarantees. Simply say, 'No, I'm not comfortable with that.'

- Don't be defensive or nasty. Be friendly to the media.

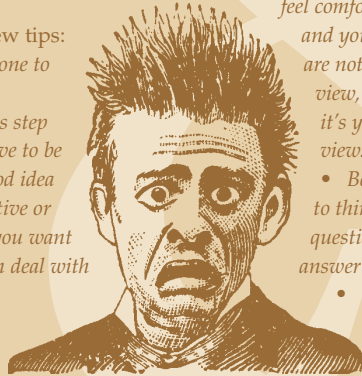
- If possible, try to get to know media people before a 'crisis' situation occurs. Perhaps call and suggest a positive story idea you think would highlight your organisations. On a slow news day, this might be appreciated. **WARNING:**

Don't bother the media incessantly.

- Don't lie or bend the truth; it will come back to haunt you.

Don't say 'no comment.' It's OK to say, "I'm not sure how to answer that.'

- Offer documents, charts or other background information if necessary.



- Talk to the reporter, not the camera.

- Don't say anything you don't want printed, heard or seen.

- Don't do an interview unless you feel comfortable with the issues and you know the facts. If you are not expressing the official view, say so. Make it clear if it's your personal point of view.

- Before the interview, try to think of some difficult questions and how you'd answer them.

- Express yourself concisely and avoid jargon. You're talking to ordinary

people! Talk plainly and candidly. Don't bend the truth or try to mislead the reporter. If you don't know the answer, don't fabricate or guess. Say you don't know, and offer to find out the information. If you're not sure about the question, say so.

- Be sincere about how you feel. If it upsets you, or you feel happy about it, or you're frustrated, you can say that.

- Be courteous and diplomatic. Suggest that the reporter call later for clarification if needed.

- Listen to the questions! Make sure you answer them. You can add other information you think is important later.

- Smile! Relax!

If you get an interview request, feel free to ask the reporter his/her name, the media outlet and what the story is about or the angle of the story. Also ask if background information is needed. Don't hesitate to say you need time to gather information.

If you think you're the wrong person to be commenting on the story, suggest the right person.

When giving the interview:

- Give short, concise answers.

- Be personal; relate your story in terms of real people, not institutions or abstract ideas.

- Be specific. Don't generalise. Use examples or anecdotes; make the story relate to people. Think about telling a story to just one person.

- Watch for a question that is re-worded to try and get another answer from you. Stick to your facts and keep the interview going where you want it to go.

- Don't forget about deadlines. If a reporter calls, phone back promptly, even if it's to say you need some time and you'll get back to them soon.

- Be friendly and approachable, articulate and concise.

- Don't be afraid to say you don't know, or you'll have to find the information.

- Don't give an inaccurate answer or give facts of which you're not sure.

- Don't tell the reporter how to write their story or that you want to see it before it's published.

- Know what message you want to get across.

- Remember that reporters usually don't write headlines, so don't criticise them for that.

- Do try to help reporters understand. If there's an error in the story, call the reporter first. If you think the story was good, call and say so. Don't thank the reporter for doing it, just comment that it was done well.

- Don't talk for the sake of talking. If continuing to talk will only damage your cause, STOP!

- If you get a media request and have only 15 minutes before they arrive, take time to prepare. Write down a focus for what you want to say. Decide on a couple of examples.

- Remember that you're talking to one person, and tell them your story.

If an issue arises that you simply cannot talk about, rather than refusing to talk to a reporter or not returning phone calls, simply explain that you cannot comment and explain briefly why you cannot comment.

Having the reporter write that you "declined to comment" is better than reading that "officials were not available for comment," or "repeated calls to the company went unanswered."



"Always be first to give your story to a reporter . . . and let everyone else react to your version."

Writing Press Releases

To get your story told, you have to let the media know you exist and that what you do is important. Other times you'll want to contact the media to ensure they get the correct facts. Providing that information in the form of a press release is effective.

You can also write press releases or briefs to give out if you're handling a number of interviews on a subject, so that everyone gets the same information. You should also prepare briefs for press conferences, so that facts are straight.

When writing a press release:

- Use an attention-grabbing first sentence or headline.
- Find an angle that provides useful information and use that; don't be self-serving. Put the most important information first and least important last. Pick out the most important information of your news and highlight it.
- Keep the release short: One or two pages at the most. Make it easy to read, without a lot of jargon.
- Make sure you cover who, what, where, when, why and how.

- Avoid wordiness; reporters can call for more information, so stick to the main facts and why it's important they know.

- Localise the information or tell why this is important.

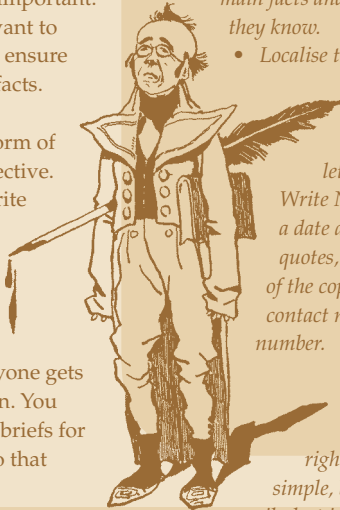
- Start with letterhead, at the top.

Write NEWS RELEASE. Put a date as well. Include some quotes, if possible, in the body of the copy. Finish with a contact name and phone number.

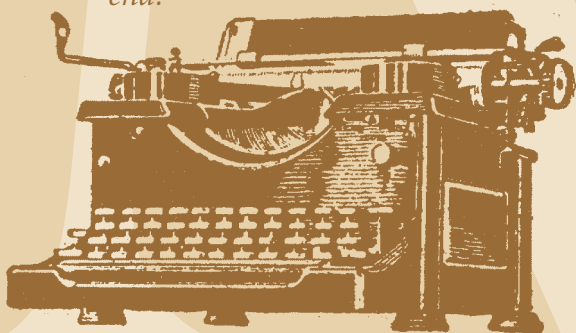
- Find out who the release should go to so that it gets to the right place (that sounds simple, but releases can get easily lost in a pile of paper). Hand

deliver it or fax it. If you're announcing an event, send your release 10 days to two weeks ahead of time.

Follow up with phone calls to make sure the release got there! Avoid being a pest, however. Don't give up. A series of news releases over a few months will make the media remember you and establish you as a source of information. When the media calls, call back promptly. Give brief, succinct answers. Don't get off on a tangent. Get your point across. Be friendly. Smile!



"It doesn't matter where the rumours start, just where they end."



Finally, some things to remember. They may not apply to everyone, but they're good to keep in mind.

The Last Word

To get the most out of the media, remember:

- Include media relations in your policy on communications.
- Appoint a spokesperson for your organisation.
- Delegate communication responsibilities clearly.
- Use all the media at your disposal.
- Find out what the media wants and give it to them.

Appearing on radio or television

Some people, even those with initial anxieties, prove to be natural performers on radio and television. Others fare less well. Television is a particularly demanding medium, especially in the unfamiliar environment of the studio. There are some dependable pieces of advice that are usually helpful. Be prepared be absolutely clear about what you want to say and what is the purpose of your appearance. Always try to be positive. Never be angry or dismissive towards an interviewer, however difficult this may be, because there is a danger that this

will alienate viewers or listeners.

While these guidelines are useful, practical experience is much more so. Training is invaluable, especially for television. When embarking on media training, make sure that you are in the hands of people who currently work, or have very recently worked, in the medium. Some courses of this sort are run by trainers who themselves have had little or no practical experience in television or radio. They are scarcely likely to be in a good position to advise you.

A key question about a radio or television appearance is whether it is recorded or live. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

While some people are more nervous about a live interview, others appreciate the opportunity to say exactly what they wish to say, without any possibility that their words will be edited before transmission. Remember that, in a news or current affairs programme, the interviewer may wish you to crystallise your viewpoint/comments in a "sound bite" of at most 30 seconds. Remember too that, as with public speaking, a little nervousness actually helps.



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