



# **MEDIA RELATIONS**

## **A GUIDE FOR COUNTIES**





## **ABOUT NACo**

The National Association of Counties (NACo) unites America's 3,069 county governments. Founded in 1935, NACo brings county officials together to advocate with a collective voice on national policy, exchange ideas and build new leadership skills, pursue transformational county solutions, enrich the public's understanding of county government, and exercise exemplary leadership in public service.

**Stronger Counties. Stronger America.**

# MEDIA RELATIONS: A GUIDE FOR COUNTIES

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THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY OFFICIALS  
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JUSTICE REFORM STARTS



# Introduction

## **YOU NEED A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

Part of your responsibility as an elected official is to inform the public about what you and the county are doing on their behalf. To fulfill this responsibility, it is a good idea to develop a workable personal communications plan each year. Having a plan will help you to focus on important objectives, ensure that accomplishments are communicated effectively to the public and prepare you to handle any public relations challenges that arise. Ideally, your county has – or should have – a media relations policy and a social media policy in place. If it does, be sure you are familiar with it and adhere to it. If it does not, or it is in need of major revision, consider leading that effort.

Developing your personal communications plan is not as difficult as it may sound. It can be as basic or elaborate as you want. A simple way to approach this is to sit down each year and:

- determine your goals
- develop key headline messages to support your goals
- identify specific audiences you want to reach such as seniors, employers, educators, students and community groups
- develop key secondary messages to appeal to those specific audiences, and
- consider all communications tools available and determine which are most appropriate for you to use to reach specific audiences.



A critical part of your plan is communicating through the local news media. At the very minimum, you should:

- know the key reporters, editors, columnists, broadcasters and bloggers in your area
- closely follow what is being reported in the local news even if it's not directly related to county government programs and services
- have a sense of how the community is reacting to certain news stories and controversies
- avoid common media relations errors, and
- not lose any sleep over your media coverage or lack of it.

The Media Relations Guide for Counties was developed to assist county officials in strengthening their communications skills to improve local media coverage. NACo has other resources available, including media relations workshops, webinars and "take home" news releases to report your NACo activities.

**Contact:** NACo Public Affairs Department at 202.393.6226 or [www.naco.org/media](http://www.naco.org/media)

# Section I:

## Media Relations 101

## WHAT IS MEDIA RELATIONS?

For our purposes, media relations is the term to describe the best practices county officials can use to communicate effectively to the public through the local news media. Typically, this means working directly and cooperatively with the reporters, columnists, editors, broadcasters and independent bloggers who produce news stories and features in the local media. The goal of effective media relations practices is to build public confidence and understanding about the role and responsibilities of county government and your contributions toward that goal. Keep in mind that media relations efforts are both reactive and proactive.

As a county official, you must be prepared to respond to media inquiries – and avoid common errors – as well as have a plan in place to effectively make important information available to your constituents.

## WHAT IS NEWS?

News has many definitions. Wikipedia, for example, defines news as the “communication of information on current events which is presented by print, broadcast, internet or word of mouth to a third party or mass audience.” This definition is inadequate for county officials. Just because you have current information to share does not necessarily make it newsworthy. You have to think carefully how the information might fit into what is considered news in your community. Start by asking yourself these questions:

- Is the information new?
- Is the information important, timely and relevant to the people I represent?
- To whom specifically is the information important, timely and relevant?
- Is the information factual and verifiable?
- Is it a statewide or national story that has a significant local impact?
- Is the information best suited for newspapers, magazines, television, radio, websites, social media or all of the above?
- Am I the best person within county government to communicate the information?

Keep in mind that reporters may have different ideas of what news is in your community. Some reporters may only be interested in



information that is not only important, timely and relevant but also exclusive. Other reporters might be more interested in stories that involve conflict or controversy. Television reporters are more inclined to cover a county story if it has interesting and exciting visuals.

## **DOs AND DON'Ts OF SPEAKING WITH A REPORTER**

Of the many tentacles of effective media relations efforts, nothing is more critical to success than your direct interaction with a journalist. Here are some tips to keep in mind when being interviewed by a reporter:

### **TEN DOs OF SPEAKING WITH A REPORTER**



1. **Know the story and prepare accordingly.**
2. **Set interview boundaries such as when, where and how long.**
3. **Keep the audience in mind at all times.**
4. **Listen carefully to each question.**
5. **Answer each question with clarity, authority and energy.**
6. **Be informative, thoughtful and truthful.**
7. **Speak in complete thoughts.**
8. **Illustrate your key points with examples.**
9. **Maintain your composure.**
10. **Stay on message.**

There are many common mistakes public officials make when speaking with a reporter. Here are some of the things you should avoid when being interviewed:

### **TEN DON'Ts OF SPEAKING WITH A REPORTER**



1. **Do not lie, mislead or distort the truth.**
2. **Do not lecture or debate a reporter.**
3. **Do not become argumentative.**
4. **Do not guess at an answer.**
5. **Do not question the motive of the question.**
6. **Do not talk too much.**
7. **Do not use words you do not want attributed to you.**
8. **Do not say "no comment."**
9. **Do not speak off the record.**
10. **Do not allow the interview to go beyond the agreed to parameters.**

There are a few other mistakes public figures too often make which can create instant political crisis and media delight: Misfiring on an analogy or joke to illustrate a point, swearing and uttering a politically incorrect (or worse) word or phrase.

Analogies are particularly risky: 1) they often do not clarify your point and 2) your analogy could badly misfire and become the story. For example, nothing in county government is comparable to propaganda tactics of the former Soviet Union or the inhumane events leading up to World War II. Do not go there. Ever. Just deliver your message.

Trying to be funny is risky business as well. Leave the jokes to the stand-up comedians.

Swearing, one would think, is a media relations no-no not necessary to mention. But it happens from time to time even by seasoned communicators. Like a poor analogy, your message is not strengthened by cursing. It's also not wise to swear under your breath or quietly to your buddy next to you in public since it could easily be picked up by a hot microphone.

Finally, be careful of falling victim to political incorrectness. Nowadays, even seemingly harmless statements can be deemed inappropriate or offensive and cause a stir. Again, keep your comments on message without getting personal or generalizing. Stay on message and be extraordinarily careful about the words that you use. If you do find yourself in a jam, see Crisis Communications on page 41.

By having a thoughtful communications plan and avoiding common media relations mistakes, your chances of success are vastly improved. In addition, over time, you will build tremendous credibility within the local news media and gain public trust. You want to be a valuable resource and effective spokesperson not only for yourself but for your county, region and state.

The rest of the Media Guide for Counties will explore the tools and strategies you need to help you succeed in county government.



# **Section II:**

## **Traditional Media Relations Tools**

Many media relations tools are available to assist you as a county official in effectively communicating to the public. The most basic yet effective tools include news releases, media advisories, letters to the editor and pitching story ideas directly to a reporter. More advanced tools include press packets, opinion or “op-ed” columns, editorial board meetings and news conferences.

## NEWS RELEASE

The news release is the most important promotional document a county official can use. It should be written in clear and simple language. It should be formatted as a typical newspaper story. Most newspapers follow “AP style” as outlined in the Associated Press Style Book ([www.apstylebook.com](http://www.apstylebook.com)).

## HOW TO WRITE A NEWS RELEASE

For most announcements, less is more. Keep the news release to one or two pages. Only go to more pages if you are explaining a complicated topic or issue. Develop a template to use for all news releases and place it at the top of each release directly under the county letterhead. See example on page 12.

The first paragraph – or “lede” – is critical. It begins directly after the dash that follows the dateline (the city or town from where the news release is being issued). Write your lede the way a newspaper reporter would write it. It should be a concise summary of the announcement. Often, newsrooms will only read the headline and first paragraph to determine whether the information is newsworthy. Within the first two paragraphs, the five W’s and H should be covered: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.

After the lede comes the body of the news release. Use the body to go into greater detail on the information you provided in the lede paragraph. You may include a quote from yourself or another appropriate county official along with any relevant statistics or background information. If you use two pages, write “-more-” at the bottom center of the first page. When you finish the release, choose one of the commonly used markers to signify the end of the release: “END” or “-30-” or “###”.



Be sure to provide contact information and where more information can be found on the county website.

## HOW TO DISTRIBUTE A NEWS RELEASE

To ensure that the media receives your news release, you need to have an updated media list. All media organizations have websites that list their contact information. If your county does not have a public information officer, appoint an aide to build and maintain a media list. The media list should include names, addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses, websites and social media sites and handles. Most important is having the contact information of key reporters who cover county government. Be sure to have their office phone and mobile phone numbers, e-mail addresses and Twitter handles. Know their deadlines. Keep the information up to date as reporters come and go and change beats.

There are several options for news release distribution:

- **U.S. Postal Service** – The use of “snail mail” to distribute news releases is no longer a recommended option. It can be costly and time consuming to print the documents, insert into an envelope, apply postage and drop in the mail. Most news organizations prefer to receive information electronically for easy review and distribution to appropriate staff.
- **Fax** – Faxed news releases can reach all of your contacts quickly and inexpensively. However, newsrooms receive dozens of faxes each day and it is possible that your news release will get lost in the paper shuffle and not find its way to the right reporter or editor. Here are some points to keep in mind when faxing a news release:
  - Broadcast function. Program the fax machine to “broadcast” the news release with one feed through the machine. Monitor the success of the faxes sent. Consider using a computer software “blast fax” program.
  - Keep faxed news releases to one or two pages. A cover page is unnecessary unless a particular reporter or editor is expecting your fax. If so, be sure to clearly address the fax to the reporter’s attention. If there are supporting documents to accompany the news release, indicate that they are available on the county website or upon request. In other words, do not fax 16 pages of supporting documents to newsrooms unless they request them.

- **E-mail** – Sending news releases via e-mail is quick, easy and cost-effective. A survey of journalists by PR Week found that 80 percent preferred to be contacted by e-mail. But sending information via e-mail has its own set of rules:
  - Do not send attachments. Most reporters dislike receiving unsolicited attachments and will not open them. Instead, copy and paste the text of your news release into the body of the e-mail. Copy and paste your headline in the subject line.
  - Personalize it. If you are distributing a news release to multiple e-mail addresses at once, place the e-mail addresses in the BCC (blind carbon copy) address line. The best practice is to add a personal note at the top of the e-mail, addressed by name to the reporter or editor. Indicate that you thought the information below would be of interest.
  - Don't spam them. It is inefficient and ineffective to send ALL your news releases to ALL reporters in your media market. Know the beats and interests of each reporter and try to target certain information to specific reporters. For example, the highway garage renovation project is of no interest to the reporter who covers healthcare. Your goal is to entice reporters to become interested in your announcement, not to annoy them by sending information that they would never use.
  - Update your e-mail/contact media list. Stay up-to-date on reporters, editors and broadcasters changing jobs or changing beats. If a reporter asks to be removed from your distribution list, honor the request. A best practice is to "follow" local journalists on Twitter and note any announcements he or she makes such as new a new job or a new beat.

## HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF A NEWS RELEASE

Do not allow your news release to die after distribution to the media. Be sure to post it on the county website where it is easily accessible. Even if the news release is not immediately picked up by the media, it is still a good record of county announcements and your positions on important issues. Many reporters search websites routinely to find information and sources for the stories and may contact you later as a result. Also, distribute the information through your social media vehicles such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blog.

Be aware, too, that newsrooms receive many news releases each day. Do not assume that because you faxed or e-mailed your news release to the local media that it has been received and deemed newsworthy. The best practice is to get the news release into the hands of key reporters you suspect would be interested in the information. For important announcements, call key reporters and verify receipt and offer to answer any questions.

## **MEDIA ADVISORY**

Related to the news release is the media advisory. The media advisory is a brief notice to the local newspapers and broadcast media of an important announcement or event worthy of their attendance. See example on page 13.

Your media advisory should be sent at least three to five days prior to the event. If you are in a large media market, send your media advisory to the local Associated Press Bureau and ask that the event be listed in the AP Daybook, which is a listing of daily media events. Reporters review the daybook listings every day. The media advisory should serve as a teaser for journalists. Describe the nature of the announcement and who the primary speakers will be without giving away the news. You want to entice reporters to come and cover the event. Tell them, WHAT, WHO, WHEN and WHERE.

## **OPINION COLUMN**

An opinion column written in your own words for publication in your local newspaper can be a very effective communications tool. Weekly community newspapers or free “Pennysaver” advertising publications are ideal media outlets to send your columns. You can also post the articles on your website, blog and social media platforms.

Less rigid than a news release, an opinion column – also known as an “op-ed” because it is often placed opposite of the editorial page in a newspaper – can frame issues and messages precisely the way you want. You can provide essential background and full context to help readers better understand your position. An effective column will make a clear and effective argument supported by facts. It will be well-written, credible, informative, focused, persuasive and interesting. An ineffective opinion column is poorly written, unfocused, inaccurate, and leaves the reader with many unanswered questions.

Contact your local newspapers and inquire about their policies for accepting opinion columns from public officials. Ask them how many words it should be. When is the deadline? Determine if there is interest in becoming a regular contributor.



## NEWS RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** Dec. 2, 2015

**CONTACT:** Brian Namey, [bnamey@naco.org](mailto:bnamey@naco.org), 724.989.3470

### Clark hosts national Safe and Secure Counties Symposium

*Event aims to help counties nationwide strengthen safety for residents*

**Colorado Springs, Colo.** – National Association of Counties (NACo) President Sallie Clark this week in El Paso County, Colo. hosted a [national symposium](#) focusing on the county role in strengthening safety and security in communities across the country. Approximately 200 officials from counties nationwide attended the event Dec. 2-4 as part of Pres. Clark's NACo initiative, [Safe and Secure Counties](#).

"In communities nationwide, there are countless examples of how counties deliver programs that keep our residents safe, mitigate damage and prepare for future disasters," said Clark. "We are working with public and private partners to strengthen safety and improve the quality of life for millions of people across the country."

Highlights of the symposium included three mobile workshops demonstrating best practices in water treatment, military partnerships and county justice systems. The workshops provided vivid examples of local leadership in ensuring safe and secure counties.

County leaders also participated in educational sessions and presentations featuring:

- Kathleen Koch, founder and director of LeadersLink and an award-winning journalist who covered for CNN the White House, Pentagon and Capitol Hill as well as several disasters including 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina
- Roy E. Wright, deputy associate administrator for insurance and mitigation at FEMA
- Matthew Travis, senior facilitator and program manager at FEMA's National Exercise Division, and
- Dr. Randall Hyer, assistant director of the Center for Risk Communication.

The symposium's educational sessions focused on emergency management, natural disaster response and preparedness, cybersecurity and criminal justice reform, mental health and public safety, risk management and crisis communications.

Clark added, "Counties play an essential role in keeping America's communities safe and secure. We provide vital services that touch every aspect of daily life – the safety net, maintaining roads and bridges, protecting public safety, supporting public health and human services, building resilient local economies and much more."

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## MEDIA ADVISORY EXAMPLE



### NEWS ADVISORY

**FOR PLANNING PURPOSES:** May 18, 2016

**CONTACT:** Brian Namey,

[bnamey@naco.org](mailto:bnamey@naco.org) 202.942.4220 (office)

## County leaders from across the West to meet in Teton County, Wyo. May 25-27

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** – More than 400 county officials are expected to participate in the National Association of Counties' (NACo) [Western Interstate Region](#) (WIR) conference in Teton County, Jackson Hole, Wyo. May 25-27. In partnership with Teton County and the Wyoming County Commissioners Association, the conference will bring together nationally renowned experts, state and federal policy leaders and county officials from across the country.

General sessions and educational workshops are open to credentialed members of the media. RSVPs to [bnamey@naco.org](mailto:bnamey@naco.org) are required. Credentials will be distributed from the NACo registration area in the Grand View Lodge, 537 Snow King Loop Road. (Note: If you have already RSVP'd, there is no need to do so again.)

For the full schedule, visit <http://www.naco.org/2016-wir-conference-schedule>.

#### Conference highlights:

##### Thursday General Session

May 26, 8:30 a.m. – 10 a.m.

Pavilion, Snow King Sports & Events Center (100 E. Snow King Ave.)

- Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead
- Grand Teton National Park Superintendent David Vela
- U.S. Dept. of the Interior Deputy Secretary Michael L. Connor

##### Friday General Session

May 27, 9:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Pavilion, Snow King Sports & Events Center (100 E. Snow King Ave.)

- Former U.S. Rep. Mary Bono, principal, FaegreBD Consulting and co-convener, Collaborative for Effective Opioid Policies
- Scott Tranter, partner, Øptimus Consulting
- Colorado State Dept. of Transportation Executive Director Shailen Bhatt

-- more --

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The effectiveness of a letter to the editor, especially to major daily newspapers, has waned in recent years. Yesterday's letter to the editor is today's tweet, Facebook status update or blog post. For county officials, a letter to the editor should be reserved to address specific items recently published in a newspaper which demand a direct response from you. For example, a letter to the editor can be an effective method to respond to a recent editorial or an article in need of clarification or additional context. To increase the odds of your letter being published, be sure your letter is on-point and brief. Find out how many words letters from readers should be and respect that limit. Send the letter to the opinion page editor or letters editor and call to confirm receipt.

## PITCHING A STORY

An excellent way to get the story you want published in the local media is by pitching a story idea directly to a reporter you suspect might be interested. Reporters, whether they cover the White House or your county board, like to have exclusive stories. Pitching a story to a journalist, however, takes some planning and skill. Here are some tips:

- **Be on target.** Determine which reporter or news organization would be most interested in your story. Has the reporter written about the issue before? Is the story best suited for newspaper, television or radio?
- **Know the reporter's work.** Be sure to review recent work by the reporter.
- **Use Ma Bell.** Pitch in person or via a landline telephone. Although the signal quality of mobile phones has improved greatly in recent years, you want to be sure you can be heard clearly. E-mail pitches can work if you already have an established e-mail relationship with the reporter, but speaking directly is the best practice.
- **Timing is everything.** Do not try to pitch a story in the afternoon or while reporters are on deadline. Initiate contact in the morning when they are planning. Also, reporters are well aware of the election calendar. The closer you are to Election Day the less likely it is for them to get excited about your story no matter how newsworthy it is.
- **Be on message.** Fine-tune your message and deliver it with clarity and confidence. Be prepared to provide all the information the reporter will need if interest is expressed.

- **Your point is?** Get to the main point quickly. The pitch should not be about you (even if it is). Rather, focus on the people who benefit from a particular county program or service. Reporters are looking for good stories to tell featuring the persons who are benefitting.
- **Sounds great, commissioner.** Listen carefully to the reporter's verbal clues when you make your initial pitch. If the reporter says, "That sounds interesting," this usually means that it is not. An interested reporter will ask a good, specific question.
- **Wrap it up.** If you suspect that your pitch has fallen flat, do not take up any more of the reporter's time. Quickly offer to send additional information and move on.
- **It's a go.** If you get to first base and the reporter expresses interest in learning more, set up a time to get together to discuss in greater detail. Offer to provide additional information and other sources for the reporter to contact.



## NEWS CONFERENCE

Successful news conferences take careful planning. By holding a news conference, you are competing with everything else taking place at that time and on that day. Remember the movie *"Field of Dreams"* when the voice told Kevin Costner, "If you build it, they will come." Well, when it comes to a county government news conference, you can build it, plan it and provide refreshments and balloons for the kids, but the media will not come unless you have some real news to announce. Only hold the news conference if you have an important announcement to make and you are fairly confident the local media will be interested in covering it.

A word of caution: News conferences have increasingly become a less effective media relations tool because of advances in technology and news gathering industry trends. Most newsrooms have suffered significant downsizing in recent years. There are fewer reporters, photographers and videographers available to send out to cover events. Most reporters have been asked to produce multiple stories and blog posts in a single day. They simply do not have time or resources available to run over to the County Courthouse for your announcement. Many reporters are under pressure to produce

original and exclusive content. They are shying away from covering what everybody else is covering even if it is newsworthy. In addition, reporters are quite comfortable searching online for information, documents and videos to source their stories. Also consider that the “who” has become as important as the “what” in today’s news media world. Big city mayors, governors and celebrities often attract news media coverage regardless of what they are announcing. Also, when considering whether to stage a news conference, be conscious of the politics of the day. Is your reelection fast approaching? You do not want to spend county resources to hold a news conference on the eve of the election and be accused of grandstanding. The announcement needs to stand on its own.

Once you decide to hold a news conference, begin planning.

- **Select a date and time.** The best time to hold a news conference is mid to late morning. This gives reporters the rest of the day to conduct further reporting and write and produce their stories. It also gives the TV reporters time to complete the story in time for the evening newscasts. Avoid Fridays if possible. TV viewership dwindles on Fridays as well as readership in Saturday newspapers.
- **Select a venue.** Try to select a location that is relevant to the announcement. If you are announcing a major county park renovation project, hold the news conference at the park. If the event will take place indoors, be sure to pick a venue that is appropriately sized. It is better to have a crowded press conference room than a seemingly empty one. If you are planning an outdoor event, be sure to have an alternate indoor site in case of inclement weather. It is a best practice to “scout” the site in the days leading up to the event to identify any potential disruptions such as construction or traffic noise.
- **Develop an invitation list.** In addition to the reporters you want to cover the event, invite appropriate county officials, supportive residents and community leaders. Make them available for reporters who want unscripted comments after the event.
- **Map the site set up.** Plan in detail how the venue will be set up. Will you have



seating and how will it be arranged? Will there be a podium or head table for speakers? Where will the media sign-in table be located? Where will the media sit? Visit the site to make sure your plan will work.

- **Timetable.** Develop a detailed list of planning tasks needed to be completed, who is responsible for competing them and by when.
- **Plan for VIPs.** If there will be any VIPs participating in the event, arrange for their transportation and any extra security measures needed.
- **Directions and parking.** Find out if parking is available at the site or if attendees need to make special arrangements. Be sure to include directions and information about parking in the materials you send out.
- **Develop the décor.** If you plan to have a banner or other visuals behind the main speaker, begin production early in the planning process. Do you need name placards for the event speakers?
- **Create a press packet.** Provide each member of the news media a press packet. The packet should include the news release, prepared statements from the principal speakers, fact sheets, bios, other supporting statistical data and a copy of the event agenda. See page 18.
- **Consider audio/visual needs.** If you expect several television and radio stations in the area to cover the event, consider having a "mult box" available. A mult box contains multiple outputs of a single audio source – i.e., the podium microphone. This will enable broadcasters to plug their cameras and microphones in one place and record the audio. If you plan to use any technology to enhance your event, such as a PowerPoint or video presentation, test everything. Make sure the equipment works and transitions are smooth. Be sure to have a technical troubleshooter on standby to resolve any glitches.
- **Consider printing needs.** Press packets, name tags, name placards, banners and posters need to be printed in advance.
- **Write a media advisory.** It is important to give the media advance notice of the news conference. Send it at least three to



five days prior to the event. An advisory should include where and when the event will take place. It should include who will be participating. It should convey why the announcement is important without giving the news away.

- **Script it.** Determine the order of speakers and length of time for each. Have prepared remarks available for the media. Review the remarks to ensure there is little or no redundancy of information. Depending on the nature of the announcement, the scripted portion of the news conference should be no more than 15 to 20 minutes followed by questions from the media. Prepare in advance for likely questions to be asked. Do not let the news conference drag on. After a few minutes of questions and answers, conclude the news conference. TV and radio reporters will likely want to conduct some quick one-on-one interviews.
- **Document it.** Be sure to arrange for someone on behalf of the county to take photos and shoot video. Consider hiring a videographer. Determine how the information will be moved via social media platforms and by whom.

## PRESS PACKET

A press packet is usually presented in a folder and contains details and background information about an event, program or initiative. The packet is designed to help reporters fill in blanks in their stories quickly and accurately. Reporters are almost always operating on tight deadlines. If they have written a story about a program or event in your county and need a few last-minute details, they may not have time to call the county office, leave a voicemail and wait for a return call. A well-developed press packet will provide all the facts they need. The packet will contain a few standard pieces of information. These documents should be printed on county letterhead, properly sourced and include the contact number of the person designated to assist the media. Depending on the objective, the press packet should contain any combination of the following information: news releases, fact sheets, charts and graphs, bios, background papers, prepared statements, testimony text, timelines, relevant newspaper clippings, photos, brochures, pamphlets, additional resources and business cards.

To save money on printing and paper costs, consider making all of the above information available via an online toolkit featuring a series of links to the documents.

## EDITORIAL BOARD MEETING

Editorial board meetings with local newspapers are an important media relations tool available to county officials. It is your chance to be proactive to discuss and gain support for an important upcoming initiative or set of legislative goals. Timing is important to consider. Let's say you plan on unveiling a legislative proposal at the March 15 board meeting. You should consider asking for an editorial board meeting to be held in the weeks prior to March 15 so you can make your case to the editorial writers in an effective manner.

Another example: Is an important county finance question on the November ballot? You should consider asking for an editorial board meeting several weeks prior to Election Day – before the newspaper editorializes on the proposition. Here are some steps to take to schedule a meeting with an editorial board:

- **Ask for a meeting in writing.** Write a letter to the opinion page editor requesting a meeting with the editorial board. Explain the issues you wish to discuss, why they are timely and important to the community and who you plan to accompany you.
- **Follow-up with a phone call.** Follow-up the written request a few days later with a telephone call to the opinion page editor.
- **How about an op-ed?** Should the editor decline to meet with you, and you have a timely initiative, respectfully request space on the opinion page to publish an op-ed article.

If the editorial board agrees to meet with you, begin planning right away. Here are some tips:

- **Determine who will participate.** Be sure to determine how many officials the newspaper can accommodate. One to three officials is advisable.
- **Determine who will say what.** Everyone should have a predetermined role and not step on each other's message or contradict one another.
- **Declare the key headline message.** "This initiative is important to the residents of this county because..." OR "We decided on this solution because..." Back up everything you say with facts.
- **Prepare a press packet.** The press packet should contain relevant information to leave behind. It should have information about what you plan to discuss and some additional information that they may find useful. Find out before the meeting how many packets should be produced. See page 18.

- **Anticipate what they will ask.** Prepare ahead of time for the questions you are likely to be asked and how you will respond to them. Assume they will ask the one question you do not want to answer and be prepared to answer it.
- **Read recent editorials.** Be sure to review recent editorials. If one or two were particularly well done, you may want to compliment the editor on it, or seize the opportunity to say, “Just as you editorialized earlier this month....”

Now the big day is here. Everyone should be prepared to make the best case for what you are communicating. Don't be afraid at the right moment to ask for editorial support on the issue at hand. Also, everyone should be aware that the meeting topics could go off in another direction. Here are some more tips:

- **You're on the record.** Be sure that everyone who attends on your side understands that from the moment you enter the building everything that is said is on the record. Watch what you say to one another while waiting to enter the meeting room. Once you enter the meeting room, it is okay to exchange pleasantries, but treat the entire visit as business. Avoid jokes like, “Here we go into the belly of the beast” or “Hey, we're behind enemy lines.” Avoid making a statement followed by, “Oh, that's off the record.” No it's not.
- **Be ready to change course.** Know that your carefully made plans may quickly fly out the window. Breaking news could alter what the editorial board may be interested in discussing on that particular day. That's another reason to have a comprehensive press kit to leave behind in the event you do not get the chance to discuss all your points.
- **Don't argue.** The purpose of the meeting is to be informative and persuasive. It serves no useful purpose to lose your cool and become argumentative. Also, this meeting is not the time to try and settle old grievances with the newspaper.
- **Op-ed?** Don't be afraid to ask if they would like you to submit an op-ed article on the issue.
- **Wrap it up.** Be mindful and respectful of the time. After one hour, it is time to go. Thank the board for their time and the opportunity. Ask them to review the information in the press packets and not to hesitate to call for additional information. Also, it is always good practice to send thank you notes to the editorial page editor and others who participated in the meeting.



# Section III:

## Online and Social Media Communications Tools

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Before you dive head first into online or social media communications, be sure you know the county’s social media policies. If your county does not have a written policy, consider leading an effort to create a policy. NACo has resources available to assist you.

**COUNTY WEBSITE AND EMAIL**

Effective online communications start with the official county government website. Your first step is to check it out for yourself. Approach it like a constituent: Try to find the county parks summer recreation schedule. Try to find the hours of operation for the county’s recycling and solid waste facility. If you have difficulty finding this information, it’s likely others will too.

A great place to review nationally recognized county websites is eRepublic’s Center for Digital Government. Visit [www.govtech.com/cdg/](http://www.govtech.com/cdg/) and check out the annual Digital Counties Survey, a joint awards program of Center for Digital Government and NACo.

County websites are an effective communications vehicle to present your unfiltered positions, activities and accomplishments. Even if you struggle to get your message into the local newspaper, posting it on the county website has the potential to reach many people. Your webpage should have your contact information, bio, district boundaries, news releases and speeches. What are your constituents most concerned about? Address those concerns on your webpage.

Do you actually read your e-mail? Do you respond to the messages? Make sure that your contact information is easily found and let your webpage visitors know that you intend to respond.

## **BLOG**

A blog (web log) can be a useful communications tool for a local government official. It gives you an online platform to say what you want when you want to say it. Accounts can easily be established by visiting popular blogsites such as [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com) or [blogger.com](http://blogger.com). Your own internet service provider may have free blog services available as well.

There are two downsides to blogs: 1) Setting up a blog and then not blogging. When someone goes to your blog and sees that you have not posted new content in a month or longer, they are unlikely to return anytime soon. 2) Blogs require users to find it. You have to make the blog relevant, informative and interesting for people to want to visit it again and again. Consider using traditional media outlets to raise awareness of your online presence.

Another consideration is whether to allow comments from the public on your specific blog posts. Two-way communication between you as an elected official and the constituents you represent can be very useful and a step toward transparency in government. But snarky, uninformed, negative or inappropriate comments from anonymous persons may add needless confusion and divisiveness to the issue at hand.

If you are a savvy communicator and computer user, your blog can be a great way to stay in contact with constituents.

If you are unsure whether a blog is right for you, consider setting one up for a specific event such as a state association or NACo conference. Blog throughout the conference and see if it's something you would want to continue. If not, simply take down the blog.

## **VIDEO**

Video is a very powerful medium. Internet sensations can be created overnight as a result of a short video that goes "viral." Similarly, political careers can be destroyed in no time.



Technological advances in the affordability of digital cameras, camcorders and user friendly video editing software have empowered the public to produce, edit and post their own video content. As a result, more counties are utilizing video content to promote their effective county programs and essential services. Visit the NACo YouTube Channel at [youtube.com/NacoVideo](https://youtube.com/NacoVideo) to see how your fellow county officials are using video as an effective communications tool.

A word of caution about video: Many citizens, reporters and political operatives are “armed” today with video cameras. Best practice: Be aware that your actions or words can easily be captured on video without your knowledge or consent. The last thing you need is an unflattering “YouTube moment” going viral causing you or your county embarrassment.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media websites are online communities of people who share interests and activities and who use web technologies to engage with their peers. Sites such as Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized how we communicate with one another. Where once only young people and techies dabbled, today the young and old alike spend considerable time sharing information with one another online.

For our purposes, think of social media as a blending of technology and social/ professional networking with your supporters, constituents and local news media. The great advantage of social media is that you are feeding relevant information into an ongoing stream of information before an interested audience. People with Facebook and Twitter accounts typically “tune in” to their feeds several times a day to see what’s going on. They do not have to go to your website or blog to find the information you are presenting. Rather, it appears among other incoming information on their computer, tablet or smart phone screen that they have granted access.

But how does it work? Go to [facebook.com](https://facebook.com) and/or [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com) and open a free account. Then set your privacy and access controls as you like. You can then search for people you know and send them a request to be a “friend” on Facebook or a “follower” on Twitter. As time goes by, your acquaintances will find you and send you connect requests. You can either accept or ignore. As a user, for the most part, you control access to your posted information, photos and videos and status updates. But as a county official, is posting every thought on Twitter a best practice? Is mixing personal, professional and political

information together on your Facebook page a good idea? The best advice is to plan accordingly. Under no circumstances should dating social media, such as Tinder or Match, be used for communication to constituents or other audiences.

## FACEBOOK

Facebook, launched in 2004, is a popular social network service and website that has more than 1 billion users worldwide. Users may create a personal profile, add other users as “friends” and exchange messages. Users may join common interest user groups organized by workplace, school, college or other characteristics. Communicating with friends and other users can be done through private or public messages or a chat feature. Users can also create and join interest groups and “like pages” (formerly called “fan pages”). Facebook’s “status updates,” photos, links and video postings are the driving force behind its popularity.

Facebook is increasingly popular with older Americans and family members residing in separate parts of the country and world. Grandparents can see the latest photos of their grandchildren and adults can keep up with out-of-town families and friends. If you use your account for personal and official and political purposes you need to use extreme caution. As an elected official, however, you can set up your own page that is separate from your personal Facebook account.

Much like when speaking with a reporter, think carefully before you post a message, link, photo or video. Once it’s out there, it’s out there, even if you delete it. Was there a great editorial in your local newspaper on a county issue? Post the link on Facebook to share with your “friends.” Is County Route 12 impassable because of high water? Send out a “status update.” As a county official, be sure to try to drive people to the county website for more information. Keep in mind that the medium is visual. Always consider integrating photos, video and links with each post for maximum engagement.



AmeriCorps @AmeriCorps · Apr 5  
#CNCNews: @americorps recognized for help w/ @RichlandSC flood recovery. [bit.ly/1UUGAct](http://bit.ly/1UUGAct) #county4service  
AmeriCorps, CNCs, RichlandSC and The State Newspaper

## TWITTER

Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging service and website that allows its users to send and read other users' status updates known as "tweets." Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length and are usually received by a user's "followers" on smart phones or other handheld devices.

Launched in 2006, Twitter boasts more than 500 million users worldwide. Can Twitter help a county official? If used carefully, the answer is yes.

Advantages:

- Essentially a free, simple and effective communications service. The only cost is time and effort.
- You can tweet from anywhere at any time with an internet connection.
- Most reporters have Twitter accounts and like to "follow" public officials on Twitter.
- Many of your residents and supporters have Twitter accounts.
- Presumably, those who sign up to be your followers would be interested in receiving tweets from their county board representative.
- Extremely fast way to distribute information.
- Helps drive people to the county website.

Disadvantages:

- Messages are limited to 140 characters, which makes writing interesting and informative messages a challenge. Consider including short links to more content on your website.
- Not everyone is on Twitter.
- Your tweets can be distributed outside your network of followers (see retweet below).
- Need to keep posting fresh and relevant information.
- Once a message is out there, it cannot be taken back.

## RETWEET

A retweet is sharing or a re-posting of someone else's tweet. For a county official, it is important to understand that all of your tweets are subject to being retweeted outside of your network of followers. A message you think is amusing or in good fun to your followers may not be interpreted in the same way by an outside audience. If you retweet someone else's message, try to be clear about why you are retweeting it so others do not get the wrong impression.

For more information go to [www.naco.org/programs/social-media](http://www.naco.org/programs/social-media).

# Section IV:

**Look and Sound  
Like a Pro**

## INTERVIEW SETUP AND PREPARATION

For county officials, the best practice is to be accessible and helpful to reporters whenever they approach or contact you. That does not mean you have to grant interviews upon demand. Here are some tips on how to prepare for an interview:

- **Interview the interviewer.** When you get the opportunity to be interviewed by a reporter, begin by asking a few questions of your own. What is the story basically about? Is it a short and simple story for the next day or a longer, in-depth story to run at a later date? Is it an investigative piece? Are you the primary source for the story? How long will the interview take? What is the reporter's deadline? For television or radio, ask if it is a live or recorded interview and how will it be edited if at all?
- **Set the parameters.** As a county official, you do not have control over the stories journalists write or the questions they want to ask. However, you do have control over their access to you and the responses you provide. The best practice is to be as accommodating and accessible as possible. If you help them with their story today, perhaps they will help you another time when you have a story idea for them. Once you have an understanding of the nature of the interview, set the interview parameters with the reporter, such as when you will be available, how long you will be available, and the nature of the questions you will be prepared to answer. If you are not willing to answer certain questions, you should have compelling reasons and be able to describe those reasons. See No Comment section on page 36.
- **Do your homework.** It is most advisable to be familiar with the work of the local media. Know what types of stories the daily newspaper likes to publish; know what types of stories the community/weekly newspaper likes to publish; know the editorial positions of the newspapers; know the local radio shows and hosts and what topics they like to fill their air time with; know the types of stories the local TV reporters produce. Get a feel for each reporter's style of questioning and types of stories they write or broadcast. This will help you be prepared for the interview.

Especially if the story may put you or the county in an unfavorable light, develop a list of questions that you suspect the reporter will ask. Expect that the one question you hope is not asked will be asked and be prepared to respond truthfully and accurately.



## MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Whenever you speak with a reporter, you should have something to say. In other words, you need to determine prior to the interview the key message or key message points you intend to deliver to the public through the reporter. Think about the audience the reporter's story will reach and what exactly your message should be. Whether for newspaper, television or radio, your message should be clear and concise. It should connect with that particular audience in a meaningful way. Your message should be accurate, truthful and supported with factual evidence. When a question is asked, answer it. If necessary, quickly pivot to your key messages. This can be a difficult skill to master and you need to be careful not to appear to be avoiding the question. Remember, you control the words that you use. Avoid using the reporter's words in your responses, or repeating the question, especially if you do not agree with the premise of the question.



## PRACTICE

If you are relatively new to the media spotlight, it's a good idea to practice answering the questions you expect to be asked. Have someone else role play the reporter or read the questions to yourself. Keep your tone conversational. Avoid using unfamiliar jargon or county acronyms or streams of statistics. Keep your breath even and maintain your volume at a normal level. Your responses should be to the point, honest, accurate and supported by facts. Use your own personal stories to illustrate your point. If you sense the need to vastly sharpen your interview skills, look into taking a media relations training session or a class at a local college.

## THE INTERVIEW

It is very important to exercise discipline when interacting with a reporter. This is true whether you are conducting a lengthy, in-depth interview, answering one or two quick questions after a board meeting or chatting casually with a reporter. Keep in mind, too, that while it is advisable to be friendly with a reporter, the reporter is not actually your friend. He is a journalist with professional responsibilities to his news

organization and the public. On the other hand, even if you do not particularly like, admire or trust a reporter or news organization, they are not necessarily your enemy and should not be treated as such. In either instance, the best practice is the same: discipline yourself when interacting with a reporter. Be sure to review the DOs and DON'Ts of speaking with a reporter outlined in Section I.

## PRINT VS. BROADCAST INTERVIEWS

Once you have a firm understanding of the subject matter of the interview request and have developed your key message points, the next step is to consider the medium: newspaper, radio, television or online and plan accordingly.

### PRINT INTERVIEWS

A frequent media relations complaint from county officials is being misquoted in their local newspaper. This can be extremely frustrating especially if you were misquoted on an important issue or had spent a lot of time with the reporter explaining the background of a particular issue only to see it get botched in print. Often, less is more. This means the fewer words you say, the less chance there is to be misquoted. This goes to the heart of staying on message. Instead of lengthy explanations or an oral review of the history of an issue, why not provide a fact sheet or other resources to the reporter? Then, when the reporter has the necessary background information, you can deliver your message. You are being helpful, responsive and strategic under this scenario.

But what about county board meetings? Have you ever winced at an article in your morning newspaper because of something you said during a heated county board debate the night before? Again, message discipline is the key to success. It's critically important to choose your words carefully in a public meeting. Often, a reporter will quote the most colorful and/or biting comments during a county board discussion rather than the most important message points. Try best you can to remain thoughtful, informative, calm and on message during board discussions.

Another frequent complaint is misleading headlines. On this matter, there's little you can



do about it. Understand that the reporter who wrote the story likely did not write the headline. It was probably written by an editor under a tight deadline who only had the story to go by and had not spoken to the reporter.

See page 41 for tips on dealing with being misquoted and crisis communications.

## BROADCAST INTERVIEWS

A credible source who can articulate responses in a way that TV and radio reporters can use increases the chance of getting coveted air time.

With radio, remember that the audience does not have the luxury of rereading printed words or taking cues from your body language. Most often, the radio reporter already has his story and is simply seeking a good sound bite to complement it.

Here are some tips for quick radio interview situations, such as after a county board meeting:

- **Be brief.** Keep answers under 20 seconds. Long, rambling responses won't be used.
- **Stay on message.** Be careful not to use the reporter's words.
- **Use a strong voice.** Let your voice indicate your confidence.
- **Speak in complete thoughts.** Avoid one-word responses.
- **Avoid saying "Uh."** When responding to a question, uh, be sure not to, uh, you know, uh, pollute your message with, uh, distracting sounds.

Here are some additional radio tips for radio call-in shows:

- **Great question, Bob.** Use the caller's name when answering a question. Using names will draw listeners into your answer and convey that you are truly engaged.
- **Caller, you are an idiot.** Never talk down to or try to embarrass someone who was brave enough to call in. Always answer their questions diplomatically. Other listeners will respect you for not taking a cheap shot and staying cool under pressure.
- **Caller, I feel your pain.** Do not be argumentative. If an angry caller accuses you of wrongdoing or is upset that the county is not taking a particular course of action, simply say you understand the caller's frustration and that he is not alone with those concerns.



## TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

For many public officials, nothing is more challenging in media relations than a television interview. You have to not only know what you are talking about, but also have to look good and sound good doing it. Being prepared is the key to a successful television interview whether live or taped. You need to know what the interviewer is looking for and then determine what message is important for you to convey.

Here are some tips for the quick “standup” TV interview:

- **Eye contact.** Look at the reporter and not the camera unless otherwise directed.
- **Smile.** Smiling improves your appearance and helps you stay calm.
- **Be still.** Do not nod your head, shake your head – or if seated – bounce your knee or swivel in your chair. These non-verbal motions are distracting to the viewer or worse can conflict with your verbal message.
- **Stay on Message.** Answer the question, but be sure to quickly pivot to your key message. You don’t know which clip will make it on air so the best practice is to return to your key message more than once.

The above tips also apply to in-studio television appearances. Here are a few additional tips for these “sit down” television studio situations:

- **What’s his name?** Know who the host or interviewer is and the names of the other guests.
- **You look marvelous.** Wear dark-colored, solid suits with simple ties/ scarves and light shirts. Avoid patterns and stripes which may appear jumpy on television.
- **Early bird.** Arrive at the studio 15 to 30 minutes early or as directed. You want to have time to freshen up and focus on the task at hand.
- **Makeup.** Accept the makeup offered by the studio to take the shine off your face.
- **Just say no to Cheese-Wiz.** Avoid snacks, food, soda and coffee in the Green Room. You don’t want to make a mess on your clothes or have food in your teeth. Carbonated drinks are an especially poor choice. Reach for the water.
- **Sit up and be still.** When you go to the set, sit up straight and lean slightly forward. Sit still with your hands folded in your lap

and face the interviewer. Now would be a good time to turn off your phone.

- **We start bombing in five minutes.**

Unlike President Reagan and many, many others, consider yourself ON THE RECORD the entire time you are in the studio. Just because the red light is not on, does not mean you are not being recorded. Even whispers can be picked up by a hot microphone. The best practice is to not say anything that could be embarrassing or offensive.

- **Pardon the interruption.** When the interview begins, be sure to allow the interviewer to finish asking the question before you respond. Cross talk is distracting to the viewer. Take the critical second or two to formulate your response and deliver it. If there are other guests, avoid interrupting them or raising your voice. You will get your opportunity to respond – even on cable TV!



## ONLINE MEDIA/BLOGGERS

Online media is everywhere. Many newspaper reporters carry smart phones with video capabilities or camcorders and will ask if you mind being interviewed on video. Many newspapers are allocating or shifting their limited resources to their digital platforms (websites, tablets and smart phones).

Community-based news organizations that publish online content only are popping up. In many respects, this is good news for counties because online platforms have fewer time and space limitations than print and broadcast operations. If you have an online news organization covering your community, you may have increased opportunities for county priorities to be covered. All the media relations tips in this guide apply to these circumstances.

Another trend is the emergence of sharply focused community bloggers. Is there a blogger in your area who focuses on county government news and politics? How would you respond to an interview request from a blogger? Again, the rules of media relations apply in this circumstance as well. Especially important is the interview setup and your preparation. Are you familiar with the blogger's work? If not, you need to be. Setting terms of your access is important as well. How long does he need? What is the story about? When does he need the interview by? It's really important to set the terms before the

interview because with a blogger, he likely does not have an editor or publisher to report to. He answers to no one and can pursue what he's looking for without fear of being reined in by a boss. If it goes bad, you have little recourse. Know, too, that a blog post remains in cyberspace for a long, long time so any unflattering quote, article or video can come back to haunt you even years later.

## WHEN YOU HAVE TO PLAY DEFENSE

As a county official, it's possible that at some point you will have to answer tough or accusatory questions. In order to succeed in an interview like this you need to be prepared and avoid the common interview pitfalls described previously.

Important here is to:

- think about the audience and your messages and not necessarily the interviewer or his agenda
- provide factual information
- use your own words (not the interviewer's words), and
- maintain your composure.

When the questions start to fly, an easier-said-than-done strategy is to take the reporter's negative question and form a bridge to a positive answer. First, answer the question directly and truthfully. Second, quickly follow with a bridge phrase and insert your message. There are several ways to insert a bridge into your response. One way is to simply acknowledge the premise of the question with a simple, "That's correct," and quickly pivot to another but related point of emphasis. Below is a list of phrases you could use:

- what is most important...
- what is of most concern to me...
- many residents have expressed to me...
- when we learned of the situation, we immediately...

### EXAMPLE 1:

**Reporter:** *Clearly, commissioner, there was a breakdown by the county officials responsible for those services. Why did you and the board stand by and do nothing?*

**County Official:** *There was a breakdown, but when we learned of the situation we immediately called the administrator to find out what happened and how he intended to ensure that it didn't happen again.*

## **EXAMPLE 2:**

**Reporter:** *Commissioner, you knew of this conflict months ago yet remained silent until we started asking you questions.*

**County Official:** *Yes, I knew it might be an issue. That's why back in June I asked the county attorney if he thought it was a conflict. Turns out it was not. In retrospect, I should have disclosed these concerns to the public and will do so in the future.*

In both of the above examples, the county official acknowledges an unpleasant fact, but quickly bridges to the fix. Most people respect admissions of a problem or poor decision, especially early on. One thing that never works is to defend the indefensible, pointing to other bad behavior or becoming argumentative with the reporter. Remember, that reporter has every right to ask unpleasant questions.

A technique some more aggressive reporters or talk show hosts use is to interrupt a response and throw another question at the person being interviewed. This is an attempt to shake your confidence and throw you off your game. It is important to stand your ground and not allow yourself to get pushed around.

## **EXAMPLE 3:**

**Reporter:** *With so many other needs, why has the county wasted more than a half million taxpayer dollars on County Route 12 road work?*

**County Official:** *As the board had budgeted, the county used \$250,000 of local money and \$250,000 of state funds to –*

**Reporter:** *Now hold on Commissioner! That state money is still our money! What about the Green Park fiasco from last year. That was another waste of money.*

**County Official:** *I am happy to clear up misconceptions about the Green Park project, but please allow me respond to your first question. The county used \$250,000 of local money and \$250,000 of state funds to make much-needed repairs and safety improvements to County Route 12. As you know, County Route 12 is a major commuter route for our residents and businesses and serves as the primary access connecting us to our neighboring counties. The project was planned, budgeted, and is hardly a waste of money.*

## NO COMMENT

Never say “no comment” to a reporter. To most consumers of news, hearing a public official say “no comment” sounds like he’s got something to hide. To a reporter’s ear, “no comment” sounds like “yes” and he’ll soon find someone else to affirm his suspicion if he had not already done so.

### EXAMPLE 4:

**Reporter:** *Commissioner, is it true that the county manager is selling old county computer parts and accessories out the back door for his personal gain?*

**County Official:** *No comment.*

**Reporter:** *That’s not a denial, commissioner.*

See? Hiding behind “no comment” does not work. If there are questions that you do not want to answer or cannot answer, you must explain truthfully to the reporter – on the record – why you cannot comment directly at this time. These reasons may include:

- “It would be inappropriate for me to comment” and explain why.
- “It would be speculative for me to comment.”
- “It’s too early in the process to comment” and explain the process.
- “That’s a good question. We can discuss it when I have more time.”
- “It’s a personal (or county personnel) matter.”

Also, it’s okay to say “*I don’t know*” provided that it is the truth. If you don’t know the answer to a question, promise to find out or direct him to the proper source. The bottom line is that even in difficult and controversial situations it is best to be forthcoming to the news media and public. Stories rarely “blow over” or go away if facts and details are being suppressed. The truth will eventually emerge. The best practice is to get the facts and circumstances out in a timely manner rather than have them trickle out day after day or week after week.



## OFF THE RECORD

Playing the off-the-record game can be dangerous and is not recommended. As a practical matter, the meanings of “off the record,” “on background” and “on deep background” are often misunderstood. Here is what these phrases actually mean, according to the Media Relations Handbook for Agencies, Associations and Congress by Brad Fitch:

- **Off the record.** The information is not to be used publicly or shared with any other person.
- **On background.** The information may be used, but the source may not be specifically identified. The source may be identified generally, using a description mutually agreed upon.
- **On deep background.** The information may be used, but the source may not be identified in any manner.

What never works is saying something to a reporter followed by, “Oh, by the way that’s off the record.” No it’s not, commissioner. Engaging in an off-the-record discussion must be agreed to beforehand. The best practice is to always consider your words and actions as on the record. In other words, never assume that you are off the record in the presence of a reporter. Even when the reporter closes his notebook or turns off her camera, consider yourself on the record.

Now, let’s take a look again at the definition of “off the record.” Why would it ever be in your best interest as a county official to speak to a reporter off the record? If the information cannot be used, then why share it? Consider a situation where you and a reporter are exchanging so-called “off-the-record” information about a brewing county or political controversy. What makes you think that your “off-the-record” comments won’t find the ears of the other parties involved? Off-the-record comments to a reporter do not get buried forever in the county dump, but remain “out there” in the reporters’ notebook, smart phone or under his hat. Trying to play the off-the-record game with a reporter to score political points, shift blame or shy away from responsibility is an unwise media relations strategy and will backfire in the end.



## THE PROBLEM REPORTER

The vast majority of reporters are not out to get you. They are out to get a story. The best practice is to be accessible and cooperative. If you are uncooperative on a particular matter, the reporter will sense that you have something to hide and will continue to pursue you and those around you. As a result, you become the focus of the story. If you feel strongly that a reporter has demonstrated a disturbing pattern of unfairness, try to resolve the matter directly with him. Make honest and repeated attempts to find a workable resolution to the dispute. Keep a record of all your communications and attempts to resolve the matter. If these efforts fail to improve the situation, ask to speak with the reporter's editor or news director. This is a last resort. Your complaint will be much more credible if you can demonstrate your efforts to resolve the situation directly with the reporter. A policy of not speaking to "that reporter" is not a solution.

## THE AMBUSH INTERVIEW

Avoid so-called ambush interviews. If you are generally an accessible, cooperative and responsive public official, you will likely never be ambushed by a reporter. If you are ambushed, the reporter is probably not looking for information, but an emotional reaction or outburst from you. Do not fall for it. With a smile, say you will be happy to answer the questions at another time. That time could be in five minutes, five hours or five days, but not now with that TV camera following you down the county courthouse hallway.

# Section V:

## Crisis Communications

# EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

No one can predict with certainty when and where disaster will strike. Be it an earthquake, hurricane, wildfire, tornado, flood or terrorist attack, public leaders must be able to respond swiftly and responsibly to media inquiries. Because of the unpredictability of when a crisis will occur, it is important to develop a written crisis communications plan in advance so your county is prepared to take appropriate action. The communications plan must be readily available and have detailed information pertaining to how to respond to certain crises. If your county does not have a written emergency communications plan, consider leading the effort to develop one. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications has helpful information available.

Here are some general tips for disaster communications:

- Place public interest first
- Designate a single county spokesperson
- Take responsibility
- Do not mislead the public/media
- Do not withhold information even if it is unpleasant
- Be accessible
- Provide timely updates
- Keep county employees informed
- Monitor news coverage/public concerns



**Rushern L. Baker III** @CountyExecBaker · Mar 13

We lost a family member today. He was about the same age as my son. This is a sad day in our County.

👍 28 ❤️ 21 ...

## POLITICAL CRISIS

The other type of crisis that arises from time to time is the political crisis. Often they are fairly insignificant and short-lived, but sometimes they can grow into full-blown scandals. How you handle it in the early stages can help keep a small controversy from becoming a crisis. The worst approach is to 1) do nothing 2) point to other bad behavior 3) defend the indefensible and 4) blame the media.

Here are some tips if you suspect a controversy developing:

- **Look in the mirror.** Take an objective look at what you said or what you did. At this point, do not worry about what your critics will say or what the media will report. Ask yourself, "Am I at fault and to what degree?"
- **Momentary lapse of reason.** If something you said or did has been deemed inappropriate by some in the community – and it probably was – simply admit the misstep as soon as possible. This is especially true for minor missteps, such as a poor choice of words or losing your cool during a heated debate.
- **I am sorry.** If something you said or did rises somewhere above "inappropriate," an apology might be in order. We've all seen insincere apologies on TV. Yet public figures continue to do it incorrectly and insincerely ensuring that the story lives on for another day. Avoid the ineffective: "If I offended anyone, I am sorry." No one buys that message. If you find yourself in a public relations jam worthy of an apology, try: "My comments were inappropriate and thoughtless. I am taking full responsibility. Earlier I contacted [the offended party] and expressed my sincere apologies. I am now asking the public for forgiveness." Then proceed to answer two or three questions from the media.





Protecting county interests and advocating good public policy

Providing education and training to assist Idaho county officials in the

**R** THE RIVERSIDE HOTEL

# Section VI:

NACo  
Conference  
Travel Tips

## NACo CONFERENCE/FLY-IN TRAVEL TIPS

Let's face it, when elected county government officials leave town on the taxpayers' dime, the local press and political bloggers are probably going to write about it. In fact, you should assume that any out-of-county travel is news and you should be prepared to respond to media and public inquires.



Traveling at taxpayers' expense is a common and appropriate story for reporters to write. If you do not handle it correctly, you will come off looking bad and find yourself in controversy. Keep this thought in mind when dealing with the media: "When speaking to a reporter, you are speaking to the public." So in terms of conference travel, it is pointless to get upset, angry or defensive at a reporter for asking you questions about the cost of the travel; what you did while attending the conference; and what you may have missed back home while away. That is the reporter's job even if you don't like the tone or implications of the questions.

Here are some tips on how to best prepare yourself to communicate to the media and public how the trip is beneficial to you as a public official and your county:

### BEFORE YOU GO

Before you grab your bags and head to the airport, there are some important things you can do to effectively communicate to the media and public about your trip:

- Disclose the travel. This should be done well in advance and preferably during a regular county board meeting. Securing support from the board is helpful as well.
- Describe the purpose. Explain what the conference is and why it's important for the county to have a presence there.
- Disclose the costs. Know the costs of the travel including registration fees and flight and lodging costs. You will be asked by reporters and they can find out anyway.
- Describe your role in NACo. This is important to communicate. Are you on a steering committee? Are you on the Board of Directors? Also, highlight the value of networking with other county officials. Perhaps you are leading a panel discussion. Make it clear where you fit in.



- Outline your objectives. This is important too. Think carefully before you leave about what you hope to achieve. For example: You want to secure passage of NACo policy that your county board supports. You want to meet with your congressional representatives or members of the administration. You want to participate in professional development or education sessions.
- Make media arrangements. Reporters like fresh and relevant information. Arrange in advance to call a key reporter once a day while you are away. Provide the reporter with newsworthy information such as fellow county officials you networked with, official meetings you had and educational sessions you attended.

## WHILE YOU ARE ON TRAVEL

So now you're out of Dodge and free as a bird. Not so fast. Your work is just beginning.

- **Review the entire program.** NACo conferences as well as state association conferences offer a wide variety of opportunities for you to address issues important to your county and help you become a better public servant. Know about the educational sessions, workshops and training opportunities as well as the special guest speakers from all levels of government and industry. Look at the meeting schedules listed in the program and plan to attend the ones of particular relevance to you and your county.
- **Divide and conquer.** Determine how best to take full advantage of the conference agenda. If more than one representative from your county is attending the same conference, the best practice is to coordinate who will go to which meetings, workshops and events. Perhaps one of you will focus on federal transportation funding opportunities and policies affecting local government, while the other will focus on bringing home innovative green government/energy efficiency ideas.
- **Write out a personal schedule.** This is key. You could simply note or highlight in the conference program which events you plan to attend. However, the best practice is to create a daily planning schedule for yourself and carry it in your pocket. Having this schedule will come in handy later when you are preparing a report on your conference activities and accomplishments to your board, writing a news release/column, or preparing for an interview with your newspaper or TV station.

- **Do the work.** Attend the meetings. Take good notes. Save handouts. Seek opportunities to network and share ideas. Collect business cards. Remember at all times that you are on county business and the taxpayers are paying for you to be there.
- **Behave.** Remember that we live in a YouTube world and the last thing you need is an embarrassing video of yourself turning up on your local TV station. Do not compete with the piano-playing cat.
- **Spend wisely.** Use good judgment when purchasing meals, beverages and off-conference site entertainment on the taxpayers' dime. Follow your county's spending procedures to the letter, keep your receipts and file for reimbursement promptly. Remember, the estimated costs of the trip should have already been disclosed publicly. Especially if county board travel or cell phone expenses have been a media issue previously be sure your costs are within the county budget line for approved travel.
- **Keep a journal of your activities.** This is very important. Sit down each night and write about what you did, who you spoke with and the ideas that you had. The best practice is to write these thoughts down while they are fresh in your mind each day. Having the journal will help you 1) respond effectively to reporters' questions 2) prepare reports for your board upon your return 3) write a column or news release about your activities at conference and 4) refresh your memory should your conference travel become a political issue months or years later during your reelection campaign.
- **Think about media opportunities.** Would the information you just learned during a workshop about "healthy counties" or "green government" be interesting to a local columnist? Would the policy your steering committee adopted on transportation funding be a good issue for a column in your weekly newspaper? Write down your ideas when they come to mind.
- **Blog and post status updates via social media.** Only do this if these are communications tools you are familiar and comfortable with.

## WHEN YOU RETURN

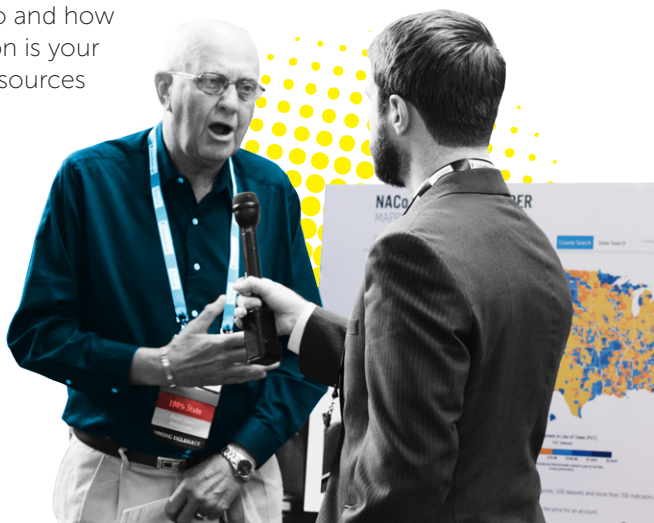
Now that you are back home sweet home, your work is still not done. Far from it. Review your schedule and notes and prepare to communicate to your fellow board members, local media and the public what you learned and accomplished on your business trip.

- **Board report.** At your next regular county board meeting, give an oral report about the conference and discuss briefly your activities and accomplishments. This is a good opportunity to remind board members and public about past accomplishments or NACo programs which are benefiting the community, such as the Live Healthy U.S. Counties program.
- **Media follow-up.** Immediately take care of any pre-arrangements you made with the local media, such as a phone call to the reporter who covers the county or stopping by the radio station for an interview.
- **Issue a news release.** Take advantage of the media relations tools available to you from NACo. Use NACo's "take home" news release as a template and make it your own.
- **Write an article.** Write a column for your weekly newspaper. NACo has examples.
- **Post** information on your website, blog or social media sites.

## FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT OUT-OF-COUNTY TRAVEL

The bottom line about out-of-county travel is that you need a plan. You need to think ahead of time about what you will say, who you will say it to and how you will say it. Information is your best friend. NACo has resources available to assist you.

For more information about effective media relations tools and strategies, contact NACo's Department of Public Affairs at 202.393.6226.





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