



NYSAC

NEW YORK STATE
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

Media Relations Guide for County Officials

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NYSAC Media Relations Guide

Table of Contents

NYSAC Media Relations Guide.....	1
Table of Contents	1
Media Relations 101	2
Developing a Media Relations Plan.....	2
What is news?	2
Basic Media Relations Tools: News Releases	3
Media Relations Tools	4
Media Advisory	4
Media Relations Tools	5
News Release Distribution.....	5
Advanced Media Relations Tools	7
News Conferences	8
Editorial Board Meetings	10
Look and Sound like a Pro.....	11
Interviews.....	11
Message.....	11
Do your Homework	12
Anticipate	12
Practice.....	12
Radio Interviews	12
Television Interviews and Appearances	13
When you have to play defense	13
Examples.....	14
On and Off the record	15
Crisis Communications	15
Emergency Communications Plan.....	15
Political Crisis	15
Hey commissioner, how was the weather down there?	16
Resources from NYSAC:.....	17

Media Relations 101

What is Media Relations?

“Media relations” is the term used to describe how the flow of public information is communicated from the county to its residents (and beyond) through reporters, editors, broadcasters and producers. Media relations is both responsive and proactive.

How can Media Relations help you?

It is in the county’s and public’s best interest for you as a county official to provide complete and accurate information to the media upon request and in a timely manner. It is also in the county’s and public’s best interest for you to proactively pursue positive media coverage about the county’s effective projects, programs and services. As a result, you are enhancing your own personal knowledge of county operations and services.

Keep in mind that local government has a responsibility to inform residents how their tax dollars are being spent. An effective media relations program should build the public’s confidence and understanding of county projects, programs and services.

Developing a Media Relations Plan

The cost of running a strong media relations campaign is far less than a paid advertising campaign but can reach as many people. Think of effective media relations as free publicity. Stories that appear in print or as part of a broadcast news program carry more credibility with the public than advertisements. However, the local newspaper is not a county newsletter or website. Local news organizations are under no obligation to print or broadcast your information. It is up to you to work as cooperatively as possible with local reporters on behalf of the residents you represent.

What is news?

It is up to you to make your message newsworthy. Think carefully about what you’re trying to communicate and who you want to reach. Then ask yourself these questions:

- Is my message important to county residents and local businesses?
- Is my message timely?
- Is my message new?
- Is my message controversial?
- Is my message interesting or unusual?
- Is my message supportable with accurate, reliable and relevant information or statistics?
- Is there a local angle about an issue that is currently getting play in the national media?
- Can I provide good quotes from key players that will be engaging and usable in a story?

The more questions that you can answer “yes” to, the more likely your message will be reported in the media.

Basic Media Relations Tools: News Releases

The news release is the most basic promotional document. It should be written in clear and simple language. It should include the information you would like to appear in the news and be formatted as a news story. Most newspapers follow AP style as outlined in the Associated Press Style Book (www.apstylebook.com). In most instances, less is more: Keep the news releases to one page. Only go two pages if you are explaining a complicated topic or issue.

Develop a header to use for all news releases and place it at the top of each release, which should be laid out on county letterhead. See Example Below.

Sample News Release

-----County Letterhead-----	
News Release	
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (Date)	CONTACT: (Name) (Phone) (E-mail)
(HEADLINE; write headlines in present tense)	
Sub-headline	
County, NY- County Legislator (NAME) announced today that (write lead & body of text in past tense).	
(Body of text & quotes from key players)	
For more information, contact (NAME & HEADLINE) at (PHONE & E-MAIL) or visit (WEB SITE).	
###	

The lead paragraph begins directly after the dash that follows the dateline (usually the county seat). Write the lead the way the newspapers write leads. The lead should be a short, concise summary of the announcement. Often, newsrooms will only read the headline and first paragraph to determine whether to pursue the information. Within the first two paragraphs the five W's and H- Who, What, Where, Why and How- should be covered.

After the lead comes the body of the news release. Use the body to go into greater detail on the information you provided in the lead. You may choose to include a quote from a member of the county board or another appropriate county official along with any relevant statistics.

If you must use two pages write “-more-” at the bottom of the first page. When you finish the release, choose one of the commonly used markers to signify the end of the release “END”, “-30-”, or “###”. Be sure to provide contact information and where more information can be found on the county website.

Some important notes about news releases: Newsrooms receive hundreds of 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. For important announcements, call and verify receipt and offer to answer any questions. A better strategy is to get the news release into the hands of the reporters you know would be especially interested in the information.

Finally, be sure to post the news release on the county website where it is easily accessible to the media and the public. Even if the media does not immediately pick up the news release, it is a good record of county announcements. Most reporters today search websites routinely to find information and sources for stories.

Media Relations Tools

Media Advisory

A media advisory is a brief notice to the media of an important news conference, press briefing or public event worthy of their attendance. Your media advisory should be sent at least three days prior to the event.

-----County letterhead-----	
MEDIA ADVISORY	
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (DATE)	CONTACT: (NAME) (PHONE) (E-MAIL)
HEADLINE- announcing event	
County, NY- Albany County Legislator (NAME) will hold a news conference at 10 a.m., Oct. 12 at the seniors center to announce details of a new service for the county's senior citizens.	
WHO:	(featured speakers, participants)
WHAT:	(description of announcement without giving the news away)
WHERE:	(exact location of news conference; inclement weather location)
WHEN:	(time & date)
For more information, contact (NAME) at (PHONE & E-MAIL).	
###	

The media advisory should serve as a teaser for the media: Describe the nature of the announcement without giving away the news. You want to entice reporters to come and cover the event.

Create and Maintain a Media List

To ensure that the media get your news releases, media advisories, and press kits, 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 county information officer, appoint someone-perhaps an aide or clerk - to build and maintain a media list. The media list should include:

- The media organization's name, address, phone and fax numbers and website
- Reporters, editors, broadcasters names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, beat and deadlines, and
- Preferred contact methods (phone, fax, e-mail)

Keep the information up to date as reporters come and go and change beats. There are media listing services available via subscription, which are helpful for larger media markets.

Media Relations Tools

News Release Distribution

There are several options for news release distribution.

E-mail

Sending releases via e-mail is quick, easy and cost-effective, but it has its own set of rules.

- *Do not send attachments.* Most reporters dislike receiving unsolicited attachments and will not open them. Copy and paste the text of your release into the e-mail. Copy and paste your headline in the subject line.
- *Do not send mass e-mails.* Almost as bad as sending a news release as an attachment is sending the release that looks like an e-mail that has been sent worldwide. If you need to send a message out to multiple e-mail addresses at once, create a listserv for your contact or put the addresses in the BCC (blind carbon copy) address line. The best practice is to add a note at the top of the e-mail, addressed to the reporter or editor by name, indicating that you thought the information below would be of interest to him or her.
- *Do not send garbage.* Know your media. E-mailing a news release about the new highway garage to the health reporter is an annoyance to the reporter. He or she will be less and less likely to look at your e-mails in the future if they do not pertain to their beat.
- *Update e-mail list often.* If a reporter asks to be removed from your e-mail list, remove him or her immediately. Send a short e-mail message to the reporter confirming that they have been removed and ask how they would prefer to be reached. If your e-mail message bounces back, call the reporter and get the correct address.

Website/Social Media

Any time you send a release via email, fax, or other method, it's also a good idea to also post it on your county's website on a central 'Pressroom' page. Post a link to the release

on your active social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, etc). Include the headline and a direct link to the full release. Many journalists monitor these channels for leads, and it can be the quickest way to get your story out.

U.S.Mail

The use of “snail mail” to distribute news releases is no longer a recommended option. It can be costly and time consuming for you to print the documents, stuff in an envelope, apply postage and drop in the mail. Most news organizations today prefer to receive electronically for easy review and distribution to appropriate staff and production.

Fax

Faxed news releases, in theory, reach all of your contacts quickly and inexpensively. However, fax machines are becoming an outdated technology. It is possible that your news release will get lost in the paper shuffle, or never received. 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 it pithy.* Keep the news release to one or two pages. A cover page is unnecessary unless a particular reporter or editor is expecting your fax. If there are supporting documents to accompany your 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 ask for them.

Letter to the Editor

The effectiveness of a letter to the editor has waned in recent years as more and more consumers of news and information turn to the Internet. Despite a steady decline in readership, many major daily newspapers receive hundreds of letters to the editor e-mailed each day throughout their websites. The chance of your letter getting published is quite low. However, in smaller media markets and communities, letters to the editor – especially to weekly newspapers – still have their place. This is especially true if you are responding to a specific item that was published previously in the newspaper. In other words, letters to the editor in your hometown press can be an effective way to “set the record straight” or provide additional information that you feel should have been included in the original article. Your letter should be concise (less than 200 words if possible) and right on point.

Pitching a Story

An excellent way to get the story you want in the media is by pitching a story idea directly to a reporter you know might be interested. Reporters, whether they cover the State or your County, like to have exclusive stories. That is one reason why news releases have become less effective as a media relations tool. Pitching a story takes planning and skill. Here are some tips:

- *Be on message.* Have your messages fine-tuned, and be prepared to provide all the information the reporter will need if he or she expresses interest.

- *Be on target.* Determine which reporter or news organization would be most interested in your story. Have they written about the issue before? Is the story best for newspaper, television or radio?
- *Know the reporter's work.* Be sure to review recent work by the reporter.
- *Use Ma Bell.* Pitch via telephone call or in person, perhaps before or after a county board meeting. E-mail pitches can work if you have already established an e-mail relationship with the reporter.
- *Timing is everything.* Do not try to pitch a story in the afternoon while reporters are on deadline. Initiate contact in the morning when they are planning their day or week ahead. Also, reporters know the election calendar. The closer you are to Election Day the less likely is it for them to get excited no matter how newsworthy it is.
- *Your point is?* Get to the point quickly. The pitch should NOT be about you (even if it is). Rather, it should be about the county or community. Reporters are looking for good stories to tell.
- *Sounds great, commissioner.* Listen carefully to the reporter's verbal cues when you make your pitch. If the reporter says, "That sounds interesting," usually that means that it is not.
- *Wrap it up.* If you suspect the pitch has fallen flat, don't take up any more of the reporter's time. Offer to send additional information.
- *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 and discuss in greater detail. Offer to provide additional information and other sources of contact.

Advanced Media Relations Tools

Press Kit

A press kit is a very common media relations tool. It is a packet of information usually presented nicely in a folder that contains detailed information about an event, program or initiative.

The press kit is designed to help reporters fill in the 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 kit can provide them with all the facts they need.

The kit will contain a few standard pieces of information. Those documents should be printed on county letterhead, properly sourced and include the contact number of the person designated to assist the media. If the media contact has a cell phone and an e-mail address include both.

Depending on the objective, the press kit should contain any combination of the following information: news releases, fact sheets, charts and graphs, bios of county officials, background papers, prepared remarks, testimony, relevant newspaper clippings, photos, brochures, pamphlets, list of additional resources and business cards.

Op-ed

Op-ed pieces (called such since they are placed “opposite” of the “editorial” page) can be an effective media relations tool to secure public support for your initiative or proposal. It can also be useful to provide full context and information about a situation of concern in the community. Once you have a clear idea of what you want to write, call the opinion page editor and pitch your idea. If he or she agrees, find out how many words it should be and where to send it. Effective op-eds are well-written, take a clear and credible position, cite real-world examples and contain reliable statistics.

When you get an article or op-ed in print, you should also share it electronically by posting it (or linking to it) from your county website, and posting it on your social media sites. You can get a lot of mileage out of one print story when it is posted and shared via social media.

News Conferences

Successful news conferences take careful planning. By holding a news conference, you are competing with everything else taking place at that time 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.

News Conferences are becoming less effective as media relations tools because of advances in technology and other considerations. Most reporters are very busy during the day and have multiple stories to file. They have meetings with their bosses just like everyone else. They simply do not have the time to head over to the county courthouse to hear about your new program for the animal shelter.

Reporters are often under pressure to produce original and unique stories and are shying away from “covering what everybody else is covering.” And, as mentioned, reporters are quite comfortable today searching the Internet for information, documents, audio files and videos to produce their stories. In today’s media, the Who has become more important than the What. In other words, the governor or a celebrity can come to your county with nothing important to say, but draw a packed house to a news conference.

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 expend 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.

- *Choose 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 for the six o’clock news. Avoid Fridays if possible, most newspaper readership dwindles on Saturday.

- *Choose a venue.* Try to select a location that is relevant to the announcement. If you are announcing a major parks preservation proposal, hold the news conference at the county 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 than a seemingly empty one. If you are planning an outdoor event, be sure to have an alternate site in case of inclement weather.
- *Develop an invitation list.* In addition to the reporters you want to cover the event, invite the appropriate county officials and interested citizens. They will be 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 it will be arranged? Will there be a head table for speakers? Where will the media sign-in table be? Where will the media sit? Where are the power outlets and do you need extensions or a “mult box” for TV and radio reporters to plug into? Will there be wireless internet available? Visit the site to make sure your plan will work.
- *Timetable.* Develop a detailed list of everything that needs to be accomplished and who is responsible.
- *Plan for VIPs.* If there will be any VIPs participating in the event, arrange for the 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. Also consider whether the podium or table will need a banner or signage, since it will likely be in all the photos.
- *Audio/Visual.* If you expect television stations in the area to send cameras to cover the event, you may opt to have a “mult box” set up at the event site. If you plan to use technology to enhance your event, test everything. Make sure the equipment works and transitions are smooth. Be sure to have a troubleshooter on hand in case of any glitches.
- *Printing needs.* Information for press kits needs to be printed with enough time left to prepare them for distribution. Print name tags for staff members and anything else you want to distribute.
- ***Write a media advisory.*** It is critically important to give the media advance notice of the news conference. Send it at least three 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 also 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 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 in the 10-25 minute range followed by questions from the media. Prepare in advance for likely questions to be asked. Do not let the news conference drag on. After 10-20 minutes of questions and answers, end the news conference. TV and radio reporters will likely want to conduct some quick one-on-one interviews.
- *Document it.* You may want to have the event recorded on videotape or DVD. It is recommended that at least digital photos are taken.

- *Create a press kit.* Give each member of the media a press kit. The kit should include the news release, prepared remarks, fact sheets, bios, other supporting data and a copy of the event agenda.
- *Follow-up-* Do your own coverage of the event, including a blurb and photos on the county website, sharing photos and links to stories about the event on your social media sites, and adding any coverage to your 'press room' page on the county website.

Editorial Board Meetings

Editorial board meetings with local newspapers are an important media relations tool available to county officials. It is your chance to be on the offensive to discuss and gain support for this important initiative. Timing is an important thing to consider. (For example, if the Special Session of the Legislature will be meeting on November 18, 2008, you should ask for an editorial board meeting to be held between now and November 18.) This will give you the opportunity to provide information regarding the issues, as well as any actions or resolutions your county has passed in relation to the issue(s) at hand.

When requesting an editorial board meeting here are some steps to take:

- *Ask for a meeting in writing.* Write a letter to the local opinion page editor requesting a meeting with the editorial board. Explain the issues facing counties during this crucial time of financial crisis and resolutions that have been put forward (using information provided). Let them know that you are representing your county on behalf of taxpayers 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.
- *Op-ed?* Should the editor not wish to meet with you, ask for a space on the opinion page to publish an op-ed article. Op-ed pieces (called such since they are placed "opposite" of the "editorial" page) can be an effective in securing public support for your initiative or proposal. It can also be useful to provide information about a situation of concern in the community. Sample Op-ed articles dealing with this initiative have been provided. If he or she agrees, find out how many words to make it and where to send it.

If the newspaper agrees to meet with you, begin planning right away.

- *Determine who will participate.* Be sure to determine how many officials the newspaper can accommodate. Three to five officials is usually a workable number.
- *Determine who will say what.* Everyone should have a predetermined role or issue to focus on. "This initiative is important to the taxpayers of this county because ..." OR "We decided on this resolution because..." Back up everything you say with facts.
- *Prepare a press kit.* The press kit should contain relevant information to leave behind. This kit will consist of the press releases, letters to the editor, information about the initiative and resolutions that you will find included here. Be sure to prepare at least five kits.
- *Determine what they will ask.* Prepare ahead of time for the questions you are likely to be asked and how you will respond to them. The included talking points will be helpful in developing responses.

- *Read recent editorials.* Be sure to review recent editorials in this specific newspaper. If one or two were particularly will done, you may at some point compliment the editor, or refer to that editorial.

The meeting

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 tips:

- *You're on the record.* Be sure that everyone who attends on your side understands that everything that is said is on the record. It's fine to exchange pleasantries, but treat the entire visit as business.
- *Be ready to change course.* Know that your carefully made plans may quickly go 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 so if you don't get the chance to discuss all your points at least they have the information in hand.
- *Don't argue.* The purpose of the meeting is to be informative and persuasive.
- *Op-ed?* Don't be afraid to ask for an op-ed to be published in 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 kits and not to hesitate to call for any follow-up questions. Also, it is always good business to send a thank you note the next day to the opinion page editor in appreciation of his or her time.

Look and Sound like a Pro

Interviews

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, more in-depth story to run at a later date? Is it an investigative piece? Is it a story that will put the county in an unfavorable light? Are you the primary source of the story? How long will the interview take? What is the reporter's deadline?

Message

Always keep in mind that when you are speaking with a reporter, that you are really speaking to the public. Before the interview, think about your audience and what exactly your message should be. Ideally, your message should be a clear, concise statement that connects with a targeted audience (seniors, users of the county bus system, etc.) in a meaningful way. Your message should be accurate, truthful and supported with factual evidence. Avoid restating the reporter's question or the opposing position. Stay on your message using your words. For example, don't say, "Are you suggesting that my vote can be bought?" It's much better to say, "I voted for approval of the contract because it was the lowest qualified bid on a much-needed project to help revitalize that section of the state."

Do your Homework

Whenever possible, be familiar with the work of the local media. Get a feel for the reporter's style of questioning and types of stories he or she writes. Reporters are not out to get you. They are out to get the story. If you prove to be a reliable source, they will call on you more frequently. If you feel strongly that a reporter has demonstrated a disturbing pattern of unfairness, speak with his or her editor or news director. Only do this after honest attempts to resolve the matter directly with the reporter. Taking this approach should be rare.

Anticipate

Develop a list of questions you expect the reporter to ask. Do not just "hope" the tough question does not get asked. In fact, *expect* it to get asked, and have a full and truthful response ready. Also, be prepared to suggest additional resources for the reporter to contact. Be as helpful as possible.

Practice

If you are new to the media spotlight, it's a good idea to practice answering questions you expect to be asked. Have someone else play the reporter or read the questions to yourself. Try to keep your tone conversational, avoid using million-dollar words the average person might not understand. Avoid using unfamiliar jargon or acronyms or streams of statistics. Keep your breath even and your volume at a normal level. Your responses should be to the point, honest, accurate, and supported by facts and your own personal stories to illustrate your point. If you sense the need to vastly sharpen your interview skills, look into taking a one-day media relations training session or a class at a local college.

Radio Interviews

When participating in a radio interview remember that the audience does not have the luxury of rereading the text or taking cues from your body language. There are some simple ways to make sure listeners stay engaged and get your message.

- *Stay on message.* Do not use the reporter's framing of the questions if it is not in your best interest.
- *Keep it pithy.* Keep answers less than 20 seconds. After that you start to lose audience attention.
- *Use a strong voice.* Let your voice show how confident you are in your answers. Answer with clarity, conviction and authority.
- *Great question, Bob.* If it is a call-in radio show, use the caller's names when answering their questions. Using their names will draw them into your answer and make them feel like you are truly responding to them.
- *Caller, you are an idiot.* For call-in shows, never talk down to or try to embarrass someone who was brave enough to call in. Always answer their questions diplomatically. The 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 not taking an action they want, simply say you "understand the caller's frustration and concern. Here are three key points to keep in mind on this issue..."

Television Interviews and Appearances

It is easy to be intimidated when you are called on to do a television interview. In addition to worrying about getting the message correct, you may be concerned about your appearance or the possibility of the interview being broadcast live. You can calm some of your fears by being prepared.

Men should wear a dark-colored, solid suit with simple ties and light shirts. Women should wear pastel colored suits, or a dark suit with a light shirt. Always avoid patterns and stripes.

Arrive at the studio at least 15 minutes early. Some shows will request that you arrive even earlier. You want to have time to freshen up and focus on the task at hand. Before the interview you will probably get a microphone attached to your jacket and possibly an earpiece connecting you to the control room.

Studios typically offer men makeup, which most often consists of light dusting of powder and lip-gloss. Always accept the makeup. Women often arrive with makeup on and only get extra if they request it. Use any additional time to collect your thoughts and relax.

The studio may have snacks available for you prior to the interview. Avoid the food because of the risk of spilling something on your clothing. Caffeine will dry your vocal cords and dairy products will coat them, so avoid coffee and milk. Reach for water.

If you are sitting for the interview you can cross your hands in your lap, but do not clench them or fiddle fingers nervously. Simply lay your hands in your lap. Do not tap your foot, bounce your knee or rock back and forth in your chair. Simply sit up straight and relax.

If you have been directed to look at the interviewer, keep a good posture and make eye contact. Sometimes, they will ask you to look at the camera. Ask where you should look if they do not direct you.

When you have to play defense

There will be times when you have to go on the defensive and answer tough or misleading questions. In order to succeed in an interview like this you need to be prepared.

Stay focused on the interview from the very start. Be sure not to let your mind wander and do not get angry. Concentration is the key to successfully completing the interview. Remember at all times- you are not speaking with the reporter; you are speaking with the community you were elected or appointed to represent. Take the reporter's negative questions and form a bridge to a positive answer. First, answer the questions directly and truthfully. Second, quickly follow with a bridge phrase and insert your message. There are many ways to insert a bridge into your response. Below is a list of terms you could use:

- Resident should know that...
- The community needs to understand that...
- However...
- It is important to note...

- Also let me add...
- At the same time...
- The most important factor is...

Examples

Reporter: Why has the county wasted more than \$500,000 of taxpayer money on highway improvements that were unneeded?

County Official: The County invested \$500,000 this year in the highway system because the old highway was deteriorating and was not wide enough to handle the rush hour traffic. Because of repairs, commutes will be cut by an average of 15 minutes each way.

Reporter: Your critics are saying that the improvement was not needed- that the old system would have lasted another two years.

County Official: The residents of the county deserve a safe and modern highway now, not in two years. In two years the costs will be greater and each commuter who uses the new highway will save an average of 120 hours in commute time. I am proud that residents will be spending more time with their families and less time stuck in traffic.

The answer-bridge-message is a time-tested approach to difficult interviews. The reporter may spot the technique and try to break up your responses. This is where your concentration and focus comes in.

The reporter may try to get you to respond emotionally to the questions. Always keep your emotions at an even keel. Do not lose your cool and do not accuse the reporter of being unfair or confrontational. The second you let your emotions take over, you have lost. Stick to your prepared answers.

The reporter may try to interrupt your answer when you get to the bridge and ask another question. If that happens, stop and let the reporter know you will answer that question when you are done answering the first. Complete your answer and ask him/her to repeat the next question. See example below.

Reporter: Your critics are saying that the improvement was not needed. That the old system would have lasted another two years.

County Official: The residents of the county deserve a safe and modern highway now, not in two years...

Reporter: But why change a system that is working just fine? Some say these funds should have gone towards the school system.

County Official: Please allow me to finish answering your first question. As I mentioned, the residents of the county deserve a safe and modern highway now, not in two years. In two years the costs will be greater and each commuter who uses the new highway will save an average of 120 hours in commute time. I am proud that residents will be spending more time with their families and less time stuck in traffic. Now could you please repeat the second question?

Never say “no comment.” To most news consumers, no comment means, I’ve got something to hide. If there are questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, there are certain phrases that sound less evasive than “no comment.” These include:

- I cannot speculate on that.
- I am not the right person to address that question.
- I cannot predict the future.
- That’s a good question. I will get back to you when more information becomes available.
- It’s too early in the process to comment at this time.

On and Off the record

Playing the on-and-off-the-record game can be dangerous. Why take the chance of your “joke” getting splashed across the front page tomorrow morning? And consider the more frequent use of cell phone cameras. You do not want to be recorded making a joke or comment that, taken out of context, would be embarrassing and end up on YouTube. The best advice is to always consider your words and actions on the record. One thing that never works is saying something to a reporter followed by, “That’s off the record.” No it’s not. Too late.

If you have a good working relationship with the reporter, and it is to your advantage as well as the reporter’s advantage to go off the record, here is what you need to know.

- *Off the record.* This means that the information is not to be used publicly or shared with another person.
- *On background.* This means that 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.* This means that the information may be used, but the source may not be identified in any manner.

Crisis Communications

Emergency Communications Plan

No one can predict when or where disaster may strike. Be it an earthquake, hurricane, wildfire, tornado, flood or terrorist attack, public leaders must be able to respond responsibly to media inquiries in a timely manner.

Because of the unpredictability of a crisis, it is important to develop a 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 a certain crisis.

Political Crisis

The other type of crisis that arises from time to time is the political crisis. Sometimes they are fairly insignificant and short-lived, or sometimes they grow into full-blown scandals (see Richard Nixon and Gary Condit). How you handle it in the early stages can often help keep a small controversy, well, small and harmless. 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. Do not worry about what your critics will say or what the media will report.
- *Momentary lapse of reason.* If you said something deemed inappropriate by some in the community, and it probably was inappropriate, say so. “What I said earlier today was inappropriate and dumb. I meant no harm and ask for forgiveness.”
- *I am sorry.* If you did something to violate the public trust, but did not break the law, simply admit it. Then offer a sincere apology to those you wronged and the public.
- *I am not a crook.* If the brewing controversy is nothing but phony baloney being spread by critics, political rivals or someone in the media, try to get to the root of the issue. Seek support from those around you and develop an appropriate response. Be careful not to blame the media for your situation. That usually is not convincing to the general public.
- *Do something, anything.* In most cases, doing nothing leads to further speculation and problems for you, the county government and public trust.

Hey commissioner, how was the weather down there?

NYSAC, like most other membership organizations, relies on the active participation of its members for effectiveness and success. This often means that county officials will travel to other areas of the state for NYSAC meetings and conferences. County officials are susceptible to negative media coverage for traveling at taxpayers’ expense. Detailing the travel frequency and expenses in the local newspaper is a legitimate story to report. The key is to make sure that the reporter has all information he or she needs to write a fair story. It is helpful if the county has adapted policies for out-of-county travel and an approved budget. But even with these in place, you can find yourself in a controversy if you are not careful.

Before you get out of Dodge County:

- Discuss the conference/meeting well in advance at a public meeting (obtain a NYSAC news release).
- Describe the purpose of the conference/meeting and be able to communicate it if asked later.
- Describe your role in NYSAC (Board of Directors, etc.) and how the county benefits from your participation
- Communicate what you hope to accomplish at the conference/meeting on behalf of those you represent.
- Know the various activities available at the conference/meeting, such as educational seminars, professional development workshops, etc.
- Highlight the value of networking with others in your field or line of work to discuss how they resolved common problems or challenges in their community and to stay on top of the latest cost-saving innovations in local government.
- Know what the registration fees are and have an estimate of how much the entire trip will cost.

While you are on travel:

Remember you are on county business at all times.
Follow your county’s spending procedures to the T.

Keep a journal of your activities at the conference/meeting.

When you return:

At the next board meeting upon your return, offer an oral report of what you did and what you achieved.

Controversial conference locations:

Some conference locations are hard to defend to the folks back at home, such as Hawaii and Las Vegas. If you choose to attend, consider these tips:

- If your county usually sends two delegates to the annual conference don't suddenly send eight.
- Know your conference attendance record. If you've gone to the annual conference each year for the past ten years, say that to show consistency.
- If members of your family traveled with you, point out that no taxpayer dollars were used to pay their expenses.
- Point out that conferences need to be financially successful. If members do not register and attend, no one wins. That's one reason why "fun" activities, such as tours and family activities are offered as part of the overall conference experience.

Resources from NYSAC:

NYSAC Press Releases: <http://nysac.org/news/category/press-room/>

Reports: <http://nysac.org/legislative-action/>

Publications: <http://nysac.org/Publications/>