

A press briefing is a good way to communicate with your stakeholders through the print and electronic media. Prudent use of this effective communication tool will enrich your “media goodwill bank account.” Then, when the chips are down and you need the media’s cooperation, you will have some capital available to make a “withdrawal” from your good will account.

PE TIP SHEET No. 2:

HOW TO CONDUCT A SUCCESSFUL PRESS BRIEFING

BY

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You are not the Governor or the Mayor, but getting your messages out to your stakeholders is just as important as presenting the State of the State Address or announcing having won America’s most livable city award. You too can use press briefings, or press conferences as they are also known, to inform a particular audience about an important or pressing matter. Note that not every topic warrants scheduling a press briefing, but judicious use of this tool will help you reach that particular audience or group of stakeholders you wish to inform.

Sometimes you will call a press briefing on a time-sensitive or “breaking news” matter. An example would be an accidental wastewater spill or issuance of a boil water notice. In such cases, act with urgency. Generally, there exists a small window of opportunity to be heard on a time-sensitive news story.

Or maybe you want to feature some “soft” news event such as the dedication of a new environmental facility. You may want to call a press briefing to announce a new technology you have applied that better protects the environment, reduces costs or solves some nuisance problem for neighbors or the public at large.

Always ask yourself the question, “Is this situation or event something that will definitely catch the newspaper reader’s or TV watcher’s attention?” If you can truthfully answer this question affirmatively, then go for it. Develop a main message and stick to the knitting, as they say.

Here are the basics of conducting a successful press briefing. Consider the following tips.

- 1. Develop a Media Relations Plan.** A future Tip Sheet will provide advice on how to develop such a plan, but one element of these plans is to determine the circumstances under which a press briefing should be conducted. Stick to the guidelines established by the plan in general but allow yourself the flexibility to call a press briefing if you feel that special circumstances warrant it.
- 2. Build a media contact list.** Know your media market. Try to learn what media your audience uses to get news, information, updates, advice, or entertainment. Include local newspapers, TV and radio. The search for all the media outlets, large and small, prominent and obscure, that are used by your target audiences. If your topic is BIG, consider including wire services, newsletters, trade journals, and selected relevant Internet outlets. Identify the appropriate sections or departments of those outlets (environmental editors/reporters, science reporters, etc.).

Don't put media outlets on your list unless they really would be interested in your message. Customize the list each time you schedule a press briefing, to weed out those that are not appropriate. One way to alienate the press is to inundate them with items that don't apply to their audiences. List the names of individual contacts. Media directories, as well as the mastheads of newspapers and magazines, will provide the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the people to whom you will be sending your press briefing advisories. They typically are beat reporters, section or department editors, managing editors, and broadcast news directors. Call each one personally to confirm their contact information; there's always a lot of turnover in these positions. You can learn a lot about media relations when you make these initial calls, if you can relax and "chat them up." Update your contact list at least twice a year, adding fax numbers and e-mail addresses when available. But don't send press briefing notices by fax or e-mail unless you're invited to do so.

3. **Collaborate with like-minded folks.** If time permits, team up with other credible groups or individuals who are interested in addressing your issue. If such groups are respected or even controversial, more reporters will be more inclined to attend your briefing.
4. **Select spokespersons.** Those who will participate in the press briefing should be carefully selected. While it is essential to have one main message, it is even more important to have one main messenger. That person should be an exceptional public communicator who is confident he or she can deal with any situation that arises. He or she must not resent conducting the briefing, but rather appreciate the opportunity to share valuable information and ease people's anxiety or clear any confusion. Spokesperson may often be the senior people in your organization since they may be perceived as the foremost "authorities." Select your supporting participants for their knowledge and expertise in the subject being discussed. It is better to have more participants than less if you are unsure what kinds of questions journalists may ask during the briefing. Also, pay attention to the diversity represented among chosen speakers.
5. **Train your spokespersons.** Folks who will most often conduct or speak at press briefings should receive basic training on how to conduct themselves during the press briefing. Some tips to follow include:
 - ✓ Don't talk over a questioner. It's rude and only raises people's frustration level. Allow each person to get his or her full question out. Further, repeat the question and acknowledge the questioner. Make sure that after you have responded the questioner understands your response, even if he or she doesn't agree. Get in the habit of asking, "Have I answered your question fully?" People appreciate that. If there is any confusion, the lead person conducting the briefing should take control and clarify things.
 - ✓ Don't argue or debate with questioners unless you see no other option. The purpose of this briefing is not to win an argument, but rather to share information and instill a sense of confidence that things are under control.
 - ✓ Even when you're not speaking, each member of the briefing team should remain alert, aware and listen to what is being said. Avoid being distracted or looking all over while another team member is speaking. You are a team and you need to look and act like a

team. A slight nod at appropriate times will underscore and support the point being made by the speaker.

6. **Clearly define the role of each person on the briefing team.** For example, while your main messenger may be your utilities director, your utilities engineering director may handle engineering questions while your operations supervisor handles operational queries. The keys are for each team member to know what they are expected to address before the briefing starts and not step on the toes of their colleagues during the event.
7. **Formulate prepared statement(s) for the briefing.** Prepare brief statements with “quotable phrases” or “sound bites.” Respect the time; don’t prepare long-winded speeches.
8. **Announce the press briefing.** Send a press advisory to the TV, radio and newspaper outlets in your area, noting the time and place of the briefing. Do not give away too much of the message, but provide a hook so they will WANT to cover it. Follow up with calls to each media outlet on your contact list. If the briefing is not time-sensitive and, therefore quickly announced, prepare and send a news release announcing the press briefing along with a press kit. The press kit should include a prepared statement, which encapsulates the message(s) you will impart during the press briefing, the press release about the press conference, bios of the people making statements and general information on your organization. If the press briefing is time-sensitive, try to give the media folks as much time as possible to attend your briefing by calling each contact on your media list as early in the day as possible. News editors hand out assignments to reporters at the beginning of each day but leave some slack in the schedule to report on breaking news. Then hand prepared press kits to reporters as they arrive. Another thought to keep in mind. Sometimes the way to a journalist’s heart is through her/his stomach. You may want to provide refreshments and make this known in your press advisory.

OK, now we’ve backed up for a running start at it. Here’s what to do at the press briefing.

- ◆ ***Start and finish the briefing on time.*** Again, respect time commitments of journalists. Learn about the deadlines of the reporters on your media list so you can pick the best briefing time of day and day of the week relative to deadlines. Get started by introducing yourself and those who are part of your support team who may be answering specific questions as specialists or experts in a given area. Don’t assume people know who these people are. Establish their credentials right from the beginning.
- ◆ ***Deliver a brief statement, which should also be available in print.*** This statement should identify your main message and a brief description of the key points you want to communicate. I emphasize the words “brief” and “key” because you must be disciplined in how much information you communicate. People want and need only so much information. The more points you try to make, the less likely your most important points will resonate with your audience.
- ◆ ***Establish the ground rules for how and when questions can be asked.*** Tell reporters that you will take their questions after you and other participants have made your statements. Don’t allow your audience, no matter how fired up they might be, to take control of the event. The key is for your organization to be in control and ensure that things remain calm and focused. If the audience goes into a feeding frenzy, the best thing to say is, “We look forward to answering all

of your questions, and I only ask that you present them one at a time. I assure you we will answer every question, if you give us the opportunity." Make sure to repeat the question so all can hear it before answering it.

- ◆ ***Don't be argumentative or try to debate with questioners unless you see no other option.*** The purpose of this briefing is not to win an argument, but rather to share information and instill a sense of confidence that things are under control.
- ◆ ***Even when you're not speaking, each member of the briefing team should remain alert, aware and listen to what is being said.*** Avoid being distracted or looking all over while another team member is speaking. You are a team and you need to look and act like a team.
- ◆ ***Follow up again.*** After the briefing, mail press kits to all media who did not attend. Follow up with phone calls and invite them to call you whenever they need information about your profession or area of expertise.