



In today's information age, there is no doubt that the media shapes public opinion. In this edition of "Tip Sheet," guest columnist Marci Davis gives us a glimpse inside the newsroom to help us understand the players and what motivates them. Her experience in broadcast news as a reporter and anchor and her current role of helping utilities with their communications needs provides some unique insights. Ms. Davis also enlightens us regarding the importance of providing valuable training for those who interface with the media. Remember what Marshall McLuhan, considered by some to be the oracle of the electronic age, said: "The medium is the message."

PE Tip Sheet No. 33

There's No GPS for Navigating the Media: You Need Knowledge and Training to Stay on Course



By Marci Hawk Davis

There are two kinds of utilities in the world: those who have faced the media and those who haven't yet. Regardless of which category your utility falls in, your time in the spotlight will come one day—and possibly sooner, rather than later. The key to a successful encounter, whether the story is good or bad, is preparation.

Media relations has been featured extensively in past Tip Sheets columns, so this one will focus more on a behind-the-scenes look at the newsroom and how media training can help your organization get ready for its close up.

Information doesn't exist in a vacuum, and every day news outlets have to fill the same amount of space and time, whether there's anything significant to report or just another rehash of the latest Hollywood scandal. As long-time newscaster and NPR analyst Daniel Schorr famously said, "If you don't exist in the media, you don't exist." Understanding the process behind news gathering can help a utility see where they fit into the big picture and put them on better footing for building positive media relationships. Pairing this knowledge with interactive media training can give your utility the edge when the media really comes calling.

The View From the Newsroom

How in the world did they decide that was a story? Why can't they ever get the facts straight? That's not what I said! If you've ever uttered any of these phrases after being interviewed or even after just watching the news, then a peek behind the curtain is in store. People often have a visceral reaction to the media; rarely is there any middle ground of emotion. But if you could be a fly on the wall and see who the key players are and how stories are conceived, you would realize that just like any other business, there is a method to the madness.

The general public is probably most familiar with the reporter whose byline they read in the newspaper or whose face they see on the evening news. While this person is an important element in the news-gathering process and is often the "face" of a news outlet, there are many "behind the scenes" people who have just as much, and sometimes more, impact on how a story is conveyed. Other important people in the television hierarchy include:

- ◆ **The Assignment Editor** – sends reporters and photographers out to cover stories; typically manages press release and meeting notices.
- ◆ **The Producer** – responsible for putting a newscast together; decides how the stories will flow and how much time is dedicated to each one.
- ◆ **The News Director** – manages the entire newsroom, overseeing reporters, photographers, producers, editors, etc.; may also make key decisions on the stories in the newscast or even information in a particular story.
- ◆ **The General Manager** – oversees all operations of the television station; sometimes

involved in newsroom decisions.

Similar roles exist in print media. They include:

- ◆ **Beat Editors** – manage the reporters covering particular topics or "beats" such as government, crime, education, environment, etc., and may make assignments. Smaller newspapers may not have beat editors.
- ◆ **The Managing Editor** – manages the entire newsroom operation; makes decisions about coverage and how much space may be given to a particular story.
- ◆ **The Publisher** – oversees all newspaper operations; may get involved in newsroom business.

For a utility, building relationships with some of these other decision makers is a smart idea, since they tend to stay with a media outlet longer than reporters (who often have to move to other markets to advance their careers) and may have a vested interest in the community. Also, a television station manager or newspaper publisher may be involved in civic clubs or organizations that a utility leader participates in. These occasions could provide a key opportunity to mention some of the positives going on at your organization, as they could filter down to the newsroom. None of this should supplant relationship building with individual reporters but should be part of your overall media relations program.

From Idea to Story

Stories develop from a variety of sources and they typically focus on things that get people talking – the weather, a bad accident, a tax increase. But the newsroom staff doesn't just pull these ideas out of thin air. There are some standard ways they keep up with what's going on in a community. Utility leaders who

take the time to learn them can gain insight into how their ideas fit. The sources include but aren't limited to:

- **Police/emergency scanners** – Most newsrooms have at least one, if not several, scanners tuned to the varying frequencies of first responders. This is how they are able to quickly get to the scene of accidents, fires, and other emergencies. Scanners are a primary source of "breaking" news.
- **News wires** – Practically every newsroom has a wire service, such as AP or Reuters, that provides "newsbriefs" on international, national, or regional stories. Someone in the newsroom may see a link between a wire story and something going on locally.
- **Daybook** – This is the calendar of planned events and is filled with items such as press releases or other announcements. While newsroom leaders may not decide to cover every event on a given day, knowing in advance what's going on in the community increases the likelihood of a story. This is one way for a utility to promote its positive news items.
- **Franchises/Beats** – There are certain areas that newsrooms brand as a "beat" (newspaper) or "franchise" (television), such as health/medical, consumer, and education. These areas typically have a dedicated reporter.
- **Local connection/angle to national stories** – Newsrooms often rely on a local angle to a national story, as it helps to expand their coverage and gives it relevance to a local audience. The recent drought gripping the Southeast is a great example of this. Even though it's a regional story that also became national, local media outlets often interviewed their local utilities to get the impact for their communities.
- **Reader/Viewer tips** – People call or email newsrooms to give their input or opinion on a particular issue or to let a media person know about something going on. In the Internet age as television and newspapers try to become more interactive, this type of involvement is often solicited and even included in the coverage of an event. Reader comments to an online news article or television e-mail polls are an example of this.

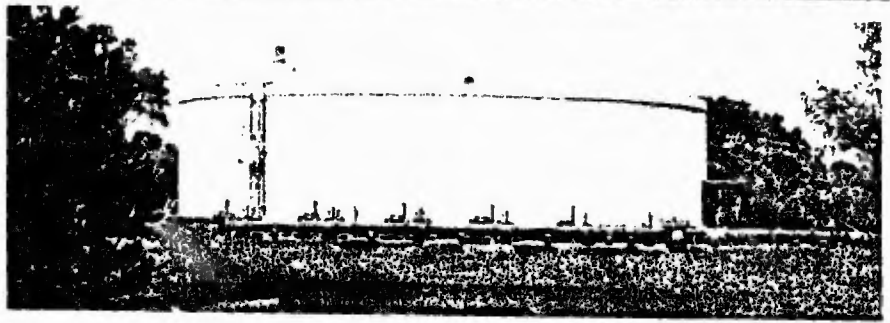
Media Training Amps up Your Program

Now that you have the inside scoop on the media's inner sanctum, you might think you're ready next time that reporter calls to get an update on your latest plant construction. Think again. The reporter may have already talked to neighbors in the area who say the plant will drive down their property

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values. Now you're in the position of defending the plant's site instead of talking about the benefits it will bring to the system and community.

Consider the various training programs a utility has in place to keep its employees up on the latest management practices, equipment, and safety procedures. Why approach your media relations program any differently?

Because the media can be a significant avenue to connect with your public, your credibility is on the line every time you're quoted in the paper or heard across the airwaves. You want to project confidence and trustworthiness. Unfortunately, for most people, talking in front of a camera or watching someone jot down your every word is uncomfortable and can be unnerving. The value of media training is that you can see how you would perform under fire in the safety of your conference room and among colleagues, as opposed to a swarm of reporters. And for a utility leader, you can

find out firsthand which of your staff stays strong under pressure and who wilts under the hot lights.

It's training that more and more utilities are undertaking. Leaders appreciate the concept of preparation for an encounter instead of just winging it and hoping for the best. A good training session should be interactive. Participants should be a little on edge and not know what's coming next. This helps mimic the sensation of being put on the spot by a reporter. Most importantly, it should feature videotaped mock interviews and scenarios. This helps to smooth out those jitters and provides progressive learning for all participants. Feedback on the "interviews" also helps participants recognize their strengths and challenges.

While the videotaped exercises and feedback usually resonate most strongly with participants, good media training should also include the big picture of the media, (similar to what was listed earlier in this column) — going through the ins and outs of the news-

room and even drilling down into the differences between broadcast and print. This sharpens participants' skills by giving them tips on how the specific medium affects their interaction.

Offering interview tricks and techniques is also critical, as is explaining what steps you can take to help the reporter get the story right. Finally, showing real-life examples of other organizations or agencies that successfully or unsuccessfully handled a situation with the press is an effective tool in training. And if you can find trainers who specifically focus on utilities, the sessions will prove even more valuable, as they can offer scenarios paralleling real-life incidents, such as construction accidents, a boil water advisory, or even political situations.

Getting your management and staff on board with the training is just as critical as finding qualified media trainers. Staff members who skip sessions or arrive late/leave early not only miss out on an important training opportunity, they also diminish the investment their organization puts into arranging media training. The champion for this effort should be at the top of the organization, and needs to let participants know beforehand that training will be lively, interactive, and even fun.

One final point about media training is that it needs to be ongoing. Even if you don't bring trainers in every time, after going through a professionally held session, make developing scenarios and role playing part of your regular agenda.

For those with no media relations program, media training is no substitute for an active program, but it can be the launching pad for a utility to start engaging the local press. And for utilities who do promote proactive media relations, at any level, media training can prepare you for that inevitable call.

It's only fair to your people that they have proper training should they find themselves in the hot seat. If the media called today, would you or anyone on your staff be ready? Because at the end of the day, it all comes back to your credibility and the reality that anyone who speaks on behalf of your organization becomes the organization.

Marci Hawk Davis is a senior strategic communications consultant for the regional environmental consulting firm Jordan, Jones & Goulding based in metro Atlanta, helping utilities meet their communications needs in media training, strategic planning, crisis communications, and multimedia production. Before becoming part of the environmental industry, she spent a number of years in broadcast news as a reporter and anchor. She can be reached by phone at 678-333-0506 or by e-mail at mdavis@jjg.com.

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