

## *Media Interviews: A Systematic Approach For Success*

By James L. Vance, M.S.

Department spokespersons can prepare for media interviews by following a seven-step systematic approach.

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Law enforcement officials, when asked their opinions of today's news reporters, predictably reply with such words as "insensitive," "arrogant," "untrustworthy," and "sensational." Rarely are the words "useful" or "necessary" included in their responses.

In contrast, reporters and editors from both print and electronic news agencies, when asked to describe the police in the 1990s, unanimously voice their opinions using such terms as "clannish," "secretive," "incompetent," and worse. The words "professional" and "trustworthy" almost certainly never make the list.

Such stereotypical characterizations from both sides do little to promote mutually beneficial relations. In fact, the attitude of police officials and the media toward one another deprives an important third party, namely, the public, of clear accounts of what it needs to know to make reasoned judgments on law enforcement's impact on the community.

In the arena of police-media relations, one of the primary goals of any law enforcement agency should be to help ensure the accurate reporting of information that the public needs to know. While administrators can employ a number of strategies toward this end, there is no substitute for a proactive attitude based on sound preparation. This article addresses the need for good police-media relations, offers a strategy to improve relations, and then presents a seven-step systematic approach that administrators can use to prepare for media interviews.

### **THE NEED FOR GOOD POLICE-MEDIA RELATIONS**

Public opinion polls consistently show that the public supports law enforcement when it acts responsibly. These same polls also indicate that the public expects law enforcement officials to tell their stories-warts and all-to maintain the public's trust.

At the same time, those charged with the public's welfare, whether they are police officers, firefighters, or elected officials, need to remember three important points regarding the media.

First, the media are not going to go away. Law enforcement represents, either directly or indirectly, well over one-half of their stories, especially in local markets. In short, the actions of the police are too important to ignore.

Second, the media will run the story whether law enforcement officials like it or not. While the media may entertain an occasional plea to delay a story, given sufficient justification, law enforcement's choice, more often than not, is to be either a player who shapes the coverage from the outset or an observer who stands back to let the critics define the issue.

Finally, bad news does not improve when it stays in the spotlight. In such instances, an agency's best media strategy is to offer a complete account of what happened, consistent with legal constraints, and let the issue run its course. This simply clears the way for other issues. To put it another way, "You may get beat up, but you'll only get beat up once."

### **A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE RELATIONS**

Without debating the merits of today's media, their own excesses and tactics, or their cynical approaches to the issues they cover, the primary question regarding police-media relations simply is, "How can today's law enforcement professionals prepare for media interviews to ensure their stories are told accurately, fairly, and in a way that the public can understand?" Surprisingly, there is a strategy for media interviews that, balanced over time, offers a better chance to obtain accuracy in reporting.

The strategy is proactive, not reactive, and requires administrators to take an aggressive, rather than passive, stance when dealing with the media. It is a strategy based on systematic organization and consistency of response. In short, it is a process based on control.

Control, in this case, does not mean attempting to hold in check the media and their access to law enforcement information, although there are times when investigative or prosecutorial realities demand a less complete response than the media might otherwise like. In fact, any tactic to control the media works against the organization, creating a climate of greater distrust in an already-adversarial relationship and possibly becoming the focus of media scrutiny.

Instead, administrators need to control their own departments by ensuring that all levels of management receive and disseminate consistent information. This is accomplished through a sound media policy and a public information officer, one with either full-time or auxiliary media duties, who has a mandate to train appropriate personnel within the agency on media relations and interviewing techniques. It also requires the full support and involvement of administrators who give priority to media relations. Enlightened leadership is the first step toward establishing sound relationships with the media.

Armed with this posture, administrators start out in a strong position with the media because they recognize that they have something the media, and presumably the public, want and need-information. From this foundation, administrators can disseminate information in such a way that the organization's position will stand the greatest chance of being reported accurately. This is where a systematic approach to preparing for media interviews assumes vital importance.

### **A SEVEN-STEP SYSTEMATIC APPROACH**

While there are as many "systems" to interview preparation as there are media consultants, the following seven-step approach is both simple and proven. It should be noted at the outset, however, that not every element of this process applies in every media encounter. The goal is to give prospective interviewees a complete arsenal from which they can draw "interview ammunition" as the situation dictates.

#### **Step One: Define the Issue**

It happens all too frequently. A reporter calls with tough questions; an agency executive or other spokesperson, often without forethought and adequate preparation, answers, believing to know the ins and outs of the issue. This response results in an incomplete or inaccurate treatment of the issue by the press, which sends the agency into the first of many rounds of damage control.

The agency would have been better served, in terms of time and reputation, by seeking to control the situation from the outset. By not doing so, administrators put the media in charge. To begin, agency officials and spokespersons should know not to respond to other-than-routine questions without knowing the background of the inquiry. In such instances, when queried by the media, they simply stress that they need to obtain information regarding the issue at hand before answering questions.

Further, they need to find out from reporters not only what led to the call but also a general idea of the identities of other individuals to whom the reporters are talking. This information will help reveal the likely tone of the press' inquiry, the reliability of their information, and even their "edge" or slant on a particular piece.

Spokespersons then should determine from reporters the specific interview topic and the kind of questions that will be asked. This gives the department the opportunity to decide who is the best person in the agency to handle the issue at hand. It may not be the individual contacted originally.

No rule exists that says the person called is the one who must respond to the inquiry. In fact, reporters appreciate a good faith effort to direct the questions to the right source. Even if the reporter views this as waffling or ducking the issue, so what? Precise, timely information, clear responses, and thoroughness are more important than a reporter's delicate feelings.

Where appropriate, the official contacted can offer to fax background information to the reporter. This does not mean that the person is refusing the interview; it just shows that the department is offering to do what it can until it develops a more specific response. At some point during the initial media encounter, the agency official or spokesperson must make one of three choices—decline the interview, answer the questions, or ascertain the reporter's deadline and offer to call back shortly with the agency's response. If the agency official declines the interview based on the nature of the questions, the reporter should be told why. If it appears that the information may be available later, that, too, should be relayed to the reporter, along with the reason why. In either case, officials should have no illusions about whether reporters will pursue stories, because they will.

Agency officials who decide to answer the questions on the spot should do so only if the issues have been developed beforehand (perhaps because of previous queries) and answers are readily available. Officials should resist being goaded into responding to questions until they are prepared completely. This is why calling a reporter back is the best option in the majority of inquiries.

With the foregoing as an agency's management posture, firm, fair negotiations between the agency and the media prior to an interview seem not only reasonable but also expected. Why? Because the agency and its issues are too important to address by shooting from the hip.

### **Step Two: Gather Facts and Prepare Organizational Messages**

In today's high visibility, sound-bite-oriented media arena, developing organizational messages in concert with accurate information is the single most important part of interview preparation. It can be accomplished when an agency has the luxury of hours or even days to prepare, or it can be accomplished quickly, even by a police official stepping onto a crime scene with cameras already in place. Without question, however, this preparation must be done.

What are organizational messages? They are points a spokesperson wants to make, no matter what. They support a department's theme or position and frequently serve to counteract the messages of critics who inevitably hover around law enforcement and who always will be given equal time by the media,

regardless of their credibility. Organizational messages must be repeated often and emphatically throughout the interview.

Department administrators develop organizational messages with an eye toward promoting public recall. The messages are simple, focused, concise, and limited in number. Essentially, they are a concession to the sound-bite nature of today's media outlets and to the often-limited attention span of the viewing and reading public.

Print journalists often dispute the assertion that, like their electronic media counterparts, they focus primarily on short, easy-to-understand messages. They assert that theirs is a more in-depth medium.

Perhaps in terms of the number of words devoted to a particular topic, print journalists offer a great deal more than their broadcast counterparts. But anyone reading a typical news account on any topic would be hard-pressed to find more than a sentence or two attributed to a source, regardless of the source's prominence or the article's length. Until the media's approach to news coverage changes, a "quotable quote" on a particular issue stands a far greater chance of being repeated than a detailed explanation. The point is: Spokespersons should not fight the trend; instead, they should make it work for them.

Supporting facts should accompany organizational messages. These facts are the standard "who, what, why, where, when, and how" material that provides the details necessary to understand an issue. Without exception, police officials must verify and reverify information before releasing it. Once in the public domain, erroneous information is difficult to retrieve, and it damages an organization's credibility. It also places a reporter in an awkward situation.

Administrators should remember that reporters succeed or fail by their credibility. If their accounts are inaccurate because the information provided was incomplete or incorrect, reporters face the wrath of their editors and are less likely to be trusted. As a result, these reporters become more skeptical of their sources and are much less inclined to accept at face value future information from law enforcement officials. In short, an organization concerned with sound media relations always strives for precision in its responses to queries.

If information cannot be released, a thorough explanation of the reasons why is warranted. The explanation should be accompanied by a promise to release the information later, as soon as practical. This is an organization's only viable option for cultivating and maintaining the public's and the media's trust.

### **Step Three: Brainstorm Potential Questions,**

Brainstorming potential questions simply means writing down everything a spokesperson conceivably might be asked. This includes both tough and easy questions. The reasoning behind this is simple. The first time interviewees come in contact with a tough question, it should be from someone on their side.

To ensure thoroughness, all personnel familiar with the issue should help draft potential questions. Almost always, the questions an organization identifies on its own will be more extensive than those asked by the media.

### **Step Four: Answer the Questions in Writing**

The mere act of writing out answers to questions promotes recall. In addition, it produces a document to be used during rehearsal and referred to during the actual interview (especially a phone interview).

Written answers also help to ensure adherence to the organizational message. Moreover, they provide a source document to assist with follow-up queries from other media outlets, thus ensuring consistent responses and saving considerable preparation time.

### **Step Five: Rehearse Out Loud**

Spokespersons often overlook or ignore this key element of media interviews. If actors or actresses refuse to go on stage without rehearsal, why would police spokespersons ever consider giving an interview unrehearsed, where the results are so much more important? A prepared official is a believable official.

A good rehearsal technique is to have other personnel role play the reporter and fire the questions—both tough and easy—at the interviewee. If they play their roles earnestly, officers usually ask tougher, more detailed questions during a rehearsal than those voiced in the actual interview. Following this session, the role players then critique the performance, updating the written answers in the process.

A rehearsal produces a highly prepared, polished spokesperson with a heightened awareness of the agency's position on the issue. At the same time, it greatly reduces performance anxiety and helps to ensure the clear transfer of factual data to the reporter.

### **Step Six: Set Ground Rules During the Callback**

First of all, the callback is predicated on the bedrock principle that if someone in the department tells reporters that their deadlines will be met and that they will be called back within a specific period of time, then this is precisely what should happen. Beating the deadline is even better.

Why is this important? Because just as agencies expect reporters to keep their word, so, too, do reporters expect spokespersons to keep theirs. Any agency, especially a law enforcement one, is only as good as its credibility. Once lost, credibility is virtually impossible to regain. During the callback, several issues need to be addressed. First, the spokesperson must reiterate the subject of the interview. No agency wants surprises, so reporters should state clearly their intentions to stay with the agreed-upon topic(s).

A majority of credible journalists adhere to this simple ground rule. However, prudent administrators also plan for those journalists who "push the envelope" by attempting to explore different peripheral areas for which the spokesperson is not prepared or who knock a spokesperson off stride by asking questions on totally unrelated topics.

Reiterating a topic beforehand provides the spokesperson with the opportunity to remind reporters of their prior agreements and the expectation of integrity. Should reporters persist in pursuing issues beyond the scope of the prior agreement, thus making clear their real intentions, spokespersons can seize the moral high ground and threaten to terminate the interview.

Along the same line, reporters should be advised of those issues that cannot be addressed and the reasons why. For law enforcement, in particular, many issues are investigatory in nature, protected by state or federal privacy laws, and are not disclosable due to prosecutorial realities. In fairness to reporters, prior knowledge of untouchable issues avoids false expectations that can lead to misunderstandings and strained relations.

Nevertheless, as a practical matter, officials stating beforehand what cannot be discussed still may be asked to state on the record or before the camera those issues on which they will not comment and why.

This is a reasonable request and should be accommodated. Spokespersons should remember that the public has a strong sense of fairness and will accept reasonable explanations.

Other issues to be handled during the callback are the time, length, and site of the interview, as well as related matters. These details set the parameters for the interview.

As a general rule, brief interviews are better than long ones; however, spokespersons need to avoid setting a specific time limit during negotiations. Not only does this allow for some latitude, but it also does not tie the spokesperson to a reporter for a fixed time period if the interview goes poorly. Put simply, spokespersons should say what they have to say and then stop.

At this point in the interview process, there is, in essence, a completed verbal contract. The level of preparation that already has taken place should make the spokesperson more than ready for the seventh and final step.

### **Step Seven: Conduct the Interview**

The interview itself often can be anticlimactic, given the preparation that goes into it. What reporters confront, regardless of individual leanings, is a confident, controlled, and professional spokesperson. In other words, the nonverbal presence supports the verbal message.

But what of those circumstances, alluded to earlier, in which a spokesperson has little time to prepare, for example at a crime or accident scene? The answer is simple: There always is time to prepare.

Under no circumstances should any official have to participate in an impromptu interview. Negotiation on questions to be asked and basic ground rules can and should be accommodated off camera or before going on record with a print journalist, even when an official decides to speak while "on the scene."

Moreover, officials always should exercise the prerogative to gather basic facts from others at the scene and develop one or two organizational messages before talking to reporters. Finally, such on-the-scene or ambush-style interviews always should be brief, with the promise of follow-up information if appropriate.

### **CONCLUSION**

The seven-step systematic approach to media interviews offers spokespersons a simple set of working guidelines. Additionally, it allows an organization to provide information in the vital early stages of a story rather than wait and give critics or less-informed sources the chance to shape the issue.

For law enforcement, a policy of complete, consistent responses to media queries enhances public understanding and support. At the same time, it breaks down media-held stereotypes. Few agencies have a greater or more important story to tell than law enforcement. A system-atic approach to telling that story-ideally as a matter of organizational policy-is a management imperative.

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