

Media Magic

Tips & Tricks for Positive Media Encounters

Bill Humphreys, San Clemente Marine Safety Chief

As a public safety officer, you may be asked to answer questions from the media. Often these are negative questions, seemingly designed to place blame or stir controversy. How you answer these questions can help or hinder you and your agency, and sway public opinion in regard to the profession of lifesaving. Following are tips for dealing with the media in a manner that addresses the issues at hand while putting you, your agency, and lifesaving in the best light possible.

In support of our profession, Greg Hulsizer and Mike Frazer have graciously reviewed this document and provided additional suggestions and tips that they use when dealing with the media. Greg is the Vice President of Cambria Solutions, an ex-city manager for multiple cities, and a former lifeguard lieutenant for San Clemente. He regularly holds press conferences and teaches public relation skills around the nation. Mike was the Lifeguard Chief for the Los Angeles County Fire Department (now retired). Representing one of the largest lifeguard agencies in the United States, Chief Frazer has had years of experience successfully dealing with the media. We would also like to credit Arch Lustberg for the development of many of these tips. Mr. Lustberg is the author of multiple books on media relations and has served as a coach to state governors, congressional leaders, and presidential appointees. For more tips on public speaking, references to online videos by Mr. Lustberg are listed at the end of this document. A shortcut guide summarizing these tips follows the reference section.

Although the tips in this document are simple, they require practice to master. Practicing these strategies can assist you in enhancing your message and painting a favorable image for you and your department. Use these strategies to control the situation rather than being at the mercy of aggressive reporters.

Preparation for the Interview

Know and Follow Your Agency's Policies for Interviews with the Media

This seems obvious but is often forgotten. Your agency has specific policies for dealing with the media that must be followed. As an example, your agency may have a press information officer (PIO) and a policy stating that media requests must go through them. If you are questioned by a reporter but fall under such a policy, tell them that your agency would love to respond to their questions and direct them to the proper person. If you don't have a PIO, and you are authorized to speak to the press, understand your agency's policies. You may be allowed to only answer factual questions, with a requirement that you pass along policy related questions to someone else. If you are authorized to answer any type of question, make sure your supervisor knows that you are doing the interview (bosses hate surprises!). Every agency is different, so understand your policy to avoid any negative ramifications.

Buy Some Time and Control the Setting

You usually have some control over the timing of the interview, so try to formally schedule the interview. Whenever possible, avoid a “spur-of-the-moment” interview. It is fine to tell reporters that you are busy and would love to help, but you don’t have time right now. Ask them to send you written questions and tell them you will get back to them as soon as possible. This will give you time to prepare a response or even prepare a formal press release – which will steal their thunder and negate the need for the interview. If delaying the interview isn’t possible, buy some time by asking for a short break. During this time, comb your hair, adjust your uniform, and try to anticipate potential and worst-case questions. Plan on how you will answer these questions using the tips contained in this document. Think about your key message and how to best get it across. Finally, think about the setting for the interview. If possible, stand outside in a natural setting and it will paint a much better picture of you.

The Interview

Pause Before (and After) Answering

Now comes the moment of truth. You’ve prepared, bought some time, and are in a setting favorable for you. When the first question comes - pause and gather your thoughts. Although it may feel awkward, there is nothing wrong with a moderate pause (it will feel longer to you than to the viewers). As you do so, think about your key message and the tips described below.

Pausing after your answer can also be very effective. Often reporters will remain silent after you have answered in the hope that their silence will cause you to elaborate or editorialize. Keep your answer brief, stop, and wait for the next question. Doing so will turn the tables on the reporter, making them feel uncomfortable and giving you more control over the interview.

Use “The Open Face”

Your face is your main communication tool, so use it to your advantage. There are four “faces” people will tend to use in an interview or a presentation. You can smile, which if appropriate for the situation, conveys happiness. You can “close your face” (picture a frown or someone with furrowed brows), which creates a vision of anger which is rarely, if ever, appropriate. You can “neutralize your face” (no expression), which Mr. Lustberg calls “the face of the dead.” This is the face that will put your listener to sleep. Finally, you can use the “Open Face” (eyes wide open, expressive facial muscles, etc.), which is a caring and loving face. To help visualize this, picture the face you use when talking to a baby. Your eyes are wide open, your voice has inflection and passion, and you aren’t frowning – in fact, you’re probably smiling. This is the face that will make you appear honest, genuine, and believable.

Maintain Eye Contact

Whenever you are speaking maintain direct eye contact with the reporter, never speaking while looking away or at an inanimate object. If you need to refer to notes or a report, look down, read,

and look back up before speaking. Most of us have seen presentations where the person read to the audience. Don't make this mistake. As you speak, look directly into the reporter's eyes and you will be seen as much more sincere and interested.

Rephrase the Question the Way You Wish It Had Been Asked

Mr. Hulsizer taught me the concept of "Rephrasing the Question" many years ago. The concept is simple— you turn a negative question into a positive one that you are proud to answer. Here's how the process works. Often a reporter will ask a question that is more of an accusation rather than a question. Instead of directly answering the question (which puts you in a defensive position), pause and ask yourself "How would I have preferred the question to be asked?" Answer your version of the question instead of answering it the way the reporter asked it!

As an example, a reporter may ask a question in a way that will cause you to drop your guard or even intentionally anger you. They may say something like "Let's get real here, isn't it true that most of what lifeguards do in the offseason isn't necessary?" Or, "You have to admit, aren't lifeguards in the winter just sitting around or doing maintenance work that could be done by other workers at a lower cost to the taxpayers?"

Before answering, ask yourself "What are they really asking here?" In this example, the reporter is asking (in a negative way) for you to explain the need for lifeguards in the offseason. There are a variety of ways this could have been asked, so pick one that you are comfortable with and are proud to answer. Your answer may start with something like this: "Thank you. Let me take a minute to explain what lifeguards do in the winter." You can expand on this to explain what it takes to become a lifeguard, how many lives are saved in the off-season, elaborate on the value of a life saved, and explain the need for winter preparation for the summer season (recruitment, training, etc.). This gives you the opportunity to explain your mission, the dangers of the ocean in the offseason, and what you are doing to protect the public. When you do this, always answer the unasked question of "so what?" Be sure to explain *why* is it important to protect the public, which is where you can emphasize the value of a human life and what lifeguards do to protect those lives.

If you can't come up with a positive way to rephrase the question, take control of the interview and redirect the question to another topic. It is fine to respond: "That's an interesting perspective, but a much more important message to the public is..." Another option if you are stumped by a question is to say: "Let me research that and I will get back to you." This will give you time to prepare and provide a written response.

The goal of rephrasing is to control the interview by turning a negative question into a positive one that you can proudly answer. Turn it into a question that gives you an opportunity to expand in a direction you are comfortable with and include a safety message whenever you can. Keep your main message in mind and repeat it throughout the interview. If you can not rephrase the question, redirect it to another interesting topic or defer on answering until you can do more research. Not only will you perform much better in the interview, your stress level will drop because you know that you will be addressing positive questions that you are proud to answer.

Provide Three Positive Comments for the Incident

This technique requires forethought and sensitivity. First, do not discount the extent of the tragedy. Express appropriate concern, empathy, and compassion for everyone who was impacted. Clearly offer your sincere condolences. Once done, provide three positive comments about the tragedy or event if possible. Typically there were some positive things that occurred, so mention them! As an example, suppose a boat capsizes, sinks, and lives are lost despite your best attempts to save them. You could say something like:

“First and foremost, we want to express our sincere condolences for the family and friends of those involved(expand as appropriate and necessary)... Although this is an extreme tragedy, there were a few positive things that came from this. First, we are so thankful that there were other boats nearby to assist those in the water. Because of their efforts, many lives were saved. Our sincere thanks go out to those boaters who came to assist. We would also like to commend the lifeguards, the Coast Guard, and the Harbor Patrol who all worked together as a team to rescue many survivors. Finally, we would like to thank two of the survivors who swam back to assist others – putting themselves back in danger. These are true heroes and should be commended for risking their lives in the effort to save others.”

Coming up with three positive comments prior to the interview will help produce a much more balanced and complete story for the public.

Provide a “Quotable Quote” Emphasizing your Message

Operate under the premise that reporters have a tendency to repeat what is told to them. If you can come up with a “Quotable Quote,” something that is catchy and summarizes the issue, it probably will be reported. As an example, when asked to comment about Retired San Clemente Lifeguard Chief Richard Hazard when he passed away, I stated that he was a “Lifeguard’s Lifeguard.” This phrase was repeated in virtually every story regarding Chief Hazard’s life and his contributions to lifesaving. Come up with something positive, phrased in a “catchy” manner to make the reporter’s work easier – in other words, provide them with a Quotable Quote!

Miscellany

Finally, here are some miscellaneous tips that don’t need detailed explanation:

- For phone interviews, have a cheat sheet or reference material right in front of you.
- Prepare canned responses for issues that you know will periodically surface (shark encounters, budget issues, winter staffing, etc.)
- Nothing is off the record!
- Bring in safety messages at every opportunity.
- Build rapport with the media before crisis hits. Items such as: regular press releases, calls to local reporters with weekend statistics or human interest stories, or calls whenever something newsworthy is happening on the beach all help build rapport.

Summary

Dealing with an aggressive reporter can be intimidating. However, with proper planning and forethought you can switch from being on the defensive and put yourself in a positive and proactive position –all while promoting your message and pride in your agency. Remember to control the interview and setting, use an open face, rephrase the question, provide some positive comments about the incident, and supply the reporter with some quotable quotes. These techniques won't always work perfectly, but even if not, you will be much more relaxed and confident. Confident in the knowledge that you can accurately provide the information that the public wants, and confident that you can do this in a positive manner. Positive for you, positive for your agency, and positive for the noble profession of lifesaving!

References:

Lustberg, A. (Writer/Speaker). (2011a). *The Open Face* [Video file]. Retrieved from
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jxJyZQ8XG4>

Lustberg, A. (Writer/Speaker). (2011b). *The Rhythm of Eye Contact* [Video file]. Retrieved from
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKzCbhSyXww&feature=relmfu>

Media Shortcut Guide:

- Know and follow your agency's policies and procedures.
- Buy some time and control the setting. Prepare written answers or bullet points when possible.
- Pause before and after answering questions.
- Use an “Open Face”. Eyes wide, smile as appropriate, expressive facial muscles.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Rephrase, redirect, or delay responses to the question.
- Have three positive comments prepared for the incident.
- Provide a “Quotable Quote.”
- Prepare canned responses for events before they occur.
- Nothing is off the record.
- Bring in safety messages whenever possible.
- Build rapport with your local media before the crisis.