



Cambridge Leadership Associates LLC

To: ICMA folks
From: Marty Linsky

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This is pretty basic stuff, but I find writing it down useful. Here are “Ten Tips” (alliteration over accuracy) toward more effective media relations. They are helpful to me. I hope they are to you as well. If not, use the reverse side for notepaper.

1. **Respect the role that they play and the pressures they are under.** They are in the highly competitive bad news business, face unrelenting deadlines and demanding bosses, and therefore value terseness, accuracy and good material.
2. **Engage in foreplay.** Before talking with a reporter, establish the terms of engagement in language incapable of misinterpretation; ask questions to find out as much as possible about the context into which you are dropping your words.
3. **Think before you speak.** You can always find time to think before talking. Picture whatever you are going to say on the front page and the evening news. Then, if you don't like the way it looks or sounds, keep your mouth closed.
4. **Develop a relationship.** Here are the rules: don't ever mistake friendliness for friendship. Give them help when you can. Never steer them wrong knowingly. Never ask for a quid pro quo; you can only get one if you don't ask. Using them by telling them something they know you should not be telling them, will earn their appreciation but not their respect.
5. **Answer the question you wish they had asked.** You are under no great obligation to answer the question they asked. You are under an obligation to your program, your Administration, your career and your constituents in and out of government.
6. **Stay on message.** When you know what you want to say, say it and only that. Minimize the reporter's choices. Be able to articulate no more than three overall goals and repeat them endlessly, finding a way to work any question back to them.
7. **Be a “source”.** Being a good source gives you the opportunity to help shape stories. It may give you the benefit of the doubt at the margins when you are the story. Leaks are not a moral issue for journalists; leaks for them are as oxygen is to life. Leaks are ok if they are purposeful and not simply self-serving. News people like exclusives, but you have to spread them around in a competitive media environment.
8. **Distinguish between objectivity and fairness.** Good journalists feel a deep obligation to be fair and accurate. They know that they are always making value judgments and therefore objectivity is an unachievable aspiration. They are in the business of accurate storytelling, not truth telling. They do not expect that people who they write about will share their view of reality.
9. **Don't worry too much about the bad story.** A bad story about you usually needs your collusion to stay in the news long enough so that anyone will remember it. Consider all the options, including those not considered often enough: confess error, do nothing, share the emotion of the aggrieved, predict the disaster, and fix the problem rather than explain or defend.
10. **Media is a plural noun.** Each reporter, editor and news organization has a unique perspective, personality, culture, and politics. The more you know about them, and the more you can deal with them one-on-one, the better you will be at dropping your message into the most hospitable media environment, i.e., the reporter, news organization, or part of the publication where it is most likely to be heard as you intended.
11. **Beware of the impulse to correct.** Corrections or letters to the editor often serve more to reinforce the original story than to change people's perceptions. Corrections are useful for fixing gross and central factual errors, boosting employee morale, and releasing your own frustration. If you must send a letter or make a response, consider asking someone to do so on your behalf, whose name, reputation or title will make the response most compelling.
12. **Don't fight the conventions.** For practitioners, the conventions of the news business are there for you to understand not to criticize or reform. If you want coverage, make news in their terms, and spoon-feed it in the form that works for them.
13. **Can you be good at your job without being good at this part of your job?** Obviously, I don't think so. You need the support of both interested and disinterested publics in order to do what you want to do. The media are a vehicle for achieving that, or for undermining it. If you aren't out there presenting the world as you see it, you can be sure that those who have a different view will be out there telling theirs. In a democratic society, thinking about how you are going to be understood, about how you are going to tell which audiences about what you are doing, is as central as thinking about what you are doing.

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