

# Step into a Reporter's Shoes To Fine-Tune Your Media Relations

by Mike Thompson

**"P**lease call back." That's the number one request that most journalists make to a public official. This request may seem simple, but it's often ignored to the detriment of both public officials and the general public. Most reporters, myself included, aren't trying to be obnoxious or act as if they are more important than a manager's other contacts.

Most reporters realize that officials are busy, and that reporters aren't the only ones with deadlines. But if the goal of both of us is to keep the public better informed, then the reporters need the managers' help. So, as soon as you can, call back.

My sources through the years in Saginaw, Michigan, included eight city managers and two interims. We got along well for the most part, sometimes even great. But at times the manager was upset with articles that appeared in the news section or with editorials in the opinion section. Or maybe the manager thought a certain topic was too sensitive or the governing body disapproving. In those cases, it wasn't a question of finding the time to call. The manager simply decided not to.

I hope I can help you avoid scenarios like these by offering some modest media relations tips from my side of the Fourth Estate. Most of the tips in this article are more complex than simply calling back, but none is more important.

If you're unhappy with an article with a reporter's name on it, call the reporter first. If you don't get satisfaction, call the reporter's boss. If that doesn't work, write a guest editorial for publication. And if the newspaper won't print it, send out your

## When Do Reporters Get Upset with Managers?

The first thing that bothers a reporter is if the manager doesn't call back. And it really bothers a reporter if the manager who doesn't call back then tells the public that it has been misinformed by the media.

Some other things also bother reporters:

- During a small meeting open to the public but with few or no members of the public in attendance, the manager looks at the reporter and asks, "If I say this, will you agree not to print it?" Sorry, this request usually can't be accommodated. It's a bad precedent.
- A manager says there's too much negative news and not enough positive. It's a fact, though, that the manager, like many subscribers, skips right past positive articles. Plus, positive news loses credibility if it's 100 percent positive. In our real world, there always are elements of both.
- A manager or a staff member makes a PowerPoint presentation during a meeting, and the information on the screen is too tiny for the audience to see.
- Here's a particular nitpick of mine (but a situation like this can occur in different settings and on different topics): You're in a budget session, and every time a councilmember asks why a line item is different than last year, the manager responds, "We did the budget differently this year." My experience in Saginaw is that the gadflies get copies of last year's budget and this year's budget, and then start throwing out those numbers at public forums and on-line. A reporter is stuck in limited newspaper space with explaining the manager's side. If the manager absolutely must change how the budget is arrived at, append an explanation sheet, but try not to tinker just for the appearance of change. Reporters, and the public, recognize tinkering for what it is.

own public mass mailing. Regardless, communicate in one form or another. Don't just throw up your hands about the newspaper coverage.

Even if all you feel you can do is decline comment, it's better in a story to see "The local government manager explained that she/he couldn't comment for such-and-such a reason." Don't you agree that this makes the manager and local government look better than "The manager did not return repeated calls."

### **DIFFERENT FOLKS, DIFFERENT STROKES**

During my career, I reported on managers who would call back seemingly before I could hang up the phone, and on others who weren't so helpful.

Some would take night calls, some wouldn't. Some would say, "I've only got a minute." Others would shoot the breeze. Some would take offense

at a single word or phrase in an otherwise positive article. Others would forgive far more glaring errors or omissions, so long as I apologized and made a correction. (Newspapers, far more consistently than electronic media, do make corrections, and usually the corrections are correct!)

Choose your own style, but lean toward being cooperative with reporters. Try to be consistent, regardless of whether it's smooth sailing or troubled waters, whether it's been a good day or a bad one.

Reporters can have bad days too. Did I like coming in at noon on a Monday to prepare for a city council meeting that would run from 4 p.m. to midnight, and then have to stay until 8 a.m. on Tuesday morning when my writing was finished?

Did my wife and family like it? These 20-hour shifts were not all that common, but they did happen. And at

tumultuous times in Saginaw, 12- to 14-hour shifts were common.

### **ADVANCE PREP MAKES A DIFFERENCE**

I believe I was able to give the most accurate and informed reporting to the managers who gave the most attention to me. Not that I was trying to be nice to them in exchange for them being nice to me. It was simply that I had more information and background available as I toiled through the necessary all-nighters.

"Aside from last-minute deadline stories, I always was pleased when reporters allowed me 15 minutes to call back," says William Bailey, who was Saginaw's interim manager five years ago. "This gave me a chance to pull the information together, talk with staff, or just think. Some young reporters didn't like that, but as trust was built, they knew I would call back and the story would be better for it."

Bailey notes that, especially in small and medium-sized towns, reporters often are young and inexperienced. The print media may assign a reporter exclusively or mostly to city hall, but radio and TV often have thinner staffs. Those in the electronic media may not even know the names of the major players, much less the background of a complicated topic.

"Reach out and build a relationship," Bailey advises. "I often invited 'newbie' reporters into the office, just to talk. In the process, I loaded them up with the audit, budget, various plans, and other documents. Offer extra time and education, especially on complex issues."

My "reporter training" was two years at a community college, followed by a few years of neighborhood organizing in a Saginaw ghetto in a format similar to VISTA and AmeriCorps. I also happened to grow up in Saginaw, where the establishment greatly appreciated the council-manager form of government, no doubt due to the influential tenure of L. Perry Cookingham, who served in Saginaw from 1936 to 1940, before he advanced to his role-model status in Kansas City, Missouri.

## When Do Managers Get Upset with Reporters?

I advanced to reporting full-time for the *Saginaw News* despite my lack of a four-year university degree. My learning had been in the real local world instead. New university graduates would ask, “How do you calculate a property tax, in terms of how much three mills would cost a person?” Or, “What’s an SEV, state equalized valuation?”

That’s the reality. So, for your own best interest, recognize that in your role as a local government manager you need to be not only a prompt respondent to the media but also a teacher.

### ESTABLISH THE GROUND RULES

A fair and good reporter will take the lead in establishing a relationship with the manager, but in some cases that won’t happen. Journalists may be young and inexperienced. They may think they need to be aggressive, and that prevents them from wanting to appear acquainted with the manager.

Here are the ground rules I strove to put in place to promote understanding during some of our potentially touchy media-government interactions.

**1. Complain courteously.** The manager should call the reporter, even if the issue or concern is not a large one.

**2. Explain issues in simple terms.** Reporters are the windows to the public. Even when items may be complex—in Saginaw, I’m thinking of the municipal water policy or the property tax freeze—reporters’ writing must be as clear as possible.

Imagine you’re the one writing the article. How can it be worded? Suggest some bullet points or bar graphs to go with the story. If a subsidized developer has a PILOT, for example, spell it out and call it “payment in lieu of taxes” instead of making it sound like they’re flying airplanes.

**3. Respect on and off the record.** I was a purist on this, and I believe the managers I covered respected me as a result. Let’s say you’re telling

It should really bother a manager if the reporter won’t acknowledge and correct an error. Also, an apology to the manager should be forthcoming.

A few examples of other things that may bother managers about the media:

**Sensationalism.** Something can be true but still be sensationalized. Speak with “your reporter” in those cases but start gently. Sometimes it’s an editor who’s responsible. Of course, sometimes a reporter may claim it’s an editor when it’s not. If a reporter falls back on “the editor” excuse too often, become suspicious.

**Lack of thoroughness.** Each year we make technological progress but suffer from the resulting brevity. If you think an article is incomplete, speak with the reporter. (Warning signs that it’s an editor’s fault: you are referred to throughout the story as “Smith” but it never identifies you as “City Manager Joe Smith;” the story ends in the middle of an unclosed paragraph quote; or the story ends in the middle of a sentence.)

**Editorializing.** Nowadays there is no bright line between straight news and editorializing. When you spot editorializing, talk to the reporter, but this is also a good time to fire up a letter to the editor. You have the privilege of taking a side because you have made no pretense of being neutral.

**Arrogance.** Some reporters fall back on the “public’s right to know,” as though they are public servants while government managers are self-serving bureaucrats. During my career, I noticed that a number of my reporter peers mellowed out—without selling out—as they became a little older. If a reporter seems overbearing, just go ahead and say so; maybe the individual will learn a lesson.

**Rudeness.** I have overheard newsroom peers reach a source on the phone and barge right in with questions, even when they didn’t mean to be rude. I feel the reporter always should first quickly ask, “Am I interrupting you?”

**Common courtesy.** One exception, of course, is when a reporter is on deadline. Even then, the reporter should quickly explain the situation. If it’s an interview schedule choice between the manager’s convenience and the reporter’s convenience, the manager should prevail.

me something totally off the record that I didn’t know already. Imagine that you are telling me you intend to propose a \$50 trash surcharge. This may not seem like much, but in Saginaw—and I’m sure in other places—people go into a lather over another \$50.

By my standards, when you are “totally” off the record:

1. I won’t print it with your name.
2. I won’t print it without your name either.

3. I won’t mention it to anyone else, not even to my own bosses.

4. I won’t go behind your back and ask others, “I’ve heard this. Have you?”

“Totally” off the record always meant strictly between the manager and the reporter. At the same time, though, I immediately began to negotiate to see what I could do to remove that “totally” designation. I’d beg and plead. I’d make the case that the item might as well come out now as later.

# PM Look to ICMA

## Media Relations

Good media relations boil down to the following actions for managers, assistants, and department heads when deciding how to deal with the media:

- Be sure your organization has a strategic plan. Put it into an understandable format using handouts and wall displays.
- Develop a communication strategy. Make it part of the strategic plan.
- Make sure your information office or officer is fully informed about the strategic plan and communication strategy.
- Make sure your information office or officer is well acquainted with local media personnel and circumstances.

Source: *IQ Report*, 1999. "Media Relations: The Manager's Role," published by ICMA, Washington, D.C. (For report information, visit [bookstore.icma.org](http://bookstore.icma.org).)

This is where you decide on your strategy and your level of trust. I had the barrel of ink, but if the reporter has integrity, then you're in control. And if the reporter doesn't have integrity, that reporter will end up in a noose sooner or later.

**4. Consider embargoed stories.** I wanted to be first among my media peers. I wanted to be the first to report that during next Monday night's council meeting, you're going to propose a \$50 trash surcharge. You insist it's totally off the record for now, but how about later? How about an embargo?

Please understand. I didn't want to wait until next Tuesday's paper, which was after the fact. By that time all the television and radio stations would have beaten me by reporting instantly on Monday night. Could I do a preview a few days ahead of the proposal, maybe for Sunday's paper? No?

Maybe a same-day shot for Monday's fishwrap? Help me out. I wasn't asking you to always let my newspaper beat the electronic media, although that would have been nice. I just wanted to finish in a tie.

Under an embargo, I wouldn't begin interviews until our agreed-upon day, and then I wouldn't publish the article until our second agreed-upon day. (But after we arranged this, I didn't want to see it on television or

hear it on the radio before our embargo date. How many people knew you were going to propose this \$50 fee? Would it leak out otherwise?)

**5. Seek to improve media-government relations.** As much as I knew you'd like to get along with me, I realized that first you had to get along with your bosses. Unless as the manager you're already at war with your governing board, certainly you want them to know what's up before they see it in the paper, and even before I would call to survey them. I respected that. I didn't want to get you into trouble.

So, let's look out for each other. In exchange, don't tell my publisher or editors about deep background stuff when you're talking at a local eatery or at a community leadership function, because that makes me look bad. The editor in chief tells the metro editor that rumor has it you're going to ask for a \$50 trash surcharge, and both wonder why I didn't know it. And I couldn't tell them I really did know because you and I agreed to be off the record.

William Bailey, Saginaw's former interim manager, advises that managers should visit newsrooms and TV stations and get to know as many people as possible. Once both reporters and editors get to know the manager, there is less suspicion. "Perhaps some reporters didn't like me doing that, but I

think it was helpful," Bailey says.

**6. Consider advance review.** In journalism trade magazines, debate has raged for years about whether a reporter should show a sensitive draft article in advance to a source. Most reporters refuse to do so, in many cases because that's what they learned in school or that's what their bosses demand.

But exceptions exist, and I was one of them, under the right circumstances. To be fair to all, there had to be time for all sources to review. And there had to be a clear understanding that I was listening to the manager's suggestions but not giving the manager the right to edit. The majority of journalists will say I was wrong, but I know from experience that my overall product was improved by revealing advance draft copies when feasible.

These six ground rules are not all encompassing, but they provide a good starting point. Obviously, other reporters may function differently. If your job situation is positive, the ground rules don't have to come into play often, but it's always good to have them. After all, managers are the chief appointed officials of their communities. Bear in mind that reporters also play a vital role and, by and large, most reporters want to do the right thing. **PM**

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## ICMASTATS

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Percentage of local government chief administrative officers who have authority to enforce the code of ethics, according to ICMA's 2006 State of the Profession survey.