



Media Inquiry: Talking to Today's Reporters

Introduction

Goals of this course

- Gain an understanding of how the media operate and why we work with them.
- Learn how and why to develop key messages.
- Develop techniques to be better interviewees.
- Gain a sense of comfort in working with the media.

Why media training?

- Media can provide visibility, legitimacy and credibility to a story.
- Media can get the message out to a broad audience.
- We are all communicators, talking to neighbors, family and friends about our jobs. Learning to develop media messages makes us better all-around communicators, no matter the situation.

Public Health Division Communications

Who we are

- Susan Wickstrom, Interim Director, OHA Communications; Lead Communications Officer
- Jonathan Modie, Communications Officer

What we do

- PHD Communications supports all 120 programs within the Public Health Division.
- Supports the communication needs of local health departments and tribes.
- Assists with emergency communications.

How information gets to reporters

- News release
 - We send news releases directly to the media about breaking or emergent news, and about major outcomes or reports that advance our mission. We do not create news releases about the routine work we do.
- Pitches
 - We identify targeted reporters who may be interested in a news story and communicate directly with them.
- Piggybacking on a national story

- Sometimes a national story is in the news that affects us and we talk to local reporters about the Oregon angle to a story (e.g. health care transformation, federal government shutdown).
- Reporters beat area/interest
 - Reporters at some media outlets have beat areas, like health care or education, that they routinely cover. These reporters regularly check websites, and social media, attend meetings and conferences, and follow national trends to look for news happening in their beat areas.
 - By building relationships with reporters, we know their specific interest areas and can tailor story pitches to their interests.
- Social media
 - We use social media outlets to share information directly with the public. Reporters use this as a source of information gathering.
- Public records requests
 - Most records maintained by state and local agencies are considered public and can be requested by reporters.

Newsworthiness/What Makes a Good Story

- Timeliness
 - News is news when it happens, not after the fact.
- Broad appeal
 - While media is fragmenting, news stories still need to be relevant to a large number of people.
- Local angle
 - News is more relevant when we hear how it is affecting our community and our neighbors.
- Personal stories
 - The people we serve tell our story. Putting a human face to a story can help it resonate with the audience.
- Injustice
 - Public health is filled with examples of injustice, these stories resonate with people's personal values of fairness.
- Breakthrough
 - Major new discoveries or outcomes are newsworthy.
- Seasonal/anniversary
 - Stories connected to seasons or anniversaries are newsworthy during the time they affect media consumers (e.g. flu stories in winter, West Nile Virus stories in summer).
- Controversy
 - Conflict, whether real or perceived, makes for a compelling story.

Overview of Different Media

Media is more than simply a vehicle for the dissemination of information. In a democratic society, media serves as a watchdog for the government and public agencies and have the ability to effect political and social change. Their role is to ask questions, look for stories, and inform the public. Remember, they are just doing their job. They aren't the enemy, but neither are they your friend.

Print

Print news sources include daily newspapers like *The Oregonian*, but also smaller community newspapers and cultural media. Print news stories are generally more comprehensive than TV or radio stories. Print reporters typically cover fewer stories each day and have more time to prepare stories. At larger newspapers, reporters do not write their own headlines, or choose the photo or graphic accompaniment. Photographers, graphics editors, and headline writers work with, but not for, reporters and their editors. Their job is to write a compelling headline, or develop a graphic that will make a reader want to read the entire article.

Structure

- **Managing Editor:** In charge of daily operations, editors report to the managing editor.
- **Editors:** Assign stories to reporters, edit stories, determine which stories will be published, and where they will appear in the paper. Each area of the paper (i.e. news, features, editorial) has its own editor. Editors can significantly change a story by editing text, influencing headlines, and shaping photos and graphic selection.
- **Reporters:** Sometimes have a specific beat area like health care, transportation, or business. At smaller papers, reporters are generalists and get assigned stories by their editors. Reporters cover the timely news of the day. They often try to tie a local story to a larger trend, long-term concern, or national story.

Deadlines: Vary from publication to publication, but for daily newspapers, stories are generally due the evening before they are published. For weekly newspapers, and sections of the daily paper that are prepared in advance (parts of the Sunday paper, travel section, etc.), stories must be completed farther in advance.

How to work effectively with a newspaper reporter

- Always return calls promptly.
- Provide accurate, understandable information.
- Use plain language. Avoid acronyms and jargon.
- Become a useful, reliable, and credible source.
- When appropriate, refer reporters to useful contacts.
- Anticipate a reporter's needs and gather information in advance (visuals, an Oregonian who has benefited from the program or service).
- Think about potential photo opportunities, graphics, or links to additional information that can be included with the story.
- Be straightforward. Don't hide bad news, or bury the most interesting or relevant information.

News story vs. editorial

News stories are unbiased accountings. Editorials express the opinion of the author. An editorial can come from the editorial board of the newspaper, or be written by a guest contributor.

- **Editorial board:** A newspaper editorial board typically includes editorial staff and newspaper publishers, or their designees. The editorial board meets to determine the newspaper's editorial agenda and explore issues of the day, often working with guests who provide insight and expertise. Meeting with an editorial board more closely resembles an intelligent discussion rather than a formal presentation. Editorial board meetings can be difficult to obtain, particularly during election season.

- **Guest editorials:** A guest editorial is an opinion column that appears on the editorial pages of a newspaper. It is a one-time presentation of the author's view accompanied by a very brief biography. The author or authors are usually experts on the topic, or people who have political influence. The editorial page editor, not the news editor, usually decides which guest editorials appear and when they will appear. They typically address a controversial, timely topic. They are often written and submitted well in advance of publication. They must be concise (usually no more than 500 words), relevant to readers of the publication, and include a specific call to action; what do you want readers to do with the information you provide? These may be submitted independently, or an editorial editor may request one of a local expert.
- **Letters to the editor:** These typically appear on the editorial pages. The information in these isn't held to the same accuracy or journalistic integrity as news stories or editorial columns. Letters are generally limited to about 150 words, and are edited for length and clarity

Important consideration: As an employee of a public agency, you represent the state in all you do. Any letter to the editor or editorial you write necessarily reflects the views of the state on a particular topic, and not your personal views.

Wire Service

A wire service is a company that gathers news reports and photos and sells them to media outlets. Examples of wire services include Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. Chains of newspapers owned by the same company also share stories or sell stories to other media outlets.

Deadlines: Similar to newspapers, though a story can be placed on the wire at any time and be available to online media outlets before it is printed in the newspaper.

Magazine

Magazines target specific segments of the population. Magazines put together an editorial calendar, which plans highlighted stories for the entire year. This is done in part to attract advertisers that may have products relevant to planned features.

Structure

- Executive Editor: Assigns reporters and edits submitted stories.
- Contributors: Most magazines use freelance reporters and photographers who work for several different publications.
- Copy Editor: Reads the magazine cover-cover to correct grammatical errors and watch for libel issues.
- Creative Director: In charge of visual aspects of magazine, including photography and graphics.

Deadlines: Monthly magazines often work three months or more ahead of publication.

Television

Television is considered the most powerful media outlet and reaches the largest audience. Television news covers the breaking news of the day. Stories are short and airtime is precious. A half hour news program includes eight minutes of advertising, which leaves only 22 minutes for news, sports, weather, lifestyle, promotional teasers and friendly banter. Stories must be active, colorful, visual, and be relevant to a wide segment of the population to get on television.

When viewers tune in to TV news, they are expecting quick, easy-to-understand stories on the breaking news of the day. As a result, stories are often presented in an us-versus-them manner. Long-term stories or complex issues rarely make the evening news. Television viewers are often interested in not only what is happening now, but also what is likely to happen next.

Three times a year, in November, February, and May, viewership is measured to determine advertising rates. During these “sweeps” months, television stations pull out all the stops to attract viewers’ attention.

Structure

- **Assignment Editor:** Decides what stories to cover and where to send reporters and crews. They usually meet with staff about 9 a.m. to discuss daily assignments. They are the first line of defense in the newsroom and gather information like press releases. They also manage crews in the field, listen to scanners and answer phones.
- **Reporter:** While reporters often cover a certain type of story, they are primarily generalists and are rarely assigned a strict beat. They cover two to three stories per day and have little time to gather background information or history. They need to get their 10-second sound bite and move on.
- **Producer:** Puts stories in order for the newscast, deciding when they will air, their length and whether they will have a reporter. They make sure they have the best sound bites and video.

Deadlines: Expect to work with TV news reporters between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. Television interviews are rarely live, most are recorded and edited before being aired.

How to work effectively with a TV reporter

- TV interviews are always conducted in person. Expect the reporter and videographer to come to your office.
- Find a suitable, quiet location where the interview can be conducted.
- Be prepared with ideas for b-roll – video of you doing your job that can be interspersed with video of you talking.
- Think about a real Oregonian affected by your story who might be willing to be interviewed. Consider how the person interviewed will reflect the face of the program (e.g. if your program is targeting Latina single mothers, make sure that is who you find to be interviewed).
- TV interviews will always begin with you being asked to state and spell your name, and provide a job title. Simplify your title as much as possible, while giving yourself the proper authority.
- Use plain language. Avoid acronyms and jargon.
- Take a breath before answering a question to give yourself a second to compose your response.
- Respond in short declarative sentences that can easily be used as sound bites. In a 90 second story, you may have an 8-10 second sound bite.
- If you mess up, stop and start again.
- Try not to say “uh”, “umm” and “you know”.
- Don’t refer to the reporter by name in your response.
- Sit or stand still while being interviewed.
- Be aware of hand motions, a little bit looks natural, but too much is distracting.
- Look at the reporter when speaking, not at the camera.
- Wear dark solid clothing, avoid small patterns.
- Avoid wearing dangling earrings, lots of bracelets, or having change or keys in your pockets.
- When sitting, be aware of skirt length and pants riding up to expose skin.

Radio

Ninety percent of radio listeners are driving or riding in a car while listening, so radio news programming must move fast to grab listeners' attention. Radio coverage provides quick bites of information rather than in-depth discussion. Radio is designed to appeal to a narrow audience in order for advertisers to reach their target market of consumers. Listeners find radio news to be credible. Radio conveys immediacy, and may be the quickest way to get information out to a broad audience, especially during an emergency.

Structure

- **Reporter:** Radio news reporters on music-oriented stations are almost non-existent these days. These stations either purchase news from a national radio news network like CBS Radio News or Associated Press Radio, or share one news reporter with multiple stations owned by the same media conglomerate.

Deadlines: Radio deadlines are often immediate. Radio tries to get news on the air before television or newspapers. When a crisis begins, listeners tune in to radio in large numbers, so radio news is under great pressure to deliver the latest information quickly and continuously.

How to work effectively with a radio reporter

- Radio interviews are generally conducted over the phone. Conduct the interview from a landline with a handset in a quiet place. Avoid cell phones or putting the reporter on speaker.
- Radio interviews can be live or recorded.
- Return calls promptly, and don't be surprised if they call back frequently throughout the day to get updates.
- Use plain language. Avoid acronyms and jargon.
- Use short sound bites that get right to the point.
- Try not to say "uh", "umm" and "you know".
- Don't refer to the reporter by name in your response.
- Use notes if you need them, but remember not to rustle the papers, the sound might be picked up in the interview.
- Stay silent while the reporter is asking the question.

Talk Radio

Being a guest on a talk radio program is very different than being interviewed for a news story. Talk radio thrives on interaction among the host, guests and callers. Talk radio programs like to present multiple sides of an issue and pit guests against one another.

Prepare for a talk radio program as you would for a public debate: have facts and figures ready, develop social math examples to provide a visual image of your figures for listeners, find out what other guests will be on the program and what their stance is on the issue at hand. Anticipate what your opponent will say, practice responses without invoking your opponents frame. Prepare for callers who may ask about other topics related to the one you are discussing.

Social Media

The way people get their news has changed, and will continue to change as traditional media responds to social media and online news and information sources. News websites, email, voice chat, blogs, tweets, videos, instant messaging and other Internet-based technologies have begun to erode the

control of traditional media in being the primary source for news. Because of this trend, government agencies have begun providing information through social media directly to the public. These tools allow public agencies to create an open and transparent environment while speeding delivery of important information to the public. PHD Communications uses the OHA Facebook and Twitter accounts. A few individual PHD programs have their own social media sites. These are approved by PHD Communications on a case-by-case basis.

How to work with effectively with social media

A strong organizational voice is essential for communicating your agency's story and a major component of your agency's brand identity. An authentic, consistent voice communicates value, authority, energy, professionalism and personality.

- Be timely
- Be relevant to your audience
- Be social
- Be authentic
- Use plain language

Why use social media

- Allows for immediate communication
- Allows for communication directly to the public
- You control the message and can engage other's opinions
- Allows an agency to develop a specific voice

Pitfalls of using social media

- New social media sites are continually emerging and current ones change their format
- Requires rapid and frequent communication in real-time
- The ability to strike a balance between a friendly and personable yet still professional voice

Key Messages

Key messages are the most important pieces of information about your topic, the information you most want included in the story. It is important to think about this and prepare one to three key messages before the interview.

Questions to consider when developing

- What is the problem?
- Why does it matter?
- What is at stake?
- Who is responsible?
- What should be done?

How to Develop

- Think about what you most want people to know, or do after reading or listening to the story.
- Use the KISS rule – Keep It Short and Simple.
 - Think in terms of media bites, one to two short, declarative sentences that get directly to your point.
- Use plain language.
 - Free of jargon and acronyms
 - Avoid using lots of statistics

- Use social math when appropriate
- Know your audience.
 - If you are speaking to a reporter for a technical trade publication, the language you use will differ from the language used for a local evening news interview.
- Use positive language.

Key Messages

OHA uses consistent messages statewide in order to convey a clear image of our agency to all Oregonians. When being interviewed, our programs and partners support and reinforce our image throughout the state. Whenever reasonably possible, we incorporate our key messages into media interviews.

- We help advance the goals of better health, better care, and lower costs for all Oregonians.
- Our programs provide real benefits to Oregonians.
- We are accountable, and we spend your money wisely.
- We continue to work to become more transparent, more accountable, and more efficient. Our work shows Oregonians that their government truly does work for them.
- We continue to work with the revenue and resources we have to provide the greatest benefit to Oregonians.

We always keep these messages in mind when developing our specific key messages. Incorporating information from your specific topic area that reinforces these messages will provide a clear image of your agency. When reporters hear consistent messages about your agency, those messages are more likely to be included in the resulting story.

Values

Speaking to a person's values helps a story to resonate. Some values (associated with OHA) to consider invoking when preparing your key messages:

- We care.
 - We provide information to reporters that show we care about what our customers are saying and respond to their concerns.
- We listen.
 - We openly communicate with our customers. We seek meaningful input early in project development. We listen to concerns, and follow-up to let people know how we respond to their needs.
- We work together.
 - We think about how our work will affect others. We coordinate messages with local health departments and partner agencies.
- We don't like surprises.
 - We offer the first and best source of information for our agency, whether the news is good or bad. We do our best to provide accurate, timely, complete and open communication on issues for which we are responsible.

****Practice**** (15 minutes)

Using the topic you thought of at the beginning of the class, practice developing a few of your own key messages.

How to stay on message

Bridging technique

The bridging technique helps you to take control of an interview by redirecting it to your key messages. You do this by quickly answering the reporter's question and then using a bridging, or transition, statement to redirect the attention to one of your key messages. This technique is useful when the reporter is asking difficult questions, or when the interview is veering away from its original focus. Think of the bridging statement as taking you safely from one point to the next. Subtlety is key, abrupt or irrational statements will be noticeable to reporters and they will ask the same questions again. Bridging statements should be prepared and practiced in advance of the interview.

Some examples of bridging statements:

- However, what is most important to remember is...
- However, the real issue here is...
- What this all means is...
- If we take a broader perspective...
- This is an important point because...
- What this information tells us is...
- That's a good point, but...
- In addition to that,...

Interview Techniques

What to do before an interview

- Think about your audience
- Develop 1-3 key messages
- Anticipate questions, both positive and negative
- Think about what you *don't* want to say
- Develop bridging statements to avoid saying what you don't want to say
- Consider confidentiality issues
- Consider cultural competency issues
- Set a time limit
- Stay calm
- Stay positive
- Practice!

What to do during an interview

- Use your key messages
- Stay on topic
- Guide the interview
- Keep it short and simple
- Don't say more than you planned to say
- Reinforce key messages

What to do following an interview

- At the end of an interview, reporters will frequently ask whether you have any final information they didn't ask about. This is your chance to reinforce your key take-away message.

- Follow-up with any promised information.
 - Sending via email is good, that way you aren't brought into any further conversations.
- Think about how the interview went and what you would like to do better next time.
- If your communications representative was not with you during the interview, let him or her know how it went, and if the reporter is requesting any further information.

How to avoid undermining your message

How to avoid being caught by unfair statements

- Reporters may ask questions using negative language or unfair statements.
 - Don't repeat negative, unfair or inflammatory words in your response.
 - Respectfully disagree with a reporter if necessary.

Potential trap questions and how to avoid them

- Hypothetical questions
 - Asking you to predict what may happen, what you or your agency would do if something happened, or asking you what you would do if the situation was happening to you/your child, etc.
- Filling the gap
 - Reporters often use long pauses or silence to encourage you to keep talking. People will often say things they hadn't planned on saying while trying to fill an uncomfortable silence.
 - When you have finished answering the question, stop talking. Don't talk again until the reporter asks you another question. Don't fidget while waiting, remain calm and make eye contact (if the interview is in person).
- Third party questions that ask you to argue with, or defend someone or some agency that is not present.
 - Say "I can't speak for them"
- Questions that ask you to choose either A or B responses.
 - If neither response is appropriate, don't choose the one that is closer to being right.
 - Instead, say something like "There may be another choice you haven't considered" and continue with your response.

Mistakes that undermine your message

- Not using your prepared key messages
- Using jargon and acronyms
- Using too many statistics
- Not using plain language your audience understands
- Being evasive
- Getting mad or impatient

Questions that raise red flags or to not answer

- Personnel issues
 - State and federal laws limit what types of personnel information can be discussed.
- Legal
- Political/legislative
- Funding/budget
- Client/patient/program participant inquiries

- Certain laws may preclude us from discussing names of people involved in programs, or on-going outbreak investigations.
- Personal
 - You are speaking on behalf of the state, and should not feel pressured to answer any personal questions about yourself, your personal opinions, or your life outside of work.
- Speculation
 - If you don't know the answer, it is OK to say so. Do not speculate. If you guess wrong, you can damage your own credibility, as well as that of your agency.

Tips to remember

- Never say “no comment”.
- There is no such thing as off the record, if you say it, the reporter can use it.
- You are always on. Even if the camera or recording device seems to be off, assume it isn't. Small talk before and after an interview is still part of the interview.
- Don't assume information or statistics from a reporter are correct.
- If a reporter tries to hand you a report, document, or anything else, don't take it. If you hold it, you own it in the eyes of the audience.

Public Records Requests

All records maintained by state and local agencies are considered public, unless specifically exempted by law.

What is a public record? At OHA, it includes:

- Emails
- Calendars
- Instant messages
- Reports
- Documents
- Video
- Text messages and voicemails from state cell phones
- State business conducted on a personal computer or cell phone is considered a public record

Who can request?

Anyone can request public records from a state or local agency. However, they may be asked to pay for time required to locate records, as well as the costs to copy the documents. In general, OHA does not charge for public records. We believe public records belong to the people.

Why do reporters ask to see public records?

The news media have a responsibility to ensure government is working effectively and efficiently with taxpayers' money. They act on the public's behalf in requesting documents to serve as a watchdog. Neither reporters nor the public need explain the purpose of their request, though reporters will generally provide information about a story they are working on.

Culturally competent communications

To be effective, media communication must be sensitive to cultural differences. Differing communication styles reflect worldviews and philosophies that are the foundation of culture. OHA programs work with a variety of different cultures, and communication methods must be sensitive to

the differences between and within these communities. The OHA Office of Equity and Inclusion is a great local resource for questions.

How to become an effective culturally competent communicator

- Try to become aware of your personal cultural beliefs, values and perceptions.
- Be aware of current power imbalances between groups.
- Be aware of your status as an “insider” or “outsider” to the community about which you are discussing.
- Avoid “otherizing,” or making a distinction between the population you are discussing and the predominant culture in a way that turns the discussed population into a two-dimensional thing.

Communication methods to consider in culturally competent communication

- Nonverbal communication
 - Body language, gestures and facial expressions that indicate receptivity in one culture may indicate something quite different in another culture.
- Language
 - Even cultures that speak the same language may assign different meanings to words. For example, “yes” may mean anything from “maybe” to “definitely, I understand what you said.”
- Emotion
 - In some cultures it is not acceptable to be open about emotions, but in others it is expected.

Your Rights and Responsibilities

Be Responsive

- Reporter’s work under tight deadlines and need to hear back from you quickly in order to complete their stories.
- Avoiding media or misleading them to avoid sharing bad news will damage your agency’s reputation and the public health division’s relationship with reporters.
- By avoiding media we miss the opportunity to tell the story from the public health division’s perspective.
- Be proactive. Preparing news that may be unflattering before media hears it from another source allows us to promote public health division values of transparency and accountability, as well as build relationships with media.
- Provide timely and accurate information. Anticipate media interest and questions before your interview and take the time to research answers.
- Suggest relevant issues and sources of additional information.
- Manage reporter’s expectations and keep promises to get back to them.

Be professional

- Always be nicer than your interviewer.
- Don’t belittle, insult, or threaten news reporters.
- Don’t be too casual or personal.
- Be friendly, not funny.

Ask your own questions

- What is the focus of the story?

- When is your deadline?
- With whom else have you spoken, and who else are you planning to speak with?
- What information do you already have on this topic?