WHEN THE MEDIA COMES KNOCKING

Like it or not, the media is part of the legislative process. Here are six ideas to help lawmakers cultivate relationships with reporters and editors.

By Gene Rose

If they haven't already, there will come a time when reporters come knocking on your door. Editors and reporters realize that state legislatures are often where public policy innovations begin (e.g., welfare reform, debate over prescription drug coverage and costs). As a result, your actions may often attract press attention.

MARRIED TO THE MEDIA

The media have tremendous influence over public perception about the work you do and about you personally. For this reason—and because the media can be an effective tool for delivering your message to constituents—you enter into a relationship with them. You are, in a sense, now married to the media.

Through a healthy relationship, you can protect and embrace your greatest political chip—your reputation. This is the one part of public relations that only you can control. Fairly or unfairly, you will be judged by the public and the media. Potential career-ending problems can be, and have been, averted by owning up quickly to mistakes and making amends immediately.

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MAKE A PLAN

A healthy relationship with the media can be beneficial. But lawmakers must be open and accessible and have a communications strategy.

1. Create team response policies.
2. Develop a crisis plan.
3. Develop key messages.
4. Care for the legislative institution.
5. Identify key media contacts.
6. Seek professional advice.

Like it or not, the media is a part of the legislative process. The bottom line is that reporters and legislators need each other. Like any relationship, that bond requires hard work and attention. It’s not easy, but by making media relations an important part of your communications strategy, you can reach some worthy goals.

Developing relationships with reporters, editors, assignment editors, owners and other media employees and owners doesn’t guarantee you’ll get more and better coverage, but the odds are with you if you do take time to develop those relationships.

More media coverage boosts your name recognition in your district, which helps when you propose ideas to improve your communities or decide to run for the same or a different office.

Once you are established in the press as a community leader, you have the opportunity to become a spokesperson for your legislature and the values of representative democracy. Through media interviews and talks to the public, you can play a key role in improving public attitudes about the legislature and the form of government we all enjoy. For all this, you need a communications plan.
HERE’S HOW TO DO IT

Establish a media relations strategy. This will change, develop and evolve over time, but it is important that you start with one. A communications plan should consist of six components:

1 **Create response policies.** It’s important that everyone on your team—key volunteers or staff—understand a few important points. Start by clearly defining which person will be assigned to respond to media inquiries. (In most, if not all cases, this should be you!) Second, since reporters work under tight deadlines, respond to all media requests quickly.

2 **Develop a crisis plan.** It is much easier to develop an action plan before a crisis than when the press is camped outside your door. A crisis could be anything from a natural disaster to a personal predicament. You can’t plan for every possible scenario, but you can put in place simple strategies. Develop a timeline for how quickly you plan to release a public statement. Throughout history, a quick and honest response has proved to be the best approach to a crisis.

3 **Develop clear and consistent messages.** Look at every reporter’s questions as an opportunity to deliver your message to your constituents. A communications plan should include core messages that can be carried to an interview or speaking engagement.

4 **Care for the legislative institution.** Legislative candidates spend millions each year criticizing issues and each other. Yet little attention is given to raising the public’s appreciation for the democratic process and the free and open debate that occurs in a legislature.

5 **Identify key media contacts.** Produce and constantly update a list of key media contacts—and not just the reporters who cover the statehouse or your local reporters. Get to know your editorial boards, editors and news directors.

6 **Seek professional advice.** You can find tremendous value in using public relations professionals to assist with media relations. Many of the most successful organizations view such expenditures as an investment in the organization’s future. Although government is more reluctant to make such expenditures, you can seek public relations advice for free by using National Conference of State Legislatures staff and, in some states, your staff at the Capitol. Legislative staff with media and public information responsibilities have a national network, called LINC (Legislative Information and Communication Staff) that also may be helpful.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Although many people search for the secret to being a media superstar, you can begin by being open and accessible. Reporters are nearly unanimous in their opinions about how to best establish a relationship with the press—personal contact. The power to survive the media can be found from within. Over time, you can develop relationships with individual statehouse and local reporters and editors. By being open and accessible, these relationships can become mutually beneficial.