

RSS. RSS allows people to subscribe to particular topics of interest to them, thus gathering news and information directly rather than resorting to searching for information in newspapers or magazines or on various websites. It is now common to find RSS feeds on major websites, including those of many government agencies and nonprofit organizations. RSS provides another way to disseminate information to the public in a quick and efficient manner. While those web users that employ RSS constitute a relatively small percentage currently—10% to 20%—that number is expected to grow. However, this statistic points out an issue with all of these new uses of information technology, that users must have some access to technology and some familiarity with the information technology that is available. For this reason, many of these techniques can only supplement more traditional ways of communicating more broadly with the public.

Of course, all these ways of communicating with the public through innovative technologies can be run on a desktop or laptop computer with an Internet connection. However, there are developments that open up the possibility for greater mobility than a desktop or even a laptop provides. Cloud computing, for example, allows users to access material stored on remote devices from any computer, thus providing greater ease of access. A government agency might employ cloud computing to enable citizen participation using wiki sites, mailboxes, podcasts, and online video. The result could be a virtual town hall meeting. Government and nonprofit agencies are also using apps for smart phones to provide access to citizen services and to gain citizens' input. For example, citizens of Los Angeles can use their smart phone cameras to take pictures of graffiti or other "eyesores" and send them directly to city government for action.

Like any other government program, applications of new information technologies require careful management and implementation. It is important first to clearly define the goals and objectives of the application being considered. There should be a long-range engagement process that involves face-to-face and online activities, and there may be a need to engage citizens to address short-term issues. Being clear about the objectives of the activity is an important first step (Leighninger, 2011). Then, it is important to develop metrics to evaluate the success of the application. (There are a variety of measurement tools available, just counting the number of visits to the site is insufficient.) Results must be analyzed carefully and compared to the objectives. Again, the number of visits to the site may be less important than the number of helpful, creative, and perhaps even cost-cutting ideas that are generated. Following this analysis, decisions can be made on which platforms to continue or expand and which ones to eliminate.

Working With the Media

Obviously, the news media play an extremely important role in a democratic society. But many public managers find that working with the media is one of their most difficult and frustrating tasks. For administrators wanting to present the work of their agencies in the most favorable light, those in the media seem bent on telling only the negative side of things. For administrators trying to serve

the public under difficult circumstances, those in the media seem only interested in uncovering scandals and wrongdoing. For administrators wishing to explain the work of their agencies fully and in great detail, those in the media seem only interested in the briefest "catch phrases" or the cleverest "sound bites." Yet according to Wheeler (1994),

to be or not to be involved with the news media is not a choice that is open to government officials. The role the media play in the democratic process necessitates a relationship between media representatives and representatives of . . . government. The quality of the relationship is often determined by the . . . official's respect for the role of the media in a democracy and their willingness to be active partners in the relationship. (p. 91)

Obviously, the media communicate both from government to citizen and from citizen to government. Certainly, the media inform the public about the activities of government and how those activities affect the public. They tell the public about those things that government is doing right and those things that government is doing wrong. On the other hand, the media also inform government officials about the public. They let officials know what the public is thinking and allow for feedback with respect to policies and programs. But the role of the media in a democratic society is not only to be a conduit of information. The media play an important role in holding government accountable to the people. "Indeed, one of the first indicators of real progress in the transition to democratic governance is the existence of a free and open press" (Washington, 1997, pp. 29–30). For this reason, the very existence of a free press is protected by the Constitution, and the role of the media is preserved by judicial interpretation. "Among other things, the court [has] held that the public media's vigorous pursuit of public wrongdoing [is] essential to the well-being of a democratic society and that this pursuit must not be weakened by the threat of court action" (Conner, 1993, p. 41).

Because the media play such an important role, and because the media are not going to go away soon, public administrators are well advised to develop a positive attitude toward media relations, learn all they can about how to interact most effectively with the media, and practice effective media relations. There are several general guidelines that public administrators should be aware of as they interact with the media.

1. *Create a media relations plan.* A media relations plan begins by defining the goals and objectives that you are seeking. Are you concerned with presenting a positive image to the public by way of the media? Are you most interested in letting the public know about upcoming events? Are you concerned with "damage control" when things go wrong? What are the specific goals that your government or agency has that might differ from those of others? Following a definition of goals and objectives, you should assign the responsibility of communicating with the media to a specific individual, perhaps a public information officer (Wheeler, 1994, p. 92). This will give reporters and editors a source to contact when they need information and also will give the agency some control over its media relations. (Others probably

will be contacted as well, but most contacts should come through the public information officer.) The designated contact person should become familiar with legal issues affecting media relations, including attention to privacy issues, libel and slander statutes, and copyright laws, and they should learn the full range of media terms such as *background only* and *off the record*. But be aware that the use of these terms does not guarantee the safe handling of information. "If the information you have requires special handling, you probably shouldn't be talking to the press about it anyway" (Conner, 1993, p. 30). Finally, your plan should include your best advance thinking about how to handle crisis situations. For example, you should decide when to respond and when to let the situation pass, recognizing that sometimes reacting inappropriately just makes matters worse. In all you do, be dignified but also realistic. "You can't determine whether a story runs, where or when it will be placed, and what the headline, content, or tone will be" (Corporation for National Service, 1997, p. 10).

2. *Establish positive relationships with reporters.* By developing effective two-way relationships with representatives of the media, you are more likely to be rewarded with fair and substantive coverage of those matters that are important to you. Above all, be honest and credible; tell a reporter that you do not know the answer if that is the case. Be consistent by communicating with reporters whether the news is good or bad. Be available to all (and do not play favorites), be sincere, and have a positive attitude. Be sure to return calls from reporters as soon as possible. You also should recognize that reporters are human too and that their mission is to find "stories." Recognize that they are loyal to their readers or listeners and that they face pressures regarding accuracy of information, timeliness, newsworthiness, and competition (Conner, 1993, pp. 3–15). Occasionally recognizing the pressures and deadlines that reporters face actually will work to your advantage.

3. *Be proactive in your relations with the media.* Involve the media in the policy process at an early stage. If you are able to establish positive relations with media representatives, then they might, in fact, be able to offer advice on questions such as the most conducive environment in which to launch policies. But this approach must be balanced given that media considerations cannot be a reason for public officials to postpone or avoid making unfavorable announcements (Washington, 1997, p. 34). You also should remember that the media are not the only source of information that the public has. For example, you can disseminate important information through a website or through advertising, consultations, or public events. (But here you must be careful not to exceed the limits of justifiable expenditures or excessively self-serving public relations.)

4. *Be prepared and be precise.* When you are preparing a press release, be sure that you have a genuinely interesting story to tell. Don't get a reputation for spreading trivia. Keep the message simple with one or two main points and some supporting arguments. Begin with the key points, such as What is happening? Why is it important? Where is it taking place? Who is doing it? When will it happen?. When you have your message worked out, be sure that anyone who is likely to encounter a reporter understands the message (CivilServant, n.d.)

When you are going to be interviewed yourself, begin by learning as much about the reporter as you can. Read what this reporter has written, or watch or listen to one of the reporter's shows. Prepare answers in advance to questions that you think the reporter might ask. Decide on a couple of points that you want to convey and figure out how you can work them into the interview. Ask in advance what questions will be asked and let the reporter know if there are things that you would like to talk about. Remember to speak in plain English and not to get angry. Finally, in an interview or in a more casual conversation, do not forget that when you are in the presence of a reporter (who may or may not identify himself or herself as such), always assume that what you say could become public information.

Whereas these four guidelines may be helpful in developing an overall approach to media relations, there are several considerations that are specific to particular types of media.

Television. Television provides a variety of means to get a message out—news programs, public affairs programs, talk shows, editorial commentaries, and public affairs programming. All of these may be broadcast by national networks, local news organizations, and public television. The key to approaching television is to remember that television messages must be short and simple. Even quite complex stories often are reduced to 30- to 60-second segments. Television reporters and producers, therefore, are likely to look for the brief summary statement or a catchy phrase (sound bite) that summarizes or expresses your viewpoint. In approaching television appearances, follow the rules of interviews mentioned above. Obtain information about the format of the program and the interviewer's name and style so that you will know what to expect. Learn about what other guests will be on the program with you. Dress appropriately so that your clothing does not overpower your message. Arrive early to meet the producer, the interviewer, and others involved in the show. State your main point first and then follow it with supporting material. Try to stay on track, even if there are efforts to interrupt and divert you (General Services Administration, 1999, pp. 6–10).

The print and online media. The print media (including newspapers and magazines) and online news sources typically provide more in-depth coverage of issues than other media sources and are read by people who want more detailed and complete information than might be included in a television news show. Consequently, they provide an opportunity for you to go into much greater detail about the work you are doing. In general, reporters for the print or Internet media spend a lot of time learning about the issues and will be somewhat better at "living with" the complexity of a story. (Note, however, that Internet media, especially blogs, vary widely in this respect.) They also will appreciate all of the documentation and facts and figures that you can provide. Establishing effective relationships with journalists and regularly providing information, even detailed information, on the work of your agency should result in more accurate treatment of the stories in which you are interested. If reporters know the background of the story, something

that has to be developed over time, then they will be more likely to agree with your ideas about what is important and what is not.

Radio. In many ways, approaching relationships with radio reporters and personalities is like dealing with television journalists. However, radio audiences are much more diverse and specialized than television audiences. Most radio formats target a particular group or "market segment."

The diversity of radio station formats provides opportunities for targeting specific audiences. A radio station's format—whether rock, classical, country, urban contemporary, all-news, all-talk, or Spanish language—... provides the opportunity to direct the ... government's message to a particular age cohort or interest group within a community. (Wheeler, 1994, p. 102)

Press conferences. Most experts agree that press conferences (or news conferences) should be used only when absolutely necessary and should be used for specific purposes.

The general rule is that when you need to give the same information at the same time to everyone in the media, and when it is information they want and need quickly, then a news conference is in order. When in doubt about calling a news conference, don't. (Wheeler, 1994, p. 113)

When a press conference is necessary, try to achieve a smooth and concise tone. Start and end on time, have sign-in sheets and press kits available, respond to questions honestly and directly (promising to get back to reporters if you do not know the answers to particular questions and then doing so quickly), and politely end the press conference after a reasonable number of questions (but providing the opportunity for reporters to follow up with more questions).

Making Effective Presentations

During your work in a public organization, you often may be asked to make formal presentations. You may be asked to present a reorganization proposal to top management. You may be asked to explain a newly developed policy to a legislative committee. Or you may be asked to speak at a civic club or neighborhood organization. In any case, your ability to deliver an effective presentation will have an impact on your agency's work as well as on your own reputation. In this subsection, we consider some of the elements that go into making a formal presentation—the planning stage, the pre-presentation stage, the presentation, the question-and-answer session, and using technological support.

The planning stage. During the planning stage, you first should try to be clear about the purpose of your presentation. You should know why you were asked to speak and what the audience expects from you. (This will shape not only your speech but also your attire.) You should decide exactly what major points you want to get