

## **Section A: Best Practices in Public Information and Media Relations**

### **I. Public Information in Mass Media: Television**

#### Henrico County, Va.

The county has developed an entire department dedicated to the production of a county television station, HCTV 17. All of Henrico County's public information is handled through the department, titled the **Public Relations and Media Services Department**. The department is in charge of all media and press releases, publications and graphic arts. Unique to the county is the media services branch, which is essentially a TV station with six full-time producers. The station has been airing original programming since 2003.

Like many other county television stations, HCTV 17 spotlights important county events and programs that may be of interest to citizens. It does not broadcast any public meetings, instead taking a more mainstream approach to county TV. In programs like "Badge of Protection: The Henrico Sheriff's Office," a specific county agency is spotlighted to help citizens understand the work of these agencies and their available services. Other programs provide updates on major county projects, documentaries on county history, or information on fitness, health and emergency preparedness. Henrico County is unique because the types and formats of its programs have the look and feel of a mainstream TV station.

Tamra McKinney, director of public relations and media services, gave a prime example of the benefits of HCTV. The station ran a program called "Cold Case," attempting to play off network hit crime dramas such as CSI by tying story lines back to the community. As a result, the Sheriff's Office received eight viable leads in cold cases up to 22 years old – proving that county government programming can be both intriguing and informative, and at the same time promote citizen involvement.

For more information, visit [www.co.henrico.va.us/pr/index.html](http://www.co.henrico.va.us/pr/index.html)

Contact: Tamra McKinney at [mck10@co.henrico.va.us](mailto:mck10@co.henrico.va.us)

#### Mecklenburg County, N.C.

One word can unfortunately describe many county government TV channels: boring. It is difficult to creatively get the word out about county government services and events. Mecklenburg County decided that county TV needed to be more like mainstream TV and gave birth to the show **The Mecklenburgers**, a weekly episodic TV show about county government, performed by actors in a funny and entertaining way. It is essentially a "show within a show" about a TV station that tries to produce a weekly family sitcom. The shows focus around county and community issues, such as substance abuse and disease, or county services, such as parks and recreation. Local celebrity radio DJs, sports stars and TV anchors make cameo appearances.

The show is made possible through a partnership between Mecklenburg County and public broadcasting station WTVI. The station is funded through government grants, but the county wanted to turn its partnership with the station into a services contract, rather than provide operational money. The same amount of money would be given to WTVI, but on the condition that it would help the county produce “The Mecklenburgers.” The show not only reaches cable subscribers, but TV viewers in 13 surrounding counties.

The county’s role is to hire, promote and advertise the show through its Public Information Office. In addition, one of the county’s assistant managers writes the scripts for the show.

“The Mecklenburgers” airs each Sunday at 7:30 p.m. In its first two years, 17 episodes of the show have aired, drawing an average of between 10,000 and 20,000 viewers. The show has received seven national “Telly” awards, and in 2005 and 2006 received achievement awards from the National Association of Counties.

For more information, visit [www.themecklenburgers.org](http://www.themecklenburgers.org)  
Contact: Danny Diehl at [diehlDC@co.mecklenburg.nc.us](mailto:diehlDC@co.mecklenburg.nc.us)

#### Yuma County, Ariz.

As one of the smallest counties in Arizona, Yuma County wanted its TV spots to get noticed, but wanted to stay different from the state’s bigger counties. The county public information officer asked officials at Adelphia, the local cable operator, for help. Because Adelphia is mandated to run a certain number of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) each week, the PIO requested that the cable provider air county-produced PSAs for Yuma. The PSAs, called “**County Update**,” were short and funny, focusing on topics such as recycling and health issues, and ran on almost every channel. Currently, 300 to 400 spots are run a week. The county pays between \$25 and \$50 to produce each PSA.

Yuma later realized that the PSAs were failing to reach at least 50 percent of its residents. This group – mostly Hispanic – prefers its messages in Spanish, and the PSAs were only aired on channels with English programming. The PIO reached an agreement with Adelphia to cover some of their PSAs on the Spanish channels, such as Telemundo or Univision. Both English and Spanish PSAs are produced at the same time using different narrators. The PSAs are dubbed **CAPSULA** and are now broadcast as far south as Mexicali, Mexico. The PSAs are also available for viewing on the Yuma County Web site.

*As a best practice idea, PSAs seem simple enough, however Yuma County’s PIO warns that it is difficult to contract with a major cable operator. The agreement in Yuma works on a handshake deal, while agreements with larger cable companies require much more negotiation, and compensation may be necessary.*

For further information, visit [www.co.yuma.az.us](http://www.co.yuma.az.us)  
Contact: Kevin Tunell at [kevin.tunell@co.yuma.az.us](mailto:kevin.tunell@co.yuma.az.us)

## II. Public Information in Mass Media: Internet

### Knox County, Tenn.

Webstreaming has emerged as the premiere technology for broadcasting meetings and events via the Web. Knox County decided to do two things: 1) go beyond just broadcasting county meetings; and 2) find new methods to reach the younger generation of Internet-savvy citizens.

The county created a weekly radio show hosted by County Mayor Mike Ragsdale that features a one- to two-minute update on major issues facing county government and upcoming events in the area. Updates on the budget are also a common topic.

To take it one step further, the county decided to make the weekly address part of a Podcast. **Podcasts** are radio shows automatically delivered over the Internet to computer users with Internet access. Citizens do not need an iPod to listen, as the Podcast link is available at all times over the Internet. The county update is also available on Apple's popular Web site, iTunes. All downloads and instructions are available on the county Web site.

*As a best practice, Podcasts and Webstreaming radio shows will only work if the person delivering the announcement is concise, charismatic and interesting. The best technology cannot substitute for a good speaker who can keep listeners engaged.*

For more information, visit [www.knoxcounty.org/countymayor/podcast.php](http://www.knoxcounty.org/countymayor/podcast.php)  
Contact: Jon Gustin at [jon.gustin@knoxcounty.org](mailto:jon.gustin@knoxcounty.org)

### Henderson County, N.C.

Henderson County may not have the resources of a larger North Carolina county, but it clearly knows that the main driver of information is the Internet. The county makes best use of delivering information via the Internet with its e-newsletter "**Henderson Highlights.**"

Henderson County's public information officer contacts each department head monthly and requests submissions on noteworthy issues or events. For headliner articles, the PIO includes pictures.

Henderson Highlights can be accessed through an online subscription form on the county's Web site home page. Included in the form is a survey about the effectiveness of HCTV-11, the county's TV station. Henderson is able to subscribe citizens to the newsletter and, at the same time, survey subscribers about another media outlet. Feedback on the newsletter has been positive. There are well over 500 subscribers, and the newsletter adds around 15 new subscribers each month.

For more information, visit [www.hendersoncountync.org](http://www.hendersoncountync.org)  
Contact: Chris Coulson at [ccoulson@hendersoncountync.org](mailto:ccoulson@hendersoncountync.org)

### Onslow County, N.C.

Rural counties often find it difficult to reach constituents through print media or technology. Onslow County decided to use the Internet to make it easier for citizens to experience county government. The **Videos Live and On Demand** program was created through a contract with Granicus, Inc. – a software consulting company providing public access services to local governments.

Granicus provided three services to Onslow County. First, it set up software to allow online streaming audio and video broadcasts of board meetings. The videos can be viewed in real-time online or saved in an online archive accessible on the county Web site. Secondly, Granicus installed a “minutes maker” program. The county clerk can record motions, votes, attendance and speaker notes with a minimal amount of annotation work. It’s all easily reviewed the next day or at a time when the clerk is ready to publish to the public Web site. Finally, Onslow requested Granicus’ VotingSystem feature, which automatically records commissioners’ votes through touch-screen panels (or other input device). The VotingSystem works together with the MinutesMaker module to automatically capture legislative motions, votes and attendance information.

The system was advertised on the county TV channel and via several press releases prior to its debut. Since then, it has received nothing but positive feedback. Since the Onslow County public information TV channel is run by Time Warner, only a portion of the county citizens receive it. With “Videos Live and On Demand,” citizens without cable access but with Internet access can watch board meetings at their leisure.

Granicus provided all software and employee training to run the program. The main stumbling block to implementing this best practice is obvious: funding. However, Assistant County Manager Lori Brill described the cost as reasonable (around \$50,000), and noted that the board’s commitment to reaching the public was key to the success of the program.

For more information, visit [www.co.onslow.nc.us/main/granicus/granicus.htm](http://www.co.onslow.nc.us/main/granicus/granicus.htm)  
Contact: Lori Brill at [Lori\\_Brill@co.onslow.nc.us](mailto:Lori_Brill@co.onslow.nc.us)

### **III. Public Information in Mass Media: Reaching N.C. Children**

#### Catawba County, N.C.

Kids are not likely to have a great interest in county government but quite often, through reports and school projects, they learn about the many and interesting services counties provide. After surveying parents and students about their information needs, Catawba County created **CATCO for Kids**, a Web site designed to help youths with research on county government. It also links them to community Web sites, such as the library and the local 4-H branch. The links include county history, economy, geography and the county flag.

The purpose of the Web site is to provide youths with easy access to county data and to stimulate involvement in county government. The Web site lists links for parents,

including for the Catawba County Partnership for Children, social services at all levels of government, and public school systems and colleges.

At the time this report was written, the Web site was in its infancy stages, and the county was in the process of asking for more feedback from children and parents on what they would like to see on CATCO for Kids.

For more information, visit

[www.catawbacountync.gov/misc/dirofsvc/kids/catcoforkids.htm](http://www.catawbacountync.gov/misc/dirofsvc/kids/catcoforkids.htm)

#### Howard County, Md.

Howard County created **Kids County**, an interactive Web site for children and their parents, to reach out to youths. Users are asked a series of questions – such as “Do you know who paints the lines on roads or who plows the roads when it snows?” – to help explain to children and parents what services counties provide.

The site uses fun characters, illustrations and activities to peak youths’ interest. Some examples: “Zooma,” a picture selection game, allows kids to guess what is in a close-up picture, and then explains how it is used in county services. “Hands-on” provides printable word searches, crossword puzzles and coloring pages related to county government.

For more information, visit [www.co.ho.md.us/DOA/DOA\\_PIO\\_KIDS\\_HOME.htm](http://www.co.ho.md.us/DOA/DOA_PIO_KIDS_HOME.htm)

Contact: Victoria Goodman at [vgoodman@co.ho.md.us](mailto:vgoodman@co.ho.md.us)

## **IV. Public Information Events and Programs**

### Brevard County, Fla.

In response to the need for a more involved community, Brevard County decided that its citizens needed to go back to school and created **The Citizens Academy**. Produced through the County Manager’s Office, the free Academy is offered twice a year in the spring and the fall. Classes are limited to 20 people per class and are run in eight sets of weekly sessions. Classes are offered in the morning and in the evening to accommodate working professionals.

The Citizens Academy varies its themes each week. In the first class, the county manager usually gives an overview of county government structure. The remaining courses address themes such as county history, volunteer opportunities, emergency services and budgeting. The Academy also offers half-day tours of the wastewater treatment plant, jail and other county facilities depending on attendee requests.

The goal of the program is to inform the community about county government and encourage citizens to volunteer for boards, committees and service projects. The response from the community has been favorable: each class is full, and new sets of courses fill up quickly. The Academy is advertised on the county TV station, library, community newspaper and – most importantly – by word of mouth.

For more information, visit [countygovt.brevard.fl.us/citizens-academy](http://countygovt.brevard.fl.us/citizens-academy)  
 Contact: Carrie Cotter at [carrie.cotter@brevardcounty.us](mailto:carrie.cotter@brevardcounty.us)

### Macomb County, Mich.

Senior citizens are often the most involved citizen group in local elections and volunteer activities. That segment of the population, however, hasn't taken to the World Wide Web and newer forms of technology for access to important county services. In some cases, they are not even aware that the services exist. Macomb County decided to combat this problem by creating two events, the **Older Americans Festival**, and **Senior Outreach Day**.

The Older Americans Festival is a one-day event held in a public park by the county Board of Commissioners, usually in June that features dancing, games and food vendors for senior citizens to enjoy. Free health screenings, and information on county services such as the public health, animal control, emergency medical services and senior programs is on display in booths. Annual attendance at the festival has averaged between 2,500 and 4,000.

Senior Outreach Day is a mobile event that occurs in several Michigan cities throughout the year. Sponsored by the Board of Commissioners, it offers free health screenings and immunizations, and provides seniors with information on the County Health Department.

Macomb County also recognized an untapped and uninformed resource in its high school population. To get the students more involved, the school board and the Board of Commissioners partnered with the Close-Up Foundation to create the **Up-Close Student Government Day**. The event is held downtown at the county administration building, and activities include job shadowing, a tour of the jail, and a mock board meeting.

Students apply through their schools, and each school is allowed to send four or five students. In 2006, the program hit capacity, with about 100 students attending. The event has been highly publicized in both schools and newspapers, further promoting the mission of county government outreach.

For more information, visit [macombcountymi.gov/publicaffairs/index.asp](http://macombcountymi.gov/publicaffairs/index.asp)  
 Contact: Phil Frame at [phil.frame@macombcountymi.gov](mailto:phil.frame@macombcountymi.gov)

### Durham County, N.C.

Who does what in government? Which services are offered by cities and which are provided by counties? Durham County set out to clear up any confusion on the subject with a program called **Neighborhood College**. The 10-week series of classes provide information on key city and county services, giving participants a chance to meet and interact with city and county staff.

Topics include city and county services, community development and the budget process. The majority of presenters are department heads and subject-matter specialists from both governments. Time is set aside at the end for a question-and-answer session. Durham runs both spring and fall sessions. To date, the program has been highly

successful and is even getting inquiries from counties in other states who wish to model their own program after Durham's.

For more information, visit

[www.co.durham.nc.us/departments/bocc/Durham\\_Neighborhood\\_College/index.cfm](http://www.co.durham.nc.us/departments/bocc/Durham_Neighborhood_College/index.cfm)

Contact: Deborah Craig-Ray at [public\\_information@durhamcountync.gov](mailto:public_information@durhamcountync.gov)

#### Pinellas County, Fla.

The motto of Pinellas County could be, "If the people don't come to you, you go to the people." In an effort to reach out and inform citizens about county government, the Pinellas County Board of Commissioners came up with "**Government on the Go.**" Measuring 25 feet in length, the retrofitted Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) bus is a community outreach tool providing computer access to the county's e-courthouse. Once aboard, citizens can register to vote, learn about emergency services, get brochures about county departments, learn about county job openings, and even pay their taxes. "Government on the Go" is convenient for elderly citizens and those without transportation, or citizens with little or no access to a computer or the county's Web site.

The county Communications Department took the lead on the project, but all departments cooperate to offer "Government on the Go." County officials say they hope to improve the "mobile" effort over the next few years by offering county information kiosks in shopping malls.

For more information, visit:

[www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=Achievement\\_Awards&Template=/cfiles/awards/program.cfm&SEARCHID=2003citi32](http://www.naco.org/Template.cfm?Section=Achievement_Awards&Template=/cfiles/awards/program.cfm&SEARCHID=2003citi32)

Contact: Tim Closterman at [tclosterman@pinellascounty.org](mailto:tclosterman@pinellascounty.org)

## V. Best Practices in Media Relations

Instead of looking for a single county that creates the best press kits or a public information officer who writes effective news releases, this section focuses on *best practices excerpted and modified from media relations handbooks that were created in-house by individual organizations.*

### *Part 1 - Making Contact: The Media Wants Your Story*

#### **What do I do when a reporter calls me?**

Step #1: Decide whether you will grant the interview. To help you decide, here are some questions to ask:

- What is the subject of the interview?
- Are you the appropriate person to answer questions about the topic?
- Who is the reporter and where does he/she work?
- What will be the format of the interview? Live? Taped? Telephone? Is it a feature story or a news story?
- Where will the interview be conducted and how long will the interview be?
- What is the reporter's deadline?

**\*\*See Appendix A on Sample Questions to Ask When a Reporter Calls**

Step #2: Prepare for the interview.

1. *Outline your main points:* Make a list of three to five main points you would like to make during the interview. These points should each be as brief as possible – you should be able to say each of them in 20 seconds or less. Reporters are looking for quotes – punchy lines that can be lifted for a “quote box” in print or a “sound bite” of air time. Make sure you get across your main points even if you have to repeat them several times.
2. *Background:* Because it is impossible to convey all the information you would like to convey in 20 second bites, handouts and background sheets are very helpful. Reporters appreciate having ample background material, and if your topic is complex, it is crucial to have handouts for reporters. This can be in the form of a prepared press release, a brochure, historical background, a fact sheet or statistics. Reporters love facts and figures that will lend credibility to their stories, but don't exaggerate figures or use superlatives to make something sound more impressive than it really is.
3. *Anticipate hard questions:* Make a list of questions you'd rather NOT answer, and then think about how you might best answer them. Also think about how you might transition from answering the tough questions into making one of your key points. Other staff members, especially in communications, can help you anticipate and prepare for tough questions.

### Step #3: The interview: some dos and don'ts

1. *You're the boss.* Take the initiative – don't wait for the reporter to ask the questions. Remember your three to five key points, and begin making them right off the bat, even if it means going beyond the question you've been asked.
2. *Don't go off the record.* Even though a reporter may agree that your comments won't be attributed to you personally, that information may eventually end up in print if it is confirmed by other sources. If you don't want to read it in the paper, don't say it.
3. *Be brief and to the point.* Remember your three to five main points and make an effort to convey those points in 20 seconds or so. If there is one key message, say it in different ways, more than once. For television, about 45 seconds of response time is the maximum you will be given to make your point.
4. *Tell the truth.* Sometimes the truth hurts, but lies hurt worse and for a longer time. Your credibility and that of your institution could be at stake.
5. *If you don't know, don't speculate.* Simply refer the person to the appropriate department or your public information officer if you are unsure. Sometimes reporters will not distinguish between a personal opinion and the county's position, so it will be up to you to set the record straight. If you are the county's spokesman, identify yourself as such.
6. *Be friendly, after all it's an interview, not an interrogation.* Try to establish rapport with the reporter and be positive and courteous at all times. Never argue with a reporter, and avoid defensive answers. A combative answer or hostile body language makes great TV, but could be embarrassing to you professionally and to your county.
7. *It's alright to make a mistake.* If you have made a mistake on camera or in an interview, or if you find that you've strayed seriously from the question asked, simply stop and correct the mistake, or ask if you can give another response. Most TV reporters will prefer your new, briefer quote.
8. *Anecdotes and humor have their place.* Use them, when appropriate, to liven up a story, to add a human angle.

*Excerpted from: NCSU news services Media Relations Guide, see "Sources: Part A"*

### **Interview Preparation**

#### Planning your interview

You always have the right to take time to prepare for an interview. Don't let a reporter bully you into responding off-the-cuff. *It is perfectly acceptable to tell a reporter that you need time to familiarize yourself with an issue.*

Pull all your notes and files and read over the information. Have those same notes and files accessible during your interview. No one expects you to have everything memorized and it is better to look something up than give the wrong answer.

#### Developing talking points

Any good interview will have a key message. First, determine this message and develop a few key talking points to help deliver it. Talking points are small, sound-bite sized sentences that flow in a logical order. **Most interviews will require only three or four talking points.** If your key message is about a new program at the county health department for elderly citizen flu shots, your talking points could be:

- The need for elderly citizens to get flu shots
- The ease of using the flu shot program for elderly patients
- The time and place of the program

In the interview, it may become difficult to deliver the talking points you have prepared. A reporter may ask you questions that don't correspond to your points or may be looking for an answer that is in direct opposition to your talking points. In the previous example, a reporter could try to ask you questions about why the county is not doing more to combat the flu. Use "bridging" to steer the interview back to your talking points. Some "bridging" phrases include:

- "The answer may come down to an individual's personal preference. What's important for the public to know is....<talking point>..."
- "It's difficult to talk about hypothetical situations. What's happening today is....<talking point>..."
- "To fully answer that question, you would need an expert on <reporter topic>. But I can tell you in general that....<talking point>..."

However, you must remember:

- Not answering every question of the reporter is not rude.
- Bridging is difficult and takes practice.
- Try to make your bridging sound natural and conversational.

*Excerpted from: The Grantmakers Communication Manual by Christopher McNamara, see "Sources: Part A"*

## **Understanding the three main types of interviews: TV, Radio, and Print**

### TV interviews

It's natural to become anxious when a TV personality requests an interview. Don't think you have to have the on-air demeanor of a Diane Sawyer or a Tom Brokaw – the public knows that this is not who you are. You don't need to dress any differently than you would everyday. Just be yourself. The important thing is to appear honest, straightforward and concerned.

Look at the reporter, not the camera. Think of it as a one-on-one conversation with someone you like and you will look more relaxed. Be prepared with visuals that may help make your story better. Suggest meeting the reporter outside your office in a natural setting or with a good city backdrop to create a better visual location.

### Radio interviews

Most radio interviews are conducted over the phone. Prepare by cutting out all distractions. You might want to hold all your calls and shut your door to avoid people entering your office. Talk in a completely normal voice. It's OK to have an accent or to talk in your normal voice that may not be good for radio. Just talk so that you can be understood.

### Print interviews

Print interviews usually last longer than radio or TV interviews. The reporter will want more detail. Make sure to block out enough time to do a print interview. If needed, pull other people from your office for the interview, especially if they have expertise on your program/issue.

*Excerpted from: North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Media Training Handbook, see "Sources: Part A"*

### Making Corrections

Mistakes happen. A reporter may not get your story right, or they may miss a major point. Make sure to contact the right person right away in order to preserve your relationship with that outlet. You may want to consult your public information officer or someone else in the office first in order to get a second opinion.

Don't respond angrily – always start your discussions with the original reporter. If you don't get satisfaction from them, you may want to consult a higher-up, but not before.

A printed or on-air correction is rare. You will have to prove something is absolutely wrong in order to merit it. In general, even if you prove it, a correction will not run as prominently as the original story.

Headline errors are rare but do occur. A reporter rarely writes the headline. Call and talk to them, but don't blame them for the mistake. A headline will only be corrected if it is totally inaccurate. Don't expect much if you are complaining that a headline is sloppy or stupid.

Factual errors are much more common. Pictures with misidentified people or misspelled names are the most common. A printed correction is always in order for these types of mistakes. Other factual errors may be harder to deal with. If a story says you did something that you didn't do, you will want to talk to the reporter first. You can try to ask for a written correction, but, if you really want to be effective, try to convince the reporter to do a follow-up story that corrects the problem. It will be read by a greater audience.

Problems of misquotation or tone are unlikely to merit a correction. However, to put out a different message to the public, you can always write a letter to the editor or an op-ed that will appear in the same paper. Make sure to get this out as soon as possible after the original story to be more effective.

*Excerpted from: North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Media Training Handbook, see "Sources: Part A"*

## **Open Meetings**

Under North Carolina law, some meetings must be open to the media. The Open Meetings law applies to official meetings conducted by elected bodies or by many bodies appointed by elected officials. In either case, this means that many of the commissioner meetings will be required to be open. Although there is a social purpose exclusion, be careful with it. If you talk business at all during your meeting, it becomes official and must be open.

The law does allow closed meetings for reasons such as conferring with attorneys, discussing personnel issues, or purchase of property. The board must take any votes, even on these issues, in a session open to the media.

Consider allowing a reporter to attend a meeting if he or she asks. If something is traditionally a closed meeting, you may want to open it up for public relations reasons. Be sure to explain that the meeting is usually closed but that you are allowing them to attend to remain as open as possible to their needs.

*Excerpted from: North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Media Training Handbook, see "Sources: Part A"*

## ***Part 2 - Making Contact: Getting Your Story Out to the Media***

### **Building Media Relationships**

The key to building good media relationships is to understand how a media professional spends his or her day. It is usually fast-paced and unpredictable. They spend half their day on the phone trying to get facts or listening to pitches, so don't annoy them. Remember to be extra polite and professional if you contact them during unscheduled times.

Another strategy is to call them when you have no news to pitch (if they are not busy). Sometimes, they are happy to get a call that is not a news pitch. Compliment them on a well-written story and it will give you an "in" to introduce yourself.

Be familiar with a media outlet and their reporters. Read the paper, watch the newscast, or listen to the radio first, so that you learn what type of stories and formats they use.

Lastly, if you have the resources, gather detailed information about the media in your area and put it into a database. Even an Excel spreadsheet is better than nothing. You will find that many reporters move around quite often, so use your follow-up calls and emails to ensure that a reporter is still on staff. Update your media database annually at the very least.

**\*\*See Appendix A for sample worksheet on Media and Reporter Contacts.**

*Excerpted from: Media Relations 101, The Visibility Coach, See "Sources: Part A"*

### **"What makes a good news story?"**

You may think a story is good, but it may not attract the attention of the media. To determine if a story will attract the attention of journalists, make sure it has one or several of the following elements:

- “New” news – A good news story is fresh and new. New services, treatments, equipment, staff and facilities are all newsworthy because they are new to the community.
- Timeliness – If something is happening now, yesterday or tomorrow, it’s more likely to grab attention. If the story doesn’t have an immediate time element, try tagging on to other events with timeliness. If you want to promote the good work of the parks and recreation department, highlight it on Earth Day.
- People – The best stories are told through and about people. While you may want to promote programs, facilities, services and future needs, use people to make that happen. Use anecdotes from citizens, family members, staff and volunteers to get better results.
- Controversy – Most stories in the paper today relate to some sort of controversy. “There are two sides to every story” is quite relevant in evaluating newsworthiness. However, when you suggest a controversial story, be ready for a reporter to ask you who might be opposed to your topic or idea.
- Involvement and scope – Story ideas that impact a large group of people, especially local people, will be more newsworthy.
- Weird or interesting – Things that make you say, “Hmmm, that’s different” are always on the list. Let your staff know you are always on the lookout for interesting and different stories about your county.
- First or most – Anything that can be identified as the first of its kind will make news. Also look for biggest, best, smallest and most unique.

*Excerpted from: Association of Washington Public Hospitals Public Relations Handbook, See “Sources: Part A”*

### **Pitching**

Pitching is when you contact a reporter by phone to suggest a story idea or material for publication. It is usually less than 60 seconds. Practice is key to pitching. Write down your script or outline the key points you want to hit. Always ask the reporter, “Do you have a minute?” or “is this a good time?” Feel free to leave a pitch on voicemail, but follow up in a day or two.

*Excerpted from: Association of Washington Public Hospitals Public Relations Handbook, See “Sources: Part A”*

### **Communication plans**

Every county should develop a communication plan to help you get the most from free media. Some questions you may need to ask before you begin are:

- What is your goal?

- What do you want the media to tell the public about your county?
- Who is your audience?
- What media are you going to use to reach them?
- What resources are available to you?

Communication plans can include a number of elements. Options are as follows:

### *News releases*

A news release provides information about an issue in a standardized format. A release must be concise. In general, it should be kept to one page if possible.

You should **never rely on a news release as your only communication tool**. Follow up with a call to make sure the media received the release. Make your call short and to the point. Don't call too much, or the reporter may ignore your event because they are tired of your harassment.

### *Fact sheets*

Fact sheets are easy to do. They lay out the main points of your program. They should include the following information:

- The name, location, size, population, etc., of your county
- Names of your county manager, commissioners, etc.
- County historical facts
- Important county programs and services

Fact sheets are good to have on hand for anyone who wants information. They are also a good basis for material to put on the Internet. Sample fact sheets can be found at the offices of most major organizations and on their Web sites.

### *Web sites*

Web sites are fairly easy to create. Some of the most useful sites are very simple; they just respond to frequently asked questions. The web is also a good place to post news, white papers, directories, etc.

### *News conferences*

If you are going to have news conference, be sure that you have something very newsworthy to announce. Be judicious in scheduling these. Ask yourself if you really need to have a conference or if the same information can be distributed by contacting reporters individually.

### *Media events*

A media event will usually get more coverage than a news conference. It gives reporters pictures as well as words. Ask yourself if you can get the affected parties of your program or service to participate in the media event. This will help tell your story.

### *Interviews*

Some newspapers or TV stations have reporters who cover particular beats such as health or the environment. If you or a reporter is new in the area, you may want to sit

down and talk with them about a relevant issue. This is an excellent way to establish yourself as an expert in that area, and on county government in general.

### ***Columns***

Smaller newspapers may be interested in a regular column. This is a usually a good idea, but with a full Board of Commissioners to answer to, you may raise a political issue or resentment among the group. You might want to have a commissioner column where a different commissioner writes the column every week.

### ***Op-eds***

This is an opportunity for you to write a column that provides more than just information. Here, in an opinion or editorial column, you can provide your stance on a given issues. Again, be careful to avoid political resentment from other board members.

*Excerpted from: North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Media Training Handbook, see "Sources: Part A"*

## **Communicating effectively: Writing news releases**

A press release is your first and best chance for communicating why your story is worth media attention. It is the one tool most reporters ask for directly. The release must quickly tell the story and make it appear newsworthy, but also must be as accurate with names, facts and figures as possible. Consider the following points when writing a news release:

- Keep it short and simple
- Answer the who, what, where, when and why of the story
- When appropriate, use quotes to share opinion or praise
- Avoid adverbs, adjectives, and qualifiers that do not add to the story (i.e. "very")
- Identify your county at the end of each news release
- Use 8 ½ x 11 paper, with county letterhead if available
- Double space paragraphs
- Double check for errors
- Have an uninformed party read the release for readability and accuracy.

*Excerpted from: Association of Washington Public Hospitals Public Relations Handbook, See Sources: Part A*

## **Lead times**

The length of time before a story or article goes to press is called a lead time. It is helpful to know the different lead times between media outlets. Keep in mind that for a written story, a reporter will spend much of the day before writing. If you have last-minute changes, make sure to contact them early in the day.

Some TV editors will be receptive to a last-minute video opportunity, but only if it is brief and easy to capture (the public appearance of a celebrity or politician). Major stories with video opportunities will need to be researched and communicated to the

station weeks in advance. Local magazines or newsletters usually have a much longer deadline. If you want a story to appear in a November issue, make contact by Aug. 1 to ensure that it will appear.

*Excerpted from: Media Relations 101, The Visibility Coach, See “Sources: Part A”*

### **Crisis communication**

Most of the time, county officials should be encouraged to talk freely with reporters about a story they are involved with. That’s not the case in a crisis. Coordination of communication – ensuring that you give out the correct information with one voice – is essential during a crisis.

Hurricanes and tornadoes are clearly crises. However, defining a smaller event as a crisis can be tricky. Consult your fellow commissioners, county manager and managerial staff as to whether or not an event should be treated as a crisis. Have a full meeting to ensure that everyone receives the message about the crisis and that everyone has the same crisis communication plan.

The best way to deal with a crisis is to coordinate all of your media messages out of one office. Have the media contact the public affairs office, or if there is not one, contact the county manager. Be sure to issue regular news releases to reassure the public.

Have on hand a regular listing of emergency numbers, including after-hours media numbers. This will help you to stay organized when the time comes.

You may want to hold a post-crisis meeting to determine what worked and what didn’t. Ask the media for their opinions. Use this information to prepare a better crisis communication plan the next time.

**\*\*See Appendix A for Crisis Communication Response Worksheet**

*Excerpted from: North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Media Training Handbook, see “Sources: Part A”*

### **Best Practices in Brief**

These best practices are commonly used by many counties:

- Gaston County has a specific day set aside as **County Government Day**. Its purpose is for citizens and students to explore county departments, such as fire, police and health, through interactive activities and booths. In Gaston, the event is held at the judicial complex and the county government offices. Other counties have chosen to do a county government day similar to a festival, with music, dancing and food vendors.
- Rockingham County tries to get its message out to the media through what they call “**e-mail blasting**.” The county public information officer creates a press release with important county information, and then sends it to every local media outlet available (newspapers, TV, etc.) by e-mail. The media can choose to use it or ignore it, but the county still attempts to push the word out, rather than having the media initiate the contact.

## **Public Information and Media Relations Summary of Findings**

In doing my research and interviews on public information, a common concern continued to crop up: the contrast between large and small counties. A large county will have more resources to hire a public information officer, hold county-funded events, and develop or purchase the necessary technology to reach out to the new “Internet” world. How do the smaller counties afford this?

As one PIO asked, “How do we get our message to a TV audience when we can’t afford TV production, nor will the surrounding ‘richer’ counties put out our information on their expensive TV stations?” Such is the conundrum of county media and public relations. Large counties do it well and are always rolling out innovative forms of communication. Smaller counties are struggling to get local papers to run positive stories.

Another general concern is the lack of counties with public information officers. Roughly 25 percent of North Carolina counties have a staff PIO. It may be due to a lack of funds in the budget or proper resources, but some counties may be choosing to pay little attention to media and public relations in general?

Maintaining good working relations with media outlets has never been, and will never be, easy for local governments. The media is much more apt to cover a negative story than a positive one. However, county government officials need to take some responsibility for the lack of positive media coverage. County officials should make sure that any media outlet that producing a story that portrays county government in a negative manner still receives the county side of the story. County officials also need to make a concerted effort to generate excitement and positive publicity for their public information events and programs.

For example, if your county purchases and installs Webstreaming equipment for Board of Commissioners meetings, don’t just advertise the new technology on your Web site or your TV channel. Contact the local media and build a story around new county initiatives in technology. Make sure to throw in other positive newsworthy events, services or recognition for hardworking county officials. **Public information initiatives can transform themselves into media opportunities with a little extra time and effort.**

County efforts in media relations often fall short. We can blame this on a lack of interest in local government, a society that’s obsessed with negative news, and the inability of county events to generate adequate coverage. But what needs to be looked at is the **structure of the county government organization** itself. Most counties do not hire professional communications employees for media relations purposes. Nor do they have the proper technologies or relationships in place to effectively place their message. The next step is for county government officials to **evaluate their current media capabilities and compare it with those groups that receive a wealth of media coverage**. Often, generating positive media coverage is not about who has the better story or more money, but who has the technology, the connections, the relationships, the know-how, and the initiative to get their side of the story out.

More importantly, **media relations cannot be about trying to target all of your citizens at once**. Each media outlet will reach a different group, and county governments should make an effort to tailor media messages to the outlets they use and the groups they

reach. It is much more effective to reach a smaller group with a specific message or service than it is to try to send out a general message that may be ignored by most people.

The first step to positive media relations is creating a media relations handbook. This does not require hiring a consultant. Borrow from others with online guides such as the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, use the best practices listed in this report, or buy a book about media relations and tailor the handbook to the specific needs of county government. **Most guides will contain the same basic information.** Use any version you want. Give a copy to each staff member and hold a meeting to discuss its contents. Make sure that everyone in the organization understands the importance of media to government, and that each person is committed to sending a positive message to the public. Everyone has the same need for media coverage and with the proper tools and information, that coverage can be open to everyone. In the future, the NCACC may look into media relations guides and handbooks to create their own version for general county use.

A media relations guide can serve as the essential reference for all media relations questions, but a Web site will be a more frequently used resource. Several Web pages have been created that address: 1) media relations and getting your message out to the media; 2) media relations and what to do when the media approaches you; and 3) public information strategies and best practices. These are only the results of weeks of research. They will need to be continually updated with new NACo award winners, Outstanding County Program Winners, etc. The City-County Communications and Marketing Association (3CMA) is also a great resource for media relations and public information best practices. I suggest that our communications director, Todd McGee, join this group and utilize their Web resources and conferences. This information can be used to update best practices on the Web site and to add to a potential NCACC County Media Relations Guide.

Times are changing in media relations. Younger generations are getting their news and information from newer forms of media, not newspapers local TV newscasts. Government officials need to find new ways (e-mail, Podcasts, major public events) to reach a younger demographic. Also, the makeup of the country, in terms of ethnic groups, is rapidly changing as well. New techniques to reach an ever-growing Hispanic population must be considered. Since many immigrants may not be able to read in English or lack Internet access, other outlets such as radio and TV will be more and more important in reaching this population. The NCACC can make use of its Annual Conference and *CountyLines* to address these issues. Commissioners need to be aware of the changing nature of technology and demographics as it is happening, not when it is too late.