



COMMUNICATING WITH PURPOSE

NCACC PUBLIC RELATIONS QUICK GUIDE

Communicating effectively with constituents is a critical part of being an elected official. Board Chairs in particular play an important role as a key spokesperson for the county, so it's important to devise a communications plan to guide county outreach efforts and relations with the media.

As you devise a communications plan, identify key county staff to include in the process such as the public information officer or others who can advise you in crafting appropriate messaging. Selecting the right communications staff is important to maximize positive press coverage and minimize the county's reputational risk during crises. Communications plans can range from simple to elaborate, but at a minimum, your plan should:

- State communications goals
- Develop key messages to support communications goals
- Identify specific audiences you want to reach (seniors, employers, educators, students, community groups, etc.)
- Customize secondary messages to appeal to key audiences
- Outline how you plan to use various communications tools

NACo offers a comprehensive media relations guide to assist counties. It is available at: naco.org/sites/default/files/documents/Media_Relations_Guide.pdf

Engaging the Media

As an elected official, it is valuable to develop positive relationships with key reporters, editors, columnists, broadcasters, and bloggers in your area. Good relationships with local media can help you obtain earned media opportunities that advance your message and get the word out to the public about your work and accomplishments. It is important to closely monitor local news and the public's reaction to issues that arise, particularly those that are controversial. There are a range of tools you can use to communicate with local media including:

- County website
- Media advisories
- Press releases
- Press statements
- Opinion editorials
- Interviews
- Press conferences
- Social media

Crisis Communications

- You want to be first to frame the facts
- People tend to believe what they hear first
- Get your message out before public opinion hardens
- Don't give your opponent the advantage of getting out their narrative first

If you are facing a crisis communications situation, you may want to consider consulting services. Mark Weaver of Communications Counsel is an Adjunct Professor at UNC School of Government and has taught numerous seminars specifically designed for elected officials. He can be reached at: Mark@CommunicationsCounsel.com or 614-349-1145.



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Tips for Interviews

- Set boundaries and expectations accordingly; clarify allotted time and topics to discuss
- PREPARE and know your audience
- Dress appropriately
 - Wearing a business suit to visit a disaster-affected area will make you seem “out of touch”
- Stay on message
- Don’t repeat negative narratives
- “No comment,” is not a response
- If you don’t know, say so and don’t guess
 - ex.: “We know the public wants to know more about what happened which is why we are moving quickly to gather the facts. We will provide that information as soon as we know more.”
- Never lie or swear
- Don’t exaggerate or use numbers or claims you can’t back with data
 - The internet makes it easy to debunk unsubstantiated claims: www.politifact.com
- Use simple language and avoid jargon
- Don’t argue, reporters have the last word
- If you can’t speak on a topic (for legal or other legitimate reasons) use holding statements
 - A holding statement states the basic facts of incident involving the county and lets people know you are actively dealing with the crisis situation. (ex. “The Judge has asked us to not discuss the details of the case in the press. We respect her order and we will present our case vigorously in court.”)
- Try to speak in 10 second soundbites and don’t assume a reporter’s question will be part of the soundbite (TV or radio)