



Working With the News Media to Win Community Support

As a chamber director or economic development professional in your community, one of your jobs is to be prepared for questions from the news media.

Most interviews will be on friendly ground, but tedious topics come with the territory. How you answer reporters' questions could affect the direction your community moves – with you or against you.

The following tips for better media relations are offered by the economic development professionals at Teamwork Arkansas, the economic development office of Entergy Arkansas.

- Build a database of media contacts, including names of editors/reporters, their mailing address, phone, fax, and e-mail.
- Establish relationships with key media representatives. Let them know you are someone who can be counted on for straightforward, accurate information about economic development plans in your community. That includes being accessible to them.
- When contemplating a particular issue, nail down your message concisely in writing. What IS your position? How do you defend it? Rehearse stating your position clearly.
- Deliver a consistent message. If practical, appoint one individual to be the spokesperson, and let them do the talking. In any case, remember item 3.
- In an interview, know your agenda. Don't be evasive, but steer your comments back to the points YOU want to make. If it's a television interview, remember, you may talk for 10 minutes, but only five seconds or so will make the evening news. Concentrate on giving them a good five-second comment. Newspapers can go into more detail, but the same principal applies: Know your agenda and stick to it.
- If you don't know an answer – or just need time to think – say you're going to have to check some facts and get back to the reporter. Then do so, preferably within half an hour – certainly before the reporter's deadline. If you don't have the option to delay your response – such as in a live television interview – and you are stumped, simply say you don't know the answer to that question. Do not guess! Do not be led into speculating. And never be untruthful.
- If you have supporting documentation, like a news release, brochures, photographs, detailed facts and figures, etc., reporters appreciate this. But don't bury them with every printed piece off the shelf in your storeroom.
- Be sure your media contacts are on your newsletter mailing list. They're always looking for story ideas.
- Develop a sense of what's news. When you have news, pitch it to the media. When you don't, don't attempt to overstate what you do have.
- Understand that it's their media, not yours. You don't "put an article in the newspaper." You offer information and the newspaper runs what it thinks it should.

Remember that, like you, the newspaper has an agenda, and that may include seeking out and reporting the views of your opposition.

- Do not rule out paid advertisement. News stories are worth more in terms of credibility, but, unlike news coverage, the content of ads is entirely under your control.
- Consider hiring a professional public relations and media firm in situations too large for your organization or community.

Shaping your image through effective media relations is a great way to win the support of your community. People want to be a part of a worthy effort. Make sure they know yours is deserving of their support.

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