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Maintaining Effective Media Relations

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ABSTRACT

The benefits of establishing and maintaining solid media relations are essential to a law enforcement agency to prevent misrepresentation by the media or unfavorable perception by the public. The question facing law enforcement is what can agencies do to establish and maintain good media relations. The author approached this problem by reviewing related articles in police journals, surveying 17 other police agencies and interviewing members of the media in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metropolitan area. The findings of the research revealed that most agencies do not provide sufficient police media relations to the entire organization. The findings also revealed that establishing media relation policies would provide for more positive interaction between law enforcement and the media. Law enforcement agencies must provide media relations training to all members of a department.

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Newspaper, television, radio and the Internet are mediums the public obtains an over whelming majority of the information they are bombarded with on a daily basis. This barrage of information can and does control decisions made by society with both positive and negative implications. An examination of recent national news events can show that the media outlets do have some type of control over citizen actions. Consider the impact of the 9/11 news coverage. The problem encountered by law enforcement is how to safeguard information that cannot be released and at the same time satisfy the media.

The members of news media and law enforcement each have a responsibly to the public to ensure they provide the most accurate information possible. However, when an inaccuracy occurs, the public will judge law enforcement more harshly than the media. Law-enforcement must provide correct information in a timely manner and in a manner that the media understands it. How information is presented to and received by the media make up what is referred to as “media relations.”

The issue facing law enforcement is working with media so that both can get their jobs done. Sometimes this seems like an impossible task because of the antagonistic relationship that is created from time to time. This issue is not the problem of any one side and seems to be manifested, in part, by what is necessary for each side to accomplish their job.

Often, law enforcement officials do not always want information reported to the general public while protecting the integrity of an investigation and sometimes to avoid embarrassment. Conversely, news media representatives work under the premise that the public has a right to know regardless of how law-enforcement officials feel (Brooks,

1999). The issues affecting relations between the media and law-enforcement is not simple to maintain. When the relationship is damaged, particularly if it appears it is part of a cover up by law-enforcement, it is nearly impossible to repair. These incidents have a negative impact on other law-enforcement agencies because the media goes on the hunt to find or create related stories.

It takes a continual effort by law-enforcement and media to ensure that each is able to perform their jobs effectively. Understanding that each can only effectively control their actions, and not the other's, is essential to understanding this relationship. Most importantly, law-enforcement must understand that anything with which an agency is remotely involved has a chance to be seen on the 5 o'clock news. Are your agencies prepared to provide information to the media for an interview? Would any agency prefer an in depth series of stories that make individual officers and departments appear incompetent or unethical?

This research will examine articles published in law-enforcement journals, surveys of other Texas law-enforcement agencies and interviews of members of the media in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. The purpose of this research is to help an agency identify the aspects of its media relation philosophy and to provide a "tool box" of ideas that can be incorporated to avoid some of the pitfalls that can damage media relations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In a perfect world each party involved would be accountable for their own actions. They would be able to count on one another to provide unbiased information for the purpose of providing accurate information to the public. This is not a perfect world and the "buck" stops with any agency when things go south. A question that can be

addressed is whether or not an agency's media relations philosophy facilitates a problem if there are persistent issues with the media.

The general consensus of the literature reviewed seems to focus on one resounding idea. The successfulness of the relationship an organization has with the media is directly related to the continued focus and efforts to ensure it succeeds. In other words, it is something that needs to be worked on everyday.

Organizations must understand that the media will always get in the last word. They get in the last word because they buy their ink by the barrel and any three minute interview can become a ten second sound bite that was edited to meet the goal of a storyline (Tyler, 2001). Keeping this thought in mind it is easy to see how establishing good media relations is vital.

Establishing a departmental policy to deal with members of the media is one way to ensure a non-adversarial relationship with them. Although no policy is ever going to be an absolute for every situation, it will provide an organization with a reference point. The policy should at least establish these basic points:

1. It designates the person responsible for releasing information to the news media. This person is known as the Public Information Officer, or P.I.O.
2. It designates an alternate person who acts on behalf of the P.I.O. in his absence. This person is usually the most senior on-duty officer.
3. Direct officers to refer new media inquiries to the P.I.O.

Finally, it is important to remember, the policy needs to be understood by every member of the department (Woodall, 1998). It may also be beneficial to share aspects of it with the media. This can be done in a revised format detailing the areas that are specific to them.

Several authors agree that having a PIO can create solid media relations. The importance of having personnel trained to specifically deal with the media is critical to effective media relations regardless of agency size. This ensures that each media group is receiving the same information and not receiving ten different bits of information from ten different sources. (Tyler, 2001). This can be viewed as a one voice concept.

There will be times when the PIO will not be the most beneficial person to relay information to the media. In these instances the PIO will assume a liaison role between the departmental speaker(s) and the media (Woodall, 1998). The PIO's role will be to make sure that the chief, detective or other speaker is prepared and should develop list of possible media questions. The ability of a PIO to determine from the specific topic of the interview the type of questions that may be asked allows you to decide on the person who will be suited to respond to the media (Vance, 1997).

Another important role of the PIO in media relations that is sometimes overlooked is networking with PIO's from other agencies. Networking allows PIO's to compare media strategies. This should include PIO's from other local, state and federal agencies including schools, hospitals, county health, electric coops, FEMA etc. This will assist an agency with coordinating PIO responsibilities in a large scale situation (Hilte, 2001).

Departments should also look at training issues. A "rookie" officer on the scene of an incident who provides information to a reporter or if witnesses are allowed to be interviewed by the media before detectives interview them can have detrimental effects. First line officers need to have an understanding that the media will show at the scene. These same first line officers need to know how to intervene when reporters attempt to cross police barriers in an attempt to contact a witness or get a better shot of the crime

scene. Front line officers are whom the media is interested in getting on film when they first arrive on scene and any misguided comments or actions will appear on the evening news (Parrish, 1993). This instance often forces a department into some degree of damage control and can jeopardize media relations.

Finally, the reviewed literature seems to be in agreement on the following for promoting media relations:

1. Be positive and confident not irritated or angry when dealing with the media (Order & Freeman, 1997).
2. Be very cautious if you choose to speak "off the record". Critical information not made generally available can create serious problems and should only be considered when there is a strong relationship with a reporter (Toohey, 2001).
3. Top administrators should be available to the media, especially during serious incidents (Behm & Teuber, 2001).
4. PIO should promptly return phone calls to the media and respect deadlines (Tyler, 2001).
5. Departments should focus on being proactive. Contact members of the media before they call you to inform them of incidents and upcoming events (Tyler, 2001).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the paper is to aid law-enforcement in understanding the importance of media relations and identify general steps they need to take to accomplish this goal. Specifically to answer the question about how law enforcement can work more efficiently with media so that both can get their jobs done. In a society that is saturated by 24/7 news cycle from numerous sources it is crucial to make sure

that the information is reported in an unbiased manner. A key component in accomplishing this task is positive relation between the members of the media and law-enforcement (Onder, 1994).

To better understand how the two sides view one another, media and law-enforcement, surveys of law enforcement officers and members of the news media were conducted. The surveys included a sampling of 17 law-enforcement agencies in Texas and interviews with six reporters from different news outlets in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. The results revealed one encompassing problem that critically affect media relations, a lack of or very limited training on how deal with the media to promote a positive relationship.

FINDINGS

After the completion of the survey it was revealed that five of the 17 departments conducted media relations training. A majority of those agencies that conduct such training only provided it to department administrators or PIO's, not to front line officers. The survey did reveal that 13 of the 17 agencies do have personnel assigned as PIO's and that all but one of those felt their department has a good relationship with the media. However, historically speaking, this relationship could be in jeopardy do to lack of media relations training.

This training does not need to cover how to write media fact sheets or how to set-up a room for a press conference. The training should cover those factors that effect media relation. Officers, especially supervisors, on the scene of an incident should know how to set up a staging area for media, know what basic information that can be released and know when to contact the PIO.

This importance of media relations is also supported by the information provided by reporters in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. In an interview with Sophie Kim with WB33 News, she stated that media relations' training is crucial to establishing an understanding between the media and law enforcement. Kim states, "It [training] gives the officer an understanding of our job and visa versa. We usually hear that officers don't like talking to the media because we always distort the truth or sensationalize. I think that if officers understood us, they would be more media friendly." Kim's statements of understanding are a constant echo though out the media community.

Another aspect of media relations that was important to the members of the media who responded the survey is the use of "off the record" communication. The use of "off the record" communication is not recommended in most basic law enforcement media relation training courses. However, from a law enforcement viewpoint, it is useful when explaining why information has to be withheld or when requesting that a reporter delay going to print with certain information (Toohey 2001). Ben Tensley, a reporter with the Fort Worth Star Telegram states, "this [off the record information] helps when you [reporters] have to explain to your editors why a story cannot immediately be released or why information [from law enforcement] is being withheld." Tensley also states that he must have a relationship built on trust with a PIO or law enforcement agency before he feels comfortable defending "off the record" information to his editor. In light of these media responses, it is apparent that media relations is crucial to all parties involved and that training to promote it should be implemented by law enforcement.

Although a majority of the agencies surveyed indicated that they provide media relations training, it is done only on a limited basis. There concern is that training is

never or inadequately disseminated throughout the organization. It is this same type of training that the responding media personnel advised was important to establishing a relationship built on trust.

Law enforcement needs to approach media relations in the same manner that you would make a friend. “Everyone wants to be liked and have friends. Reporters are no different. Respect the many good ones, learn how tough their job really is, and be both available and creditable” (Staszak, 2002). This philosophy is the keystone of establishing a solid relationship in today’s news driven society.

The findings also indicated several ideas to avoid confrontation between law enforcement and the media. The ideas have been combined from various sources and are included as Appendix 1. Appendix 1 is designed to be used as resource guide to promote media relations for members of an organization.

This resource guide is broken down into two sections. Section one is for PIO’s or members of an organization who regularly have contact with the media in a controlled setting. It is relevant when dealing with routine media calls, releases, press conferences etc. Section two applies to contacts at the scene of an incident. The purpose of this guide is to provide the user with tips that will assist them during a media contact.

Section one covers the majority of media contacts. This section is intended to provide a member of a law enforcement agency with the basic mechanics to create a positive media encounter. It is broken down into three subsections: routine media calls, one on one interviews and news conferences. This section nor is any part of this guide intended to supercede any departmental policy, state or federal law concerning the release of information.

Section two, although brief, is important as the officer on the scene of a incident is often the initial contact person for media. This section is designed to give guidance to officers on how best direct the media when they arrive at a scene. It also addresses some the mannerism that should be avoided by officers. This guide helps identify some of the pitfalls that jeopardize relations between law-enforcement and the media. It was also meant to provide a “tool box” of ideas that can be incorporated by a law enforcement agency to promote positive interaction or strengthen its relationship the media.

During the course of completing this research paper several of the issues were addressed by Flower Mound Police Department’s PIO. One specific incident which provided a relevant case study, dealt with a juvenile suspect who resided in a neighboring jurisdiction but attended a school in the Town of Flower Mound. The juvenile was under investigation for possession of bomb making materials.

The neighboring jurisdiction created serious media issue for the Flower Mound Police Department by releasing information regarding plans by the juvenile to infiltrate the environmental system of the school. This information sent parents and the media groups into a frenzy about anthrax in the air-conditioning system. It took numerous phone conversations and several interviews with members of the media explain the reason the Flower Mound Police Department had not released such critical information concerning the school’s environmental system. This problem occurred because the information was misrepresented to the media in a release by the other agency. The other agency had referred to the toilets as parts of the environmental system of the school and the plan involved flushing firecrackers down the toilet. This task was time consuming and could of looked like a cover up; however, it was easy to explain because

the relationship between the Flower Mound Police Department and local media. Incidents like this are why it is important to build media relations and why agencies should adopt guidelines to promote media relations.

The research outlined in this paper clearly supports the benefits of establishing a good working relationship between the law enforcement community and the media. It is important that agencies establish a media program in their organization that fosters this relationship and enhances the community's perception of law enforcement (Onder 1994). After a review of current information, it is evident that media relations training plays an important role in accomplishing this goal.

CONCLUSIONS

The research in this paper illustrates the issue affecting relations between the media and law-enforcement. It identifies that it is not simple to maintain but is achievable with proper planning and training to strengthen this relationship allowing each group to accomplish a favorable outcome. The goal of the research was to take the viewpoints of each side to determine what actions can be taken by law enforcement to prevent or limit the likelihood of problems occurring. Reviewing related articles in current periodicals and media practices of the Flower Mound Police Department then validated these viewpoints. The result of the project was the creation of a media guide to be utilized as reference during contacts with the media.

In today's news driven society that is filled with 20 second sound bites and news briefs it is more crucial than ever to adopt a philosophy to ensure that law enforcement maintains a policy with media to foster trust (Brooks 2003). Law enforcement has to understand media is going to fill its allocated airtime and print space. The media will always go on the offensive when situations arise in an organization that creates an air of

deceit or the possibility of a cover-up. When these situations arise they can be damaging to the law-enforcement community as a whole not just the just the responsible agency. These situations create public distrust for law enforcement, can have enormous monetary cost, devastate department morale, and destroy an organization relationship with media for years (Tyler, 2001).

The research contained in this paper does have two possible identified deficiencies. First, it did does not include a cross section of media outlets from across the state. Second, no large metropolitan agencies were included in the survey. Additionally, only 5% of the nation's law enforcement agencies have more than 50 officers and very large metropolitan have well established media polices. Therefore, it is not believed that these two possible deficiencies would have affected the outcome of the research but it should be considered as an unknown variable when reviewing this document.

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APPENDIX

Routine/Daily Media Procedures

- Review the blotter from the previous shifts
- Be prepared address calls you feel may peak a reporter interest.
- Return all calls to the media promptly
- Never make a guess or give opinions
- Give reporters a call back time if you have to research information
- Be aware of reporter's deadlines.
- If your send out a media release, send it to everyone.
- Provide reporters with an alternated contact number.
- Provide reporters with alternated contact person in you absence
- Update immediate supervisor of media releases in accordance with policy

Critical Incidents

- Get update from scene supervisor while en-route
- Set-up media staging area
- Ask scene supervisor to assign a media liaison
- The main PIO should avoid acting as liaison
- Verify all information for accuracy
- Coordinate information to be released with Incident Commander
- Provide timely updates (frequency depends on incident)
- Stick to the information and do not be swayed by the media
- Never be afraid to ask for HELP. Some incidents are too big for one PIO
- Remember, you're just doing your job. So are they.