

Get the Word Out

News Releases

Media Contact

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: A high tech snow plow will be used to clear city streets faster and more safely this winter.

Complaints

Elected Officials

Radio/T.V./Print

Public Speaking

Public relations tips for transportation agencies

Introduction

As an employee with a local transportation agency, you probably realize how much good (and bad) public relations can affect your job. When your agency has a positive reputation with the public, you can get your job done more easily and with fewer hassles than when your agency is constantly receiving negative criticism from the public or the media.

So how do you develop good public relations? It won't happen overnight, but this collection of tips is a place to start. You'll learn how to deal with the media, especially how to develop story ideas, where to send them, and how to write more effective news releases. You'll also learn from other transportation professionals about handling complaints, speaking to the public, and working with elected officials.

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*Center for Transportation
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IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Radio/T.V./Print

You don't need to be a journalist to sniff out a good transportation story. "A desire to have knowledge and a desire to share it are all that's needed to develop story ideas," says Clare Bills, the City of Ames public relations officer.

Bills tries to accommodate reporters by always having story ideas ready such as major construction sites, household hazardous waste days, and the city snow ordinance. She also has a "media box" in her office which functions as a sort of information center for reporters from the local newspapers and radio and TV stations. She sticks press releases, brochures, and anything else of possible interest in the media box. Reporters have an excuse to stop by her office and check their box.

Story County Engineer Harold Jensen says he tries to keep story ideas in mind too, such as a safety project or a new program. He also likes to suggest something unusual. When the county planned to have aerial photographs taken of the entire county by using global positioning systems surveying, Jensen contacted newspaper reporters so they could witness some of the surveying.

Jensen suggests ideas to local reporters about a dozen times a year. He also provides reporters attending board of supervisors meetings with the same reports, minus any confidential information, that he gives board members.



Developing a
nose for news

Keep a list of story ideas somewhere handy, like near the phone, so you always know where they are in case a reporter calls you looking for a story.

Other potential story ideas include the following:

- valuable employees
- safety tips for driving through work zones
- special training your employees receive
- recent innovations
- employee participation in a snow plow or motor grader rodeo
- adoption of new policies that help you serve your constituents better
- how new equipment will help your employees work more efficiently and safely

Story ideas are opportunities to educate the public about what a good job your agency is doing.

Once you've got some good ideas, the key to seeing them turned into radio or TV sound bites or newspaper ink is understanding what kinds of stories these different media want and need.

How many projects has your organization completed in the last year that you've told the media about?

Radio and TV: the immediate media

Think for a minute about the weather. Weather becomes a radio or TV station's lead story when a severe winter storm closes roads or flash flooding washes out a bridge. Weather is of immediate interest, especially when it creates a safety hazard (and exciting video).

Since radio and TV cover events as they're happening, that's where people turn for immediate information. Obviously weather-related transportation stories will be covered whether or not the station is contacted by a transportation agency. But it doesn't hurt to contact radio and TV stations even if reporters are already warning people not to travel.

Jensen called radio and TV stations during a late winter blizzard to urge people to stay home because roads were too dangerous. Coming from a transportation official, Jensen's comments probably reinforced the warnings of a TV reporter doing a live shot from the side of a snowed-in highway.

New to your job? Make sure you visit with reporters on your beat.

Besides emergencies, radio and TV reporters are interested in what's going on right now. The beginning or ending of massive construction projects is usually newsworthy, and to encourage news coverage, you can give reporters plenty of notice beforehand. A good corollary story may be the new safety equipment road workers will be using. Reporters can be receptive to story ideas that encourage safety in and around work zones.

Reporters aren't always looking for "dirt." Don't let the stereotypes of journalists pollute how you interact with them.

TV coverage will probably be harder to get for most local transportation agencies in Iowa who don't share a city or county with a TV station. TV reporters may not think a rural county's story idea has enough relevance for their audience. TV stories fight for space on the nightly news. Stories are typically short, about two minutes or less. A typical 30-minute TV newscast, when printed on paper, takes up less space than the front page of a newspaper. Some days are slow news days, however, so that's when it can pay to have a story idea ready.

City and county transportation agencies will have a better chance of getting their stories on the air with local radio stations. Radio stations play a vital news role, especially in areas where local TV news coverage is minimal, and radio reporters can respond quickly to story ideas.

Do you have reporters' names in your Rolodex?

Newspapers: in-depth coverage

What newspapers lack in immediacy, they can make up for with depth of reporting. Newspapers are much more likely

*Assume anything you say
to reporters is “on the
record.”*

to cover smaller stories such as a city’s new street cleaning machine or a county road department’s safety program. City council meetings and board of supervisor meetings are often attended by newspaper reporters.

Newspapers are great outlets for information you want people to know but which they don’t need to know right now. Examples include a reminder to residents about when and where the snow ordinance is in effect or a story about how well city crews cleaned up the streets after a big storm.

Contacting the media

*Keep track of the story
ideas you’ve suggested to
reporters so you’re
prepared with more details
when they call.*

For emergency-related information, call or fax radio and TV stations. For non-emergency stories, you may want to fax a news release (see the article about writing news releases on page 5) including your contact information so reporters can call you back.

If you’d like to cultivate more general radio coverage, Bills suggests physically visiting radio reporters and advertising people. This would be an effective approach with newspaper editors and reporters too. Call or fax news releases to the newspaper reporter assigned to the city hall or government beat. If you like how a story turns out, let the reporter know that.

Media Contact

When a reporter calls you out of the blue, it's nice to know a few things before giving an interview.

- What is the reporter's name and organization?
- What is the reporter's deadline?
- What is the reason for the interview request? In other words, what's the nature of the story?
- Who else has the reporter interviewed for the story?
- Has the reporter done any other research?
- How much time or space will the story have?

For the broadcast media, find out if the interview will be live or taped. If it's live, make sure you're comfortable thinking on your feet. You might want to practice possible questions and answers.

If you'd like some time to gather your thoughts before granting an interview, tell the reporter you'll call back at a specific time, and then do so. He or she is probably working on a deadline.

Keep your remarks short and to the point. Reporters love snappy quotes and lively turns of phrase. Instead of saying "no comment," briefly explain why you can't answer a question.

When they call you

If you can speak with colorful frankness to reporters, you'll become a sought-after source.

Many reporters gather information over the phone. They are required by law to inform you if you're being recorded. If you're not sure, ask.

If you have supporting documents that may flesh out the story, offer to fax or mail them to the reporter. This will help the reporter get the facts right.

News Releases

Once you get the hang of writing them, news releases are a quick, simple way for you to inform the news media, and ultimately the public, about interesting transportation issues in your city or county.

Basic writing tips

It's unlikely that a reporter will use your news release as written, mainly because writing is his or her job. So you don't have to be an outstanding writer. You just need to sell your story ideas well. With that in mind, realize that your first audience is the reporter, not your constituents. Grab the reporter's attention from the very first sentence. A startling fact, a colorful quote, or visually descriptive language generates reader interest. Be certain, however, that your "hook" also provides important information.

To help you decide what you should include in the news release, answer the journalist's questions of who, what, where, and when in the first two paragraphs. Answering the question why may also be important. After the primary information, provide supporting details in their order of importance with additional but not critical information followed by background and peripheral information. Journalists are familiar with this inverted pyramid form for a story and will be able to pick out what they need easily.

Writing effectively

News releases are usually read by reporters or editors. Write for them, not for your constituents.

By typing “news release” at the top, you easily identify the kind of information for the people you send it to.

Giving your news release a title helps readers know the subject instantly.

Prepare a news release template so you can write a news release in the proper format in just a few minutes.

Don't go overboard on the details. News releases should be brief; aim for two pages or less. Present your information objectively. News releases are factual pieces, not editorials. Opinions should be in quotation marks and clearly attributed to someone specific.

Use active verbs not passive verbs when you write. Compare the following sentences:

- 1) The snow plow was driven by the most experienced operator.
- 2) The most experienced operator drove the snow plow.

The first sentence is flabby. The second example gets right to the point. Active verbs help readers form a picture in their minds.

Avoid technical jargon too. You may want to ask someone who can give you honest feedback to read your news release to make sure you're being clear.

Formatting the news release

Your news release should be typed on 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper. Office letterhead works well. Include the date and time the material should be released to the public in the upper left-hand corner. Also include where the news release originated and the name and phone number of the contact person.

Start the text of the news release about one-third of the way down the page. Double space the text and use wide margins. If the release runs more than one page, type “MORE” at the bottom of each page and “-30-” or “###” at the bottom of the last page. At the top of each subsequent page, type a brief headline to identify the subject matter.

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NEWS RELEASE

May 1, 1996

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Restricted Access Roads

TAMA, Iowa -- Governor Branstad has signed a bill passed during the 1996 legislative session which allows counties, in cooperation with landowners, to restrict public access to certain Level B (dirt) roads. This legislation had been sought by the Iowa County Engineers Association and the Iowa State Association of Counties as a way to reduce the damage done to dirt roads by recreational drivers and yet protect the access needs of those who own or farm the land adjacent to these roads.

Beginning July 1, 1996, those who own or farm the land along those roads in Tama County may ask the Tama County Board of Supervisors to reclassify a Level B road to Level C. If the request is approved, the Tama County Secondary Road Department will furnish and install a gate (two 16-foot panels) to restrict access to the road, provide keys to those parties having a need for access, and furnish and install suitable signing to warn motorists that access is limited.

Anyone who currently owns or farms land accessed by a Level B road and who is interested in learning more about the Level C option should contact the Tama County Engineer's Office, 1002 E. 5th Street, Tama, Iowa 52339, 515-484-3341.

Do you regularly take photos of interesting construction projects, maintenance activities, and other events?

If you want media coverage of an annual event, sending a few photos of last year's event along with your news release might inspire the media to cover the event this year.

Worth a thousand words

Sometimes reporters won't cover events you feed them, but with newspaper reporters you can try again afterward. Along with another news release describing the highlights of the event, include photos. Candid action shots, rather than posed shots, work well. Provide the newspaper editor with several angles so he or she can choose. For example, if your employees participate in a snowplow rodeo, take photos of the drivers maneuvering through the course and send the photos along with the news release. Tape a caption to the back of the photo, name all the people from left to right, and briefly describe the activity. Make sure you also refer to your department in the caption in case your photo gets printed without your story. Maps or diagrams can be effective graphics too.

Complaints

Like pesky dandelions, complaints from residents keep cropping up. Your office does the best it can by handling complaints over the phone, but a written log may not be kept consistently and sometimes no one gets back to the caller.

Is there another way to handle complaints? You bet.

Instead of waiting to hear complaints, the city of Indianola, Iowa, solicits public input through citizen work orders and traffic work orders. In 1996 Mayor Jerry Kelley created a citizen work order form for residents to let their government know what needs fixing.

Tim Zisoff, Indianola's city manager, says the city received 50–60 work orders about problems like potholes and trash in the parks. Initially, he believes, residents expressed their pent-up demands. Once those problems were resolved, work orders slowed to a trickle, Zisoff says, but they go in cycles.

“Probably about as important as anything is keeping the resident informed,” Zisoff says.

Once a work order is received, the city writes to the resident within a few days explaining whether the request will or will not be acted on. Some requests for stop signs, for

Thanks for
complaining

*Rapid, polite response is
the key to handling
complaints.*

example, are judged unnecessary after staff and committee reviews show a lack of accidents and/or speed in the area. In these cases, the letter explains why the city won't fulfill the request. After an approved request has been routed to the appropriate department and is taken care of, the city sends a second letter describing what was done to correct the problem and thanking the resident for his or her input.

*Document every complaint
and its disposition.*

In addition to complaints, the city receives some good suggestions, such as extending an existing sidewalk to connect to a trail. The city liked that idea and built the sidewalk.

The city has received 25–35 legitimate traffic work orders. Most deal with stop signs, blocked vision, and parking. Some of the stop sign requests go to the traffic committee.

*Spring and summer are
good times to solicit
complaints and
suggestions because more
people are outside to spot
problem areas.*

The city advertises the work orders in its quarterly newsletter, which is sent to all residents. The work order is also available at city hall and at several local public places such as grocery stores.

The form is a simple one-page sheet with spaces for the resident's name, address, and complaint or suggestion.

You probably already do a good job of resolving residents' complaints. You've just got to let them know what you're doing about it.

Public Speaking

Presenting your ideas, plans, and suggestions to the city council or board of supervisors is probably a regular part of your job. Have you thought about taking your show on the road?

Speaking to local organizations can be a good way to develop public support for your department. Community groups like the Kiwanis Club or the Lions Club are often looking for speakers. Speaking to a group of people who know next to nothing about transportation, however, may require a different approach.

Tips on content

The first concern of many speakers is what they're going to talk about. While you may know exactly what you want to say, stop to consider your audience's needs and interests before writing your speech. Who will make up your audience, and what are they interested in listening to? Are they business people concerned about the installation of parking meters in front of their businesses? Are they engineers interested in Iowa's transportation history?

Stan Ring, CTRE's library coordinator, has given many speeches over the years to service organizations, church groups, and even a high school reunion. The key to good



Speak up!

The group who has asked you to speak may have a subject in mind they'd like you to address.

What do you look like when giving a speech? Try videotaping yourself beforehand. You may be surprised at the unconscious habits and gestures you use.

How many filler words do you use (um, uh)? Practice your speech with a tape recorder to help identify spots in your speech where fillers creep in.

speaking, Ring says, is to fit the material to your audience so people can understand and relate to your topic.

Once you have some ideas about who your audience is, your speech's purpose will be clearer. Do you want to inform, entertain, or persuade your audience? You can certainly use a mixture of two or three, but you should have one overriding purpose. Ring says his talks on bicycle safety are mainly informative, and his speeches on Iowa transportation history are informative but primarily entertaining.

With an audience and a purpose firmly in mind, you can begin to shape your content. Don't try to talk about too many different things. Focus on a single main theme.

Ring also recommends tailoring the length of your talk to fit the subject and audience. "Find out when they expect the speech to end and keep this schedule," he says.

Tips on delivery

Being a good speaker doesn't mean you have to fire off one-liners. In fact, use humor only when it's appropriate or relevant. Being a good speaker means you engage your audience and keep them interested. It does not mean that you read your speech. It's too easy for your voice to slip into a monotone as you read, making your audience doze off.

Don't even write out the whole speech. That just tempts you to memorize it word for word, and if you forget where you are you have a harder time getting back on track. Use notes with key words and phrases. Practicing your speech

with note cards will make you more relaxed and comfortable than reading anyway.

Show your enthusiasm. Use gestures and facial expressions when they're natural for you. Move around the room (take your note cards with you if necessary). Don't hide behind a lectern all the time.

Using visual aids

Handouts are extremely effective visual aids. They give your audience more information than overhead transparencies or PowerPoint presentations can. They also give your audience a place to turn if their attention lags. Handouts are a record of your speech that audience members may take with them. This can be particularly important if you're giving a persuasive speech and you want your audience to act on what you've said.

Include your name, address, and phone number for later contact on your handouts.

Other forms of visual aids should be used sparingly and purposefully. Overhead transparencies or PowerPoint presentations can easily become a crutch if all they do is outline your speech. You've probably heard speakers read each transparency to you verbatim. Use transparencies to provide something extra to your speech, such as color images, that would be impractical to hand out.

Do you want to use PowerPoint because it adds something spectacular to your talk or because it gives you something to do with your hands?

Images, in the forms of overhead transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, slides and/or video, can be very effective when they are directly relevant to your speech. When Ring speaks about transportation history, he shows slides of old construction sites. The slides "show Iowa getting out of the mud," Ring says.

*How do your visual aids
help your audience
understand your main
point better?*

The images you use should somehow enhance the purpose of your speech. For example, showing dramatic before and after shots of a bridge that suffered from scour and then was washed away in a flood would prove your point more easily than simply describing the damage.

Not everyone is a born speaker, but with practice you'll enhance your speaking skills. You'll also get to know your constituents better, and they'll get to know you.

Elected Officials

Maintaining a positive, professional relationship with elected officials requires good communication. That's a given. Attending regular board or council meetings is the typical way transportation professionals communicate with their elected officials.

Council Bluffs Public Works Director Mike Wallner has another idea. Informal study sessions are the key, he says. Council members get answers to their questions before they have to vote on issues during their regular meetings. Because of the success of the study sessions, Wallner says, "I have not had to attend a council meeting this year."

Honesty is also important, Wallner says. The city council or board of supervisors needs to trust the advice of its transportation professionals. County engineers and public works directors also need to trust their elected officials to do what's needed and necessary in the long run.

To establish trust you need a common level of understanding with elected officials, says Duane Smith, CTRE's associate director for outreach and former assistant traffic engineer in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Smith says the Colorado Springs public works staff would invite newly elected council members to visit their facilities. They would discuss the public works budget and equipment, tour the facilities, and meet the managers. That way when public

Working together

works issues came before the city council, members were already familiar with the people, the money, and the work involved.

Educating elected officials

How do newly elected officials learn about your agency?

Occasionally elected officials may require “more coaching” about the need for a project, Wallner says. That was the case with an expensive, major renovation of a waste water plant. The city council didn’t immediately understand why the project was necessary or so costly. For the majority of projects, Wallner says, the Council Bluffs City Council understands the need and timing for a project.

When you want to present a major, complex project to your council or board, step into their shoes for a few minutes. What do they need to know to understand why this project is needed?

Lee County Engineer Dennis Osipowicz uses a lot of “supportive data to answer questions.” When the county had the funds to buy a sign truck, he learned that the company that makes them had a used one for sale with 8,000 miles on it. He did an economic analysis comparing the costs and benefits of buying a new sign truck versus a used one. The county bought the used one because it was the best buy.

Osipowicz points out that his board is “willing to spend money” if the project is worthwhile. His staff likes to try new ideas. The board thought a heater scarification system for asphalt sounded like a good idea. It saved \$10,000 to \$12,000 per mile on a 10-mile paving project, a significant savings for Lee County.

Avoiding micromanagers

Osipowicz says he inherited a board whose philosophy is that each department head runs his or her department without day-to-day involvement by the board. This hands-off approach has become a sort of tradition and is passed

on by experienced board members to new members. Osipowicz credits the board itself for developing this easygoing style.

To prevent micromanaging by a board, Osipowicz says it helps to cultivate the attitude that “that’s what you hired me for—I’m the professional.” But insisting too forcefully can also endanger your job. To keep a board or city council from micromanaging requires a tactful balancing act.

Political promises

The stereotypical politician is a short-term thinker who only cares about getting re-elected. This is a rare breed in Iowa.

Osipowicz’s three-person board of supervisors responds well to long-range planning. “They keep projects in sequence” according to the county’s five-year program. In fact, the board uses the program as a way of not promising things it can’t provide to constituents, Osipowicz says.

Making promises prematurely is often how elected officials, despite their good intentions, create problems for their county engineers or public works directors. When elected officials make promises, sometimes public works directors can’t avoid “playing the political game a little bit,” Wallner says, particularly in a ward system of city government rather than a system where members serve at-large. When council members represent specific sections of a city, they feel more pressure to do what constituents want. The council members then pressure the public works department to satisfy the constituents’ demands, even if doing so doesn’t fit into the city’s maintenance plan for that year.

If the project can be funded with the annual maintenance budget, Wallner says, then “just do it.” For projects requir-

*Be prompt and complete
in all your responses to
elected officials.*

ing capital expenditure, like laying five new blocks of pavement, then Wallner suggests working with a council member to find ways to secure funding and to garner support for the project from other council members.

Political decisions

Of course there's no guarantee the board or council will follow the engineer's advice. Smith recalls an example in Colorado Springs. A street with the highest accident rate in the city needed a left-turn lane. Accident studies and engineering design studies clearly showed the benefits of a left-turn lane. But the city council didn't like the project because a handful of homeowners would have lost on-street parking. Smith says the left-turn lane "made all kinds of engineering sense but not political sense." The project didn't go forward.

*Always try to be as open,
honest, and available as
possible for elected
officials.*

When a board or council wants to do something the engineer believes violates safety standards or ethics, Smith suggests keeping a file of all correspondence on the issue. This does two things: it keeps decision makers fully informed and it lets engineers provide supporting data later if needed. Beyond that, Smith says, you just have to move on.

Small governments aren't immune to politics. When Lee County needed to buy a new crawler-loader, Osipowicz put together a checklist rating various features like safety and hydraulics. He recommended a Caterpillar brand because he and his personnel felt it was the best overall. The board decided to purchase a John Deere brand instead because it was American-made.

"It became a political decision," Osipowicz says, but overall he's "been extremely fortunate" to have the board he does.

"We're there to serve the public," Osipowicz says of himself, his staff, and the board.