



A NEWSLETTER FOR LIBRARY TRUSTEES *WITHIN THE PIONEER LIBRARY SYSTEM*

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Your Message and the Media: Staying Concise, Consistent and Ensuring Accurate Coverage

by Kimberly A. Iraci

Neighboring libraries and their policies have been a hot topic in the local media this spring. Though it would be impossible to cover every media scenario, here are some tips and tricks I learned as a former news producer and assignment editor that can help to ensure your library's coverage is the most accurate when the media calls for a quote.

Prior Planning

Decide in advance who can officially speak for the library: the director, the president of the Board of Trustees, and/or department heads. Once the media call chain has been established, it will be easier for staff and board members to refer a reporter to the appropriate source. This is best ironed out well before there is a story.

If a press release is being sent to the media, make sure all involved with the library, including trustees, are aware of the release or have received a copy in advance. This enables everyone to formulate a few quotes before the phone rings, or to make sure they are clear on the topic or the library's policy.

When a Reporter Calls

Often when a reporter calls, you are not even aware of the story they are working on with regard to the library. Most reporters are working on a deadline and are trying to get as much accurate information as possible to write their piece. Unless the reporter has been specifically assigned your library as their beat, it is very likely that they are trying to get up to speed on the issue and the library's involvement. When you take the call, listen closely to the story the reporter is working on and the issue that you are being asked to comment on. Then ask the reporter for their deadline.

Check to see who the reporter has spoken with already and if they will share their comments on the issue. It is then perfectly okay to say, "Well, I am in the middle an assignment for work," or "I have an appointment that I need to leave for right now," but promise to call back at an arranged time, leaving ample time before the deadline. If the reporter needs a quote within a few minutes since the article is going to press, you can also state that you will need a few minutes to review the library policy since you want to make sure you are giving them the most accurate information. Then make sure you promptly get back in touch with the reporter. This gives you some breathing room to formulate your comments. You can also draft your comments so you have some talking points at hand to stay focused during the interview.

If the story is being covered by the local television news, often a reporter and camera person will drop by your place of employment or the library hoping to get a few quick soundbites and some footage to be used in the piece. Depending on time available in the newscast, the story could be presented by a main anchor reading the facts of the story over the footage and a 10- to 15-second soundbite. Or, the story may feature footage, voice-over narration by the reporter and soundbites all edited into a package about a minute and a half long. In either case, the soundbites chosen by the reporter have to be succinct and get to the heart of the issue in a very short time, which brings us to the most-often-dreaded portion of the coverage—the interview.

The Interview

Most reporters are on a very tight schedule with several stories they need to file during their shift. They

Feature Topic: Your Message & the Media

will only have 10-20 minutes to gather your soundbites, shoot footage, and capture some patron or trustee comments.

Listen carefully to the questions being asked and take your time formulating your answer. Remember, for an on-camera interview they will only be using 10–15 seconds of what you have said, so choose your words wisely. A reporter may ask a leading question, such as “Why does your library allow people to have access to pornography on the internet? Don’t you think that is inappropriate for children to see?” Instead of answering this using the loaded words in the question, remember that the media can only use the words that you give them as a direct quote, so answer that type of question this way: “Our library has explored this policy in depth, and the Board created a policy that upholds the law as well as meets the information needs of our patrons. We use filtering software as required by federal law and disable that filtering only when an adult identifies a blocked site that is legal and meets our internet use policy. And although the library strives to be a safe place for all ages, parents should always monitor their children in public spaces including the library, the mall, the playground, etc.” At this point you can share with the reporter a written copy of your Board-approved policy. The reporter will probably counter with a question bringing the story back to the viewing and child issue. At this point you can once again say, “We have policies in place, and as much as we try to monitor a situation, sometimes people violate those policies. That is why we ask parents to accompany their children in the library, and for people to alert us to anything that appears to be a violation of policy or would impact their safety, so that we may address the situation.”

Often during an interview, banter will develop between you and the reporter. Be careful! Remember, *everything you say is on the record, even if it’s in casual conversation*. Also be careful of the reporter paraphrasing your comments. If you stated, “It will be a particularly difficult year for the library, given the current budget situation,” and the reporter counters with, “Are you saying the library will be in dire straits and staff cuts will need to be made?” Don’t agree with that statement unless *all* of it matches your response, or is how you want to be quoted in the article.

For on-camera interviews, be aware of what can be seen in the background and how it will come into play with the issue. Unless the issue is repairs or overcrowding, work with the camera person to select a neutral and professional looking area inside the library to use as a backdrop, or go outside and pick a flattering spot in front of the building.

Following the Interview

At the close of the interview, thank the reporter for contacting you, even if the story is controversial. It’s good that the media is trying to get both sides of the story and you are being asked for your view on the situation. If you are hostile during the interview or if you refuse to answer questions, this will be apparent in the coverage. It’s also a good idea to have a quick summary sheet or brochure about your library which you can hand the reporter, since this may be their first time covering your institution. Also, ask if the reporter has an e-mail address that you can use to send any follow-up information. Following the interview you may want to jot a quick note to the reporter, highlighting the points of the interview, along with your direct quotes and any post-contact information. Before sending it, have someone take a quick look at it to make sure everything is clear. By doing this immediately following the interview, you have a better chance of being quoted verbatim rather than taken out of context. The information can also solidify a reporter’s notes and increase accuracy.

At the close of the interview, you can ask who else the reporter is planning to talk to about the story. If another Board member or affiliate of the library is used, you may want to give them a quick call along with an overview of what you discussed, so everyone is on the same page.

Final Thoughts

The media look for tie-ins and stories that will strike a chord with viewers. They are also looking for compelling stories. During “sweeps weeks” in February, May, July and November, when ratings are compiled that set the broadcast media’s advertising rates, radio and television stations will air series that have an emotional or investigative nature to draw in viewers. These pieces will be put together several

weeks or months in advance, and reporters are often more secretive, since they don't want their competition to know what they are planning. For investigative pieces they often use hidden cameras and microphones placed in backpacks or thick-framed glasses to catch people off guard. Remember when you are speaking to anyone about your library or your role as a trustee, it has the potential to be quoted and be part of a story, even in the most casual of settings. Try to remain as positive and upbeat as possible, even if you do not agree with a decision the Board has voted on. It is often best to leave those disagreements in the Board room, rather than present a fragmented front to the public eye. You can say, "Yes, I voted against that measure, but the majority ruled in favor due to these key points and so that is the policy we are adopting."



Media Story Times

Have you ever sent a press release to the media about a big event at your library, only to receive no coverage? Wonder what happened? Obtaining media coverage and placement can be hit-or-miss, but here are a few key things to consider.

Press releases should be sent using the method preferred by the media outlet. In today's digital age many stations and newspapers have software that manages assignments and stores press releases in electronic format by the date of the event. The Assignment Editor reviews the file in advance and then again in the morning on the day of your event. In many cases local stations have an early morning meeting where final decisions are made on the stories that will be covered for the day. Again, these meetings usually take place by 9 a.m. and cover news up until the 6:00 p.m. cast.

For local television news coverage, our member libraries can be quite a distance from the station's base of operations. Often a station has only 3 or 4 news crews available, even on a weekday. They won't spread their crews too far from the home base in case a breaking story develops, so any story that is not a "hot topic" is risky to devote resources to, especially at a distance. If you can time your event to coincide with other news in your community, it might become worthwhile for the crew to travel to cover two stories within close proximity, or perhaps you can find a way to create a local tie-in with significant state or national events.

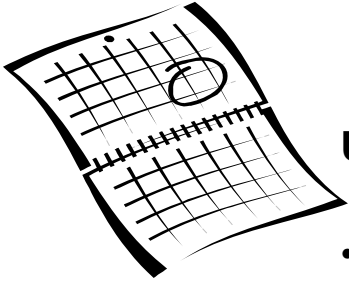
News crews gather the bulk of the day's coverage between the hours of 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. and often look for morning events that can freshen the noon newscast. For example, if your town is the birthplace of the Pledge of Allegiance, and

you have a special Flag Day story hour complete with smiling children, it might just be the carrot that entices the news crew. Offer the story hour at 11:30 with a celebration at noon and you just might get live coverage!

On weekends, local news coverage often gravitates to lighter stories. On Saturday and Sunday, you will often see a large portion of the day's coverage dedicated to fundraisers, community events and festivals. Weekend assignment editors searching for more in-depth topics usually start looking at press releases and lining up interviews on Thursday for the upcoming weekend. Again, distance from home base comes into play, since stations may have only two reporters available during the day and one in the evening. If you are offering an item for weekend coverage, make sure the press release has weekend phone numbers for interview contacts.

For print media, the Sunday newspaper has more sections and a greater audience for readership, lending itself to more in-depth coverage of topics. Many articles for the Sunday edition are feature pieces written a few days ahead of time with breaking news stories added on the day or eve of publication. Again, if you know of a particular event in your community, a tie-in will help ensure coverage.

Kim Iraci is the Communications, Advocacy and Outreach Librarian with the Pioneer Library System. In addition to her MLS, Kim has an undergraduate degree in Television-Radio from Ithaca College and formerly worked as a News Producer, Assignment Editor, and reporter for broadcast stations in Rochester and Ithaca.



Upcoming Workshops & Events:

- September 15, 2007
Trustee Essentials Workshop at Bloomfield Library
- October 10, 2007
Pioneer Library System 18th Annual Dinner
- November 3, 2007
Trustee Essentials Workshop at Town of
Gainesville Public Library, Silver Springs

<http://www.pls-net.org>

Click on Calendar of Events for details
and to register online



2557 State Route 21
Canandaigua, NY 14424
585-394-8260

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Executive Director:
Jennifer Morris
jmorris@pls-net.org

Editor: Kimberly A. Iraci
kiraci@pls-net.org

Layout and Design:
Jeanne Hayes

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