



They're Here!
How to Handle the Media
Tips & Best Practices for Law Enforcement & Government Officials

Chata Spikes
Director of Public Affairs – City of Atlanta Police Department



THEY'RE
HERE!

“I Don’t Talk to the Media!”

- ▶ “They’re a bunch of vultures”
- ▶ “All they want to do is embarrass you”
- ▶ “Only interested in the negative”

Facts About the Media



Not
going
away



By not talking is
not going to
make the
reporter go away

Why Don't We?



**Try to
understand
them**



**Learn how
they
operate**



**Learn how
they go
about their
business**



**Then,
maybe we
can
“Use Them”**

Then We Have To



**LEARN TO DEAL WITH
THE MEDIA**



**BUT REMEMBER, WE ARE
GOING TO DO IT ON OUR
TERMS**

Controversy/Crisis

Reporters will
always be on the
lookout for
controversy

Don't be the one
to provide it

Always think
before you
speak

Don't get "jammed"
thinking the
reporter's job is to
make you look good

Crime reduction,
new businesses,
community events
will do that!

Controversy/Crisis

**Controversy &
Crisis can last
1 day or 1 year!**

**Many people think
their issue is
everyone's issue!**

**During a crisis
everyone
becomes a
reporter!**

Is This
Really A
Crisis
Situation
?





**I Deal With Controversy & Crisis --DAILY!
YES! 24/7/365**

[VIDEO](#)

Hook

- ▶ Reporters will look for ways to “hook” a current incident to a previous story in another city/jurisdiction
 - ▶ Chase policy
 - ▶ Deadly force policy
 - ▶ Handcuff policy
 - ▶ Domestic abuse policy – “O.J. Simpson”
- ▶ Don’t play the “what if” game

Slant

Direction of the story

Reporter will usually have quotes from other sources on how bad the problem is

Don't be afraid to ask the reporter what direction his story is going

Never, never lie about a problem

I Never Thought It Would Happen to me—to us!

It's important to recognize that negative news can occur
in any area, at any time, day or night



Will you be ready when the media arrives?

Who speaks?

Have a plan

Have a backup



The first step to better media skills is to recognize the
above statement

I Never Thought It Would Happen to me—to us!

UTILIZE YOUR WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA
UPDATE



DON'T RUSH—but DON'T TAKE TOO LONG!

What's the problem

Who speaks?

What questions?



ESTABLISH WHERE YOU WILL HOLD YOUR PRESS CONFERENCE
WHO WILL BE THE POINT PERSON

Reporters Will Be Looking for Color

Example:

**The downed
tree on the
house**

The victims

**The
leader(s)**

AFTER THE STORM: Show and Tell What You're Doing to Fix the Problem

Provide the opportunity to show media, citizens, & stakeholders that you are working on the problem

Especially with TV, you must think visual.
Example:

Provide counseling to those impacted.
Provide assistance to the victims.

Think visual

Video

Answering Questions



Don't React

- Short, Direct Answers based on talking points/ key messages.



Refer

- I'm not the best person to answer that question.



Rephrase

- “What you’re asking is...”
- “The real issue is...”

Learn How to “Bridge”



The fact is...



The real question is...



The truth of the matter is...



What's more important is...

Bridging

Bridging

Allows you to redirect the question to a subject or key message that you want to discuss

- “...what’s important to know...”
- “...and what’s really important is...”
- “...what we’re really talking about here is...”
- “...and you should also know that...”

Redirecting

Redirecting

- Answers a question, but not necessarily the one asked
- Shifts the subject to one of your key messages

Q: You shut down a plant in a small town in the Midwest. What are you doing to get those people new jobs?

- A: That's a great question. The truth is, we had to make some tough decisions last year, which is how we were able to exceed our numbers this quarter. We expect to turn in another strong performance this quarter.

Pink Elephant

- ▶ If you don't want to see it in print,
 - ▶ Don't draw attention to it.....
 - ▶ Don't bring it up, because once you do, it's like a pink elephant

Never Forget

**You are
not the
story**

**The
event/incident
is the story**

**The
reporter's
thinking:**

**Why am
I here?**

**How much
time do I
have?**

**How much
play is this
going to
get?**

It's OK to Ask Reporters:



It is within your rights to ask the reporter to go back over his/her notes if you feel the reporter didn't fully understand your response



You can usually tell if the reporter doesn't fully understand the subject being discussed

Watch Out For...

Some reporters have been known to play officials off one another



Example:

**“I spoke to _____ and
he said _____”**

**“No, that’s not true, it
happened this way”**

Don't Forget

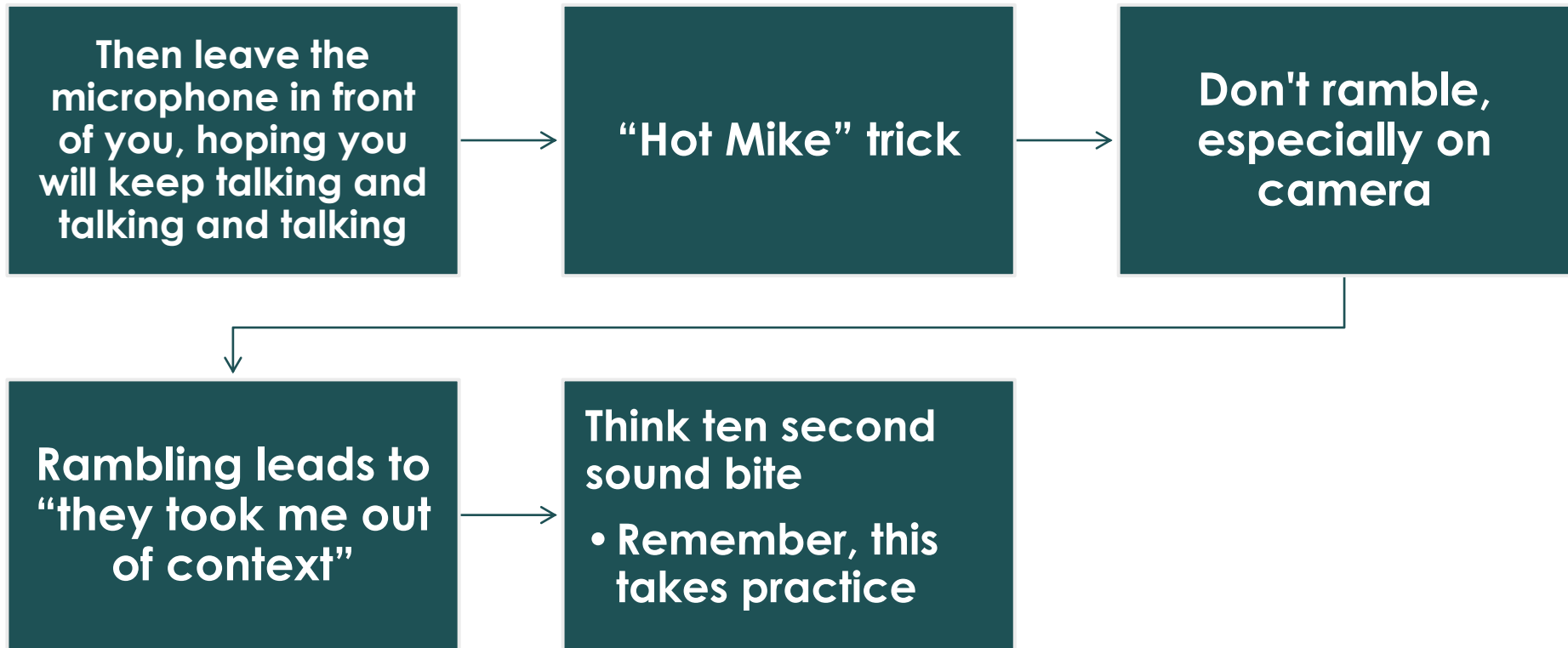
IT'S YOUR INTERVIEW



HAVE 2-3 "KEY" MESSAGES CLEARLY
IN YOUR MIND BEFORE YOU START
TALKING

IT'S OK TO REPEAT "KEY" MESSAGES

Be Aware



Reporters
Will Always
Ask
Questions
That You
Don't
Want to
Answer

Don't get mad at the reporters for asking tough questions. They are only doing their job



Don't get mad and play into their hand

This will provide color for their story

Talk In Soundbites



Say what makes a good quote



Reporters are always listening for good quotes



“Will it work in my story?”

Example:

- “The officers ran towards to the burning car, to rescue the children.”

No Comment

Saying “No Comment” and walking away from the camera presents a picture that the public often identifies with criminals



Not responding or being evasive will give the impression that the incident is more important than it really is



Why not try something to the effect:

“I’m sorry, it’s too early in the investigation to discuss your question. Hopefully, I can have something for you in the tomorrow.”

When You Don't Know



**Don't be afraid
to say
“I don't know,
but I will find
out and get
back with
you”**



**Don't make-up
something just
to make
yourself look
smart!**

**This tactic is
guaranteed to
blow-up in your face**



**Never,
never try to
“wing it”**



**Never,
never lie**

Tough Questions

“I don't have an answer for you at the moment.”

Let me check on that and then I'll respond. OK, next question”



It's always best to look the reporter in the face

- That way you can tell if you're clearly explaining your topic and does the reporter understand you



Be COVID Complaint

Use Technology: Zoom/Microsoft Teams



Does he/she have a quizzical look on their face?

- You can't see that over the phone



A quick fact over the phone is ok

Be Careful of the Telephone Interviews

Don't be Pressured

Don't be pressured into making a statement if you are not ready

Always get your facts together

There should be an initial statement, followed by several updates

Don't Be Pressured...Be Prepared

34

Reporter vs. Daycare Director



Stay Cool

- ▶ Some interviewers deliberately seek to provoke
- ▶ Don't take it personally
- ▶ It's just a technique to elicit more colorful information or controversial quotes
- ▶ Work on staying calm and unemotional
- ▶ Don't you become the story

Don't Answer for Someone Else

- ▶ “I didn't hear (the Chief/Sheriff) say that, therefore I can't respond. It would be improper for me to assume what he meant.”

If the Reporters Get Only One Side You'll Read/See Only One Side

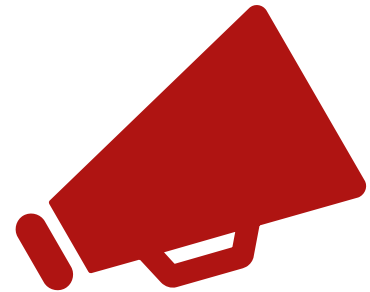
- ▶ “Ambush Interview”
- ▶ It's always best to get your side out first
- ▶ You set the tone of the story, not the other side
- ▶ Be careful on a potentially embarrassing situation. Example:
 - ▶ When a reporter wants you to look at a news photo and then asks for your reaction
- ▶ Always think before you respond
- ▶ Colorful quote

Better Media Skills??

- ▶ Better media skills does not mean that you have to give reporters everything they ask for

[Facebook Link](#)

[OIS – July 2022](#)



Social Media Guidelines

Traditional ethics/moral rules still apply



Assume everything you write online will become public



Privacy settings are constantly changing—what you write on someone's wall one day might be public purview the next.



Use social media to engage with the public

Social Media Guidelines

- ▶ Beware of Perception
- ▶ Social media is two-way communication
- ▶ You have an obligation to interact

Control Your Narrative— Tell Your Own Story

Benefits

An opportunity to promote your unit's good work

You control the content

More than a 60 second sound bite

Positive

Message delivered to your audience

Video is your friend

Sometimes You Have to Tell It Like It Is

A key to earning
and retaining
credibility with the
media is to take the
bitter with the sweet

Understand that
bad news is good
news to editors

They know that bad
news is more avidly
read than good
news

Enterprise Story

An enterprise story
You are the storyteller
You create the story

Example:

Officer Saves Baby
- CPR

Example:

Officer Delivers A
Baby

On the other
hand...

All of the media
helped keep a
general assignment
story alive

Example
“Unsolved
Cases”

Throw Them A Bone



Give them something they can use



Don't automatically shut them out



You must occasionally "feed them"



You control the food (information)

Positive Headlines



**Degree Program Partnership
with Local College**



**15 Arrested In Fake Business
License Crackdown**



Community Clean Up



**Local job cuts Lead To Uptick
in Department Applications**



Officer Pay Raises

Don't Try to Get Buddy-Buddy with the Press



A friendly and productive relationship can be developed without going overboard



In fact, some reporters will resist too chummy a relationship to avoid impairing their own objectivity

Resist the Ego Trip

**It's always fun to see
yourself featured and
quoted in the media**

**Remember the best
publicity is what advances
the department as a whole**

**Personal gratification
should be a pleasant
by-product**

It's Ok to Complain

- ▶ **Best way**
 - ▶ **Call the reporter first**
 - ▶ **Ask for a correction or retraction**
 - ▶ **Do as soon as possible-in person/telephone**
 - ▶ **Explain why you're concerned**
 - ▶ **"I know you want to be accurate"**
 - ▶ **Give credit where credit is due**
 - ▶ **Don't threaten! Remember, it's on the record**
 - ▶ **Listen to the reporter's response**



Not Satisfied

- ▶ Next Step:
 - ▶ Contact the editor or news director and also let the reporter know
 - ▶ Explain the problem and results of your discussion with the reporter
 - ▶ Be calm and analytical
 - ▶ Ask if others have complained
 - ▶ Expect the editor/news director to defend the reporter
 - ▶ Don't expect correct action on the spot
 - ▶ Listen to the editors/news directors feedback
 - ▶ Continue to make it clear what you expect

Still Not Satisfied

Other Means:

- Put your complaint in writing
 - list all your facts
 - who you have talked to
 - what their responses were
- Send copies to other media and local law enforcement
- Try to get other reporters to do a story
- Always leave the door open for further discussions and corrective action

In the future

- Tape interviews
- Have a third party present
- Provide written responses

Still Not Satisfied



Still Not Satisfied

The Atlanta Police Department responds to rumors and misinformation regarding the recent Piedmont Park case~

CBS 46's investigative reporters recently ran a story stating, "Thousands of calls for service at Lenox Mall despite 'millions' spent on security."

Perception



- ▶ **Perception is Everything!**
 - ▶ Be conscious of how your operation or effort is perceived.
 - ▶ **If the public doesn't perceive it,** then it doesn't make any difference what you're doing.

Don't Forget the Best Policy

**IT'S ON THE RECORD
ALL THE TIME**

Questions



cmspikes@atlantaga.gov



470-631-4019



Thank You

