

TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA BEFORE A CRISIS

Love 'em or hate 'em, there is no denying city officials need members of the media to get the word out to the public. This is especially true during a crisis.

Reporters don't see it as their job to help you. Their job is to provide new information, whatever it may be, to their readers, viewers and listeners. So it's important to have positive relationships if you're going to ask them to deliver your message when you really need it.

The best time for building those relationships is NOW – before everyone is tossed into the pressure-cooker atmosphere of an emergency. Here are some tips for cultivating positive working relations with journalists before a crisis hits:

- **Make them feel welcome:** Wishing reporters wouldn't poke around at City Hall isn't going to make them go away. So familiarize yourself with their work and understand their "beat" assignments – learn to "speak their language." Be friendly ... invite them in ... have casual chats about things unrelated to city business. Get to know each other beyond your jobs. They'll start to see city leaders as more than just "officials," but also as real, caring individuals. But make sure you're not trying to be overly sociable when they're on deadline.
- **Help them do their job:** Remember that reporters are always looking for interesting story ideas. Help them achieve their own goals by providing tips and steering them to helpful sources of information. You're looking to emphasize favorable news about the city, and good story ideas will give them something positive to write or broadcast.
- **Respect their jobs:** Learn and adhere to reporters' deadlines. Keep your promises. If they get something wrong, help them correct it. When possible, anticipate their questions so you're ready with an answer on the spot.
- **Play fair:** Always tell the truth. If you tell a reporter you'll get back to her ... get back to her, and quickly. If you provide certain information to one reporter, also provide it to a competitor if asked. If you have a complaint about a reporter's story, go to the reporter first to discuss it privately, not in front of his peers.
- **Stay in touch:** If a reporter does an accurate, balanced story, tell her you appreciate it (even if the story includes criticism from the "other side"). But if you believe the story contains inaccurate or misleading information, don't hesitate to point this out in an appropriate way – calmly, respectfully and privately – and offer specific information that can help the reporter get it right the next time.

If reporters respect and trust you – if they see you as someone who is helpful and credible – they will be more inclined to help when you really need them to share information with the public. That kind of relationship cannot be cultivated in the midst of a crisis, so start forging those relationships now.