



Your library branch receives a call from the media. Generally, your initial reaction is panic. But take a moment to think about it. You are in charge of the information that the media wants. Of course, you will want to come across as helpful and open to the media's inquiry. This article can help you breathe a little easier...the next time the media calls.

PERCEPTIONS ARE POWERFUL

How libraries are perceived is important when handling any media inquiry, crisis or other situation? Perception is a powerful tool. Take a moment to look at the two circles featured in Figure 1. They are simply a larger circle and a smaller one. Yet depending on your background and experience, you might see a doughnut, a bagel or a fried egg if you are a dietician. If you work for a water company, you might say the circles resemble a water pipe. If firearms are your hobby, you might see the barrel of a gun. Ask others what they see. Depending on their background and experience, you might be surprised at the many different responses you get.

Like people see like things. How libraries are perceived is no different. As a librarian, you have a perception of what libraries are and how they serve the public. However, your perception may be very different from the patrons who use libraries.

Perceptions are not necessarily right or wrong. They are simply opinions held by individuals and they can have a powerful impact. Patrons and the media may hold some of the following perceptions about libraries:

Libraries should be given financial support by taxpayers.

Libraries should not carry videos.

Libraries should be open longer hours each day.

Adult reading materials should not be shelved in a way that may provide easy access for children. These materials should be kept behind a desk, with children gaining access only with a parent's permission.

WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS...

*by Karen E. Wilczewski,
Communications Consultant
kewski1@aol.com
9618 North Highgate Circle
Indianapolis, IN 46250
(317)849-9022*

As a librarian, you play an integral role in possibly changing the perception a media representative has about how

libraries function. It is up to you and your staff to take control of any media inquiry and to remain calm and be as helpful and cooperative as possible.

WHAT DETERMINES A CRISIS?

The public may find it difficult to imagine a crisis occurring at a library - an incident that the media would cover. However, librarians know that a crisis can involve:

- a disgruntled library employee retaliating for perceived mistreatment.
- a natural disaster.
- a bomb threat.
- a class-action suit.
- an unhappy patron threatening to disrupt a board meeting or budget hearing because he or she does not approve of the books or periodicals that the library carries.

Not surprisingly, crises come in different forms. They can be sudden and urgent or they can smolder like a fire in a wall or an attic. Either way, when the crisis comes to a head, it is instantly visible and requires action.

PLANNING

Planning is the key to handling any media-related crisis. Have a crisis communications plan in place, one that you can access immediately and implement in a moment's notice. Although it may be difficult or challenging to convince key decision-makers to outline and approve such a plan, the middle of a crisis is not the time to create one.

You will want to build the following basics into a crisis communications plan:

Identify a spokesperson and key decision-makers.

Keep a list of your spokesperson's and key decision-makers' telephone numbers on index cards. Have each member of the library's staff keep a card in their wallet or purse, in the glove

compartment of their cars and next to their home telephones at all times. In this way, when the media calls about an incident or crisis, all key contacts can be reached quickly.

If your library has a web site in place, create a media page that can only be accessed during a crisis. Make sure that this page contains basic information about the library, such as hours, mission and services. Routinely update this page during the crisis with new information related to the incident. Refer all media to this web page. This will help to significantly reduce calls to your library spokesperson at all times of the day and night. In addition, you will gain credibility with the media for being helpful and cooperative during the crisis.

In the early stages of a crisis situation, speculation often occurs as to what happened. Frequently the media gets information second-hand, possibly from ambulance personnel, police or firefighters. The media often report their initial findings, only to learn later that the information was incorrect, despite it being the only information available as they approached a news deadline. This is where perceptions prove detrimental to crisis situations. The information may not be accurate. It is the spokesperson's role to clear up speculation and report the facts related to the crisis during a media interview. Naturally, as updated information is provided to your spokesperson, it is his or her responsibility to report it to the media.

One example of the media working with available information early in a crisis occurred some years ago when an airplane crashed into the Ramada Inn at the Indianapolis International Airport. Moments after the incident, reporters heard and speculated that up to 200 people were killed or injured in that incident. The breaking news of the crash was immediately reported on the air, along with the number of killed or injured. As more accurate information came in, the Ramada Inn's spokesperson needed to deal with the misinformation. The spokesperson announced that "as of this moment, our reports show that we have two people killed and five injured." Be careful not to report the inaccurate information prior to stating the updated, more accurate information. Research shows that repeating the wrong information first can reinforce it in viewers' and listeners' minds.

The next time you watch a prominent figure being interviewed by the media on television, notice who they handle inaccuracies. The interviewee may respond with "No, that's not correct. THIS...is the correct information."

There is one deadly sin that a spokesperson should avoid when responding to a media inquiry. Remember

NEVER to say "I don't know," or "No comment." Nothing loses a spokesperson his or her credibility faster than these two statements. Instead, respond with "That's a good question. Let me get that information for you." The latter response comes across to the media and viewers as being cooperative and helpful, open and having nothing to hide.

There are also times when you have a prepared statement that you have written done. Once you have delivered the statement, you might find the reporter still holding the microphone in front of you to see if you have any further comments. DO NOT do it. Avoid embellishing on your original statement. This is where many spokespersons get into trouble. Offering more information just because the silence of the moment is very uncomfortable can prove detrimental. Practice in advance becoming comfortable with the silence, because once a statement has been made, you cannot relinquish it. Frequently, the media will air the off-the-cuff statement made in a moment of nervousness and not the one you and your crisis team have carefully crafted.

TAKE CONTROL OF THE INTERVIEW

Always remember that you can control how the media perceives a story simply by how effectively you deal with their inquiry. Also, based on how you respond, you can help to shape public opinion on the issue. When the media calls and requests an interview, consider these steps.

Review your library's borrowing and collection development policies, along with the American Library Association's Bill of Rights, prior to meeting with a reporter.

Be overly prepared. Try to anticipate every possible question that the media might ask. Have someone brainstorm on possible questions. The media may ask the simplest question and be done with the interview. However, by being prepared, you will come across as confident, relaxed and in control of the situation.

Prepare background information on the library and the situation, if possible, and provide it to the reporter.

Be courteous to reporters. Avoid coming across as defensive.

Address the issue in neutral terms. Avoid mentioning the other party involved by name, whether it is a person or a corporation.

Speak in complete thoughts. The media refers to these as "sound bites." In this way, you make it difficult for the station or newspaper to edit out some of your comments or string

together phrases that make your statement totally different from what you intended.

Write down on an index card or sheet of paper any facts and figures that you might need and refer to them when responding to a media inquiry. Reporters like concrete numbers and percentages. Using them lends credibility and substance to your statements.

Cite anecdotes or quote comments from parents and children about how the library has helped them. As mentioned earlier, if a reporter makes a false statement, point it out diplomatically and consider adding, "The truth is that the vast majority of parents find the library an extremely friendly, safe place for their children. We've received many more compliments from parents than concerns." Statements like these can help to cancel negative comments and help to put a positive spin on the library.

Avoid name-calling and making accusations. Reporters love this kind of behavior because it makes great copy and video footage. However, it creates barriers to good communication.

Maintain a positive attitude about your library when addressing the media. Consider saying, "Libraries are vital to democracy. We are very proud of the service that our library provides."

Keep your comments simple. Avoid using professional jargon that readers or listeners might not understand. For example, consider saying, "freedom of choice," rather than "The Library Bill of Rights." Refer to library patrons as "people with concerns" or "concerned parents" instead of "censors."

Be clear about whom you represent.

Know your audience. Tailor your responses to that particular media, whether it is newspaper, radio or television.

If a positive story about the library is being prepared, be sure to stand in front of any appropriate library signage. If the media is covering a negative story, keep as far away as possible from any signage that links the interview to the library.

Always be honest with the media. Reporters can easily use today's sophisticated Internet research capabilities to uncover inaccuracies in your statements. This is the quickest way to lose credibility with the media.

POST-CRISIS - AFTER IT IS OVER

Congratulate yourself and the crisis management team for getting through the crisis or incident. Conduct a debriefing session to learn what was handled well and how the team would handle difficulties differently next time. You can learn a great deal from this process and be much better prepared...when the media calls again.

Karen E. Wilczewski is a communications consultant and has her own company. She has many years of experience dealing with the media, as well as with publications and marketing. She is available to work with libraries in Indiana. Her resume and samples of her work are available upon request.

FIGURE 1

