

Media Training for Library Challenge Situations

September 19, 2023

Presented by Christine Carpenter, Public Information Specialist and Altamont Free Library Trustee

Confident Communication for Libraries

Breathe

Take a few deep, full breaths. Even an emerging crisis allows for this. Repeat throughout the situation.

Gather your facts

- Do your homework (who? what? where? when? why? how? are good guidelines for fact gathering.)
- Go to the source to find out what happened—ask detailed questions and write down all you learn.
- Review the facts: What’s missing? What more do I need to know?
- What supporting policy and protocol, laws pertain?
- Where might the criticism of the library around its handling or role in the situation come from?

Remember: *there are some instances when the library and its representative should **not** investigate, but law enforcement should (e.g., threats to health and safety in and around the library.) In this case, call in the experts and wait for them to advise on next steps.*

Gather your team

- Who will do what?
- How quickly is their support or information needed?
- How will we keep in touch throughout?

Seek speedy counsel

If the situation is yours to handle: consult with those on your team who need a first “heads-up” and can provide counsel (the library leadership team including your communications advisor--if you have such a person on staff, UHLS team, legal, law enforcement.)

*Be sure you have the contact information for each of these individuals in your phone **and** on a paper cheat sheet you and your “crisis” team keep offsite where it’s easy to find.*

Identify your audience

- Who needs to hear from you about this situation? What do they need to know? When do they need to know it?
Remember: your “public” includes your staff and your board of trustees, as well as those outside the walls of the library.
- Know their issues
 - Think about/write down the questions, concerns/fears or criticisms each “audience” may have.
 - Gather your answers/resources that answer these.

Develop your plan

- **Assign a spokesperson/contact to take media calls and work with reporters** who “just show up” -or- is prepared to redirect inquiries to law enforcement. This person may vary depending on the situation.
 - **If this is your news to share about:** your spokesperson should have the authority to initially confirm and, if an emerging situation, provide follow up with additional details about the incident.
- **Assign someone to regularly check library email, voice messages** for inquiries that require a quick response.
- **Assign someone to regularly check the library’s social media channels** for posts or comments that help you take the pulse of what your community may know and be talking about.
- **Think about the best ways to get the information out** (e.g., turn and talk? in-person (including virtual) meetings? meetings with staff/board leadership? notices on your website and prepared for handout? meetings with members of the media?)
 - Who needs to hear about this, in what order and how soon?
 - Where can people go to for accurate information? This is typically you/your spokesperson or your website.
 - Do people need an outlet to react (e.g., a public forum where they can ask questions and express themselves.)

Prepare written materials

- Use the facts you have gathered and the issues you have brainstormed to craft:
 - A simple script for media, “cold call” and curious community inquiries (bullet points work well for this);
 - Talking points (think bulleted Q&A style) for conversations and press statements;
 - A website post simply and clearly outlining the situation with resources for more information, if relevant.
- Quickly get applicable messages to key people in your library, especially those who might be contacted by the public or the press (e.g., board members, staff, local/elected officials.)

Communicating with the media

- Statement, individual interviews, press conference?
- Determine the best time and place to meet with reporters.

As you meet with the public and/or the media, remember to:

- Be the best source of information.
- Be direct and **be yourself** in all your written and verbal statements.
- Tell what you can without violating a law or someone’s rights.
- Be prepared to talk simply and openly if asked about any mistakes and what is being done to fix problems going forward.
- Note any unanticipated questions that are asked and follow up with answers.

Debrief and reflect

When the dust settles, gather your team and formally debrief and reflect:

- What went well?
- What did you learn?
- What do we want to do differently next time?
- What additional resources you may need in your “toolkit”?