



Earn trust one-on-one

According to [Pew data](#), about 80 percent of Americans say they have never spoken with or been interviewed by a journalist. And their chances of having had those interactions go down the less white, rich, educated and old they are. Each time we talk to someone one-on-one — while officially on the job or otherwise — we have an opportunity to be an ambassador for our profession. How can we all use those interactions to help correct misconceptions and share the value of what we do?

In-person as well as online, there are some people who may not be worth engaging with. But try giving people the benefit of the doubt. Answer them in good faith, as if you have a mutual goal to learn about each other. When possible, end the interaction by handing out a business card — or a handout about your newsroom — and inviting future feedback and questions.

Here are a few common topics of complaints and ways you might try responding.

Complaints about “the media”

Mention a few stories you've done lately that you're proud of, so you can expand their idea of what journalism is. Tell them that your newsroom is made up of people who live in the area and cover things like traffic, schools, health and sports. Say that you're always looking for feedback and ideas, and try to get something specific out of the person. Tell them how to contact you.

Complaints about “fake news”

Try explaining to them how you fact-check your stories and what it takes for stories to be published. Explain that you don't just publish things you hear, you have to verify or attribute. Ask them what they're afraid will happen in the story you're reporting today. Also, try asking them what signs they're looking for to tell whether information is credible.

Accusations of a liberal bias

Acknowledge that there is a lot of partisan information out there and that irresponsible and lazy journalism is frustrating. Then assure them you and your colleagues work hard to be fair. Ask if they have feedback about any of your recent coverage.

A lack of “good news”

First, ask people what they wish the community knew more about. Write it down. Then offer an example of a recent story that shared positive things happening in the community. Tell them where to find those stories on your website, in your newsletters, etc.

Sensationalizing or “stirring the pot”

Let folks know your goal isn't to cause trouble. You're on the side of a healthy community. But ask if they think it's important for journalists to shine a light on problems. Not everyone will agree on which problems need attention. But it's hard to solve problems without public discussion, even when it's uncomfortable.

An inconvenient payroll

Let people know you understand the perception that online news is free. But behind any credible information is probably a paid journalist. If it feels appropriate, be light-hearted. “Would you do your job for free?” Help them understand that the story you're working on represents a day's wages to your organization. If communities want someone to let them know what's going on, money needs to exchange hands. Also, let them know what has changed in the industry and how the economic times are affecting local advertising.

Inaccuracy

Many people don't realize how seriously ethical journalists take accuracy. They don't realize we want to know if we've gotten something wrong. Let them know about your corrections policy, and how they should get in touch if they spot an error. You can't correct it if you don't know it's wrong. If their complaints are about typos or grammatical errors, acknowledge those happen and are really frustrating, and say you'll take the feedback to the newsroom.

Keep in mind these conversation tips:

- Be polite and respectful, even if they're not. If you can't do that, walk away.
- Conversations take time. Be upfront if you can't spare much time, but do your best to make it clear you want to hear what they have to say. It's okay to put a limit on the time you spend, though, and offer to follow up later.
- If you don't have the answers or facts to address their concern, offer to get back to them or connect them with a colleague who can.
- Be comfortable with what you can share and can't share on behalf of the organization. Don't represent official views unless you're confident it's appropriate.
- Have business cards handy, or another easy way to have people get in touch with you directly (not the main newsroom phone number).
- Feel free to defend your work. Try to do it from a perspective of explanation and education, not anger.
- Show humility. Admit if you don't have an answer, or if people are teaching you something new. Don't pretend journalism has no flaws.