

### **RESPONDING TO MEDIA INQUIRIES**

Any inquiry from the media should be viewed as an opportunity for your library. Whether the reporter is calling because of an interesting news release that you sent him or because a patron has complained to the reporter about a book in your library's collection, any inquiry is an opportunity to share your library's story and to continue to educate the community about the library's services, resources, and philosophy. Many celebrities who receive coverage in the scandal sheets sold in grocery stores take the attitude that "any press is good press." This may not always be true, but any media inquiry is an opportunity for positive news coverage.

It is always best to respond to a reporter's inquiry—even if you have to tell the reporter that the needed information isn't currently available. You are beginning to build a relationship that will benefit you down the road when you want coverage. Remember also that libraries have a variety of resources that can help people in the news business. For example, when a reporter calls looking for a local high school's 1966 yearbook photograph of someone in the news, your prompt response may begin to build an impression in the reporter's mind that the library has many useful resources—you may have made a friend for the future when you want a story covered.

Here is another example of the opportunity present in any inquiry. A reporter calls your public library and asks for information about a patron in your database. You know that the library's policy on confidentiality of patron records prohibits you from sharing that information without a court order. Rather than simply telling the reporter, "No," and acting irritated, you can use this as a chance to explain the policy and the philosophy behind it, and maybe even fax the reporter a copy. The reporter may not use the information in this story, but you will have educated the reporter about how your library operates and why.

Be careful to share all information with reporters that the public has a right to have access to. For example, the budget for a public, school, or publicly funded college or university is typically public information. If you get a request from a reporter for a document and you are unsure about whether or not it should be shared, check with legal counsel for your library, school district or college or university before sending the reporter away empty-handed. If you can't get an answer right away, tell the reporter you will get back to him. The last thing a library wants is to be accused by the media of withholding public information. Such an accusation will come back to haunt you when you deal with an intellectual freedom issue in the future.

At library board meetings, always be sure that there are extra copies of board materials for the media. Preparing several board packets and having them available on a table in the back of the room is a good idea. Or you might wish to use handing them out as an opportunity to greet each reporter and offer your help in answering any questions that they may have. Be sure that reporters get complete board packets—it is confusing if board members refer to materials that the media don't have, and it may appear that you are trying to hide something.

### **The Value of “I Don't Know”**

Be forthcoming, honest, and helpful, and make “I don't know, but I'll find out and call you” an important part of your vocabulary—even when you are interviewed for radio or television. It is preferable that reporters wait for the correct information than that they receive incomplete or erroneous information. Wrong information will diminish your credibility as a source and eventually reporters will stop contacting you or devalue the information that you provide to them. No one can fault you for saying, “I don't know.” And the return phone call to the reporter with the information that you find is another chance to tell your library's story.

### **There's No Such Thing as “Off the Record”**

Going “off the record” is dangerous stuff. In novels, in the movies, and on television, sources frequently go off the record with reporters. They share information that they don't want attributed to them or that they don't want included in the story. Sometimes this is done because the interviewee believes that the background is essential to understanding other issues, but, for legal or personal reasons, he or she doesn't want the information published or attributed. The idea is that the reporter is then bound

by some moral code to honor the agreement that the information is off the record. The reality is that, particularly for individuals who are novices in working with the media, there is no such thing as “off the record.” If you don’t want to be quoted or you don’t want the information included in a story, don’t say it to a reporter. It puts you both in a bad position—you may offer some information that the reporter simply cannot avoid reporting, and you may risk your job for sharing the information. Again, be forthright, honest, and helpful, but don’t share “off the record” confidential information with a reporter.

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## DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

In many ways, the professions of journalism and librarianship share similar values, particularly in the areas of intellectual freedom and freedom of information. Libraries also have a variety of resources that can support reporters in their work. Use these resources to develop a strong relationship with members of the media. When a reporter drops by to do a story on preschool storytime, but mentions a business story he is working on, tell him about the new resources in your business section. Take every opportunity to tell reporters about areas other than the one you are discussing. If a reporter is doing a story on the lack of parking near your library, give her the information she wants and then tell her about the new bookmobile service that you have started so that elderly people don’t have to struggle with the lack of parking. Turn every topic into a win-win situation for your library and the reporter!

When a reporter calls, return the call promptly. If you have been dissatisfied with the quality or quantity of news coverage that you have received in the past, and if encouraging more accurate coverage is a priority for your library, returning reporters’ calls in a timely fashion could be a key to changing the coverage you have been receiving. The next time a library story comes up, the reporters may remember you were helpful.

When you have a photo opportunity at your library, call the newspaper photo editor or a photographer that you have worked with in the past. It may just be the day they need some stand-alone art for the front page. On the other hand, you may spend hours compiling information for a reporter on what you think is

a terrific story, setting up interviews and so forth; that may be turn out to be the day that the mayor resigns or there is a terrible traffic accident. Don't give up! Be friendly, but be persistent. The reporter will remember the work you did and your investment will pay off down the road!

Listen carefully anytime you talk with a reporter. For example, you may be walking together after a library board meeting and the reporter may tell you that he is a Civil War history enthusiast. Jot that information in your Rolodex or in a notebook or file. Then when your library buys new books on the Civil War, you can send him a note calling his attention to the new resources. This gives you an excuse to contact him, and remind him that your library is there. It will be a positive experience for both of you—people are always flattered when others take note of their interests, and your follow-up will provide him with a positive feeling about both you and your library.

Many computer software packages are designed to help salespeople manage their contact information. An inexpensive “contacts” program might be a good tool for you to use to manage your media contacts. These database programs usually provide space for personal information, the best time to call, and a record of previous contacts.

Some of the things mentioned above may seem time-consuming. However, if you work slowly over time to build relationships with reporters in your community, there will be a time when it pays off. If media representatives like and trust you, you will have more straightforward and pleasant dealings in the future. Ultimately, building strong relationships with reporters, without compromising their integrity or yours, will result in positive, honest news coverage for your library. The story may not always be the one that you want told, but you will have the opportunity to share your side of things.

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