Media Guidelines for Emergency Responders

Firefighters/EMS are trusted sources of information for media professionals and the communities they serve. Making the most of your media relationships can help your department disseminate safety and health messages, manage incident scenes and keep the public informed of the good work you do (e.g., training, community service).

How we receive news

Think local. How do you and your friends and family receive news? Your department might already be engaging the public via social media. That is excellent. Social media facilitates "word-of-mouth." It gives you strong control over your message, and research shows that news received from friends on Facebook is highly trusted. But not everyone is active on social media, even if they have an account, so it is still important to work with traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio). A multi-media approach layers and reinforces your messages. In addition, by partnering with traditional media, you take advantage of their marketing research. They're experts at reaching their audiences.

The media landscape

Newspapers: This industry declined greatly over the past 20 years, and many small town papers with local-sounding names are shells of what they used to be, operated by editors from afar. Still, you can often find locally-based editors and reporters who are invested in their communities. Check out some of the weekly papers, which focus solely on local news. You also might reach out to agricultural weekly newspapers. There are three in Wisconsin: The Country Today, Wisconsin State Farmer and Agri-View.

Television: While newspaper newsroom staffs have decreased in size, the number of TV newsroom employees has remained steady over the past 20 years. For this reason and because of the visual nature of the medium, you are more likely to encounter a TV reporter than a newspaper or radio reporter at the scene of an incident.

Radio: The industry has undergone much consolidation, with companies often owning multiple stations at local levels. Listen to your stations. Is there one person who usually handles local news? And is there one farm broadcaster whose reports are carried locally? Farm broadcasters are highly respected in rural communities, providing agribusiness and human interest news multiple times a day. Listeners think of these broadcasters as trusted friends.

Each of these mediums has strengths and weaknesses, and one might be more prominent in your area than the others.

Spokesperson and a media relations plan

Decide your communication goals. They can be broad and might include:

- Building trust with the community and local media.
- Motivating and influencing safety behavior in the community.
- Setting the stage for future safety messaging.
- Promoting fundraisers for new equipment.

Whatever your specific communication goals, a **spokesperson** (public information officer) will be essential in your department's relationship with the media and community. A spokesperson embodies a department's identity, personifies its response efforts and serves as the overall human connection to the public. Media members appreciate being able to deal with one person who can handle all their needs/ questions. Having a designated spokesperson also makes it easier to manage on-scene communication. Ultimately, if a spokesperson is successfully able to communicate important safety and health messages, the community should see fewer incidents of illness, injury, and death.

As the media point-of-contact, the spokesperson's responsibilities span before, during and after an incident.

The media can help you achieve your communication goals, but only if you work with them.

Remember the three Bs: be credible; be available; be helpful.

There can be a lot of turnover with reporters in small markets. New reporters will appreciate you being available to provide context and guidance.

Preparing for interviews

Scheduled:

Before you agree to an interview, ask the reporter if he/she has an angle in mind. If yes, offer to provide facts/figures/ references that might help the reporter prepare for the interview. If the reporter does not have a specific angle – perhaps their assignment editor told them "go out and do a story about Fire Prevention Week" – you then have an opportunity to help shape the story and suggest an angle.

Will the interview be recorded or live?

Ask the reporter if he/she can send you questions in advance to help you better prepare. Offer to review articles for factual content before they are published, some reporters actually appreciate that.

Decide on what you want to accomplish with the interview. Develop one to three key talking points that you want to emphasize during the course of the interview. Practice these "talking points," trying to keep them to 15 seconds or less.

Don't hesitate to say, "I don't know, I will have to get back to you." Follow up promptly.

If you get a tough questions, stay "on message" and bridge back to your talking points.

Don't be lulled into a false sense of security by a reporter's promise to keep your comments "off-the-record." Everyone can be held accountable for anything they say.

It might sound easier said than done, but try to relax! You are the expert and you have an important safety-related message to convey. Radio and TV reporters, especially the experienced ones, have a knack for guiding the conversation and getting interviewees to relax.

On-scene:

Always assume you are being recorded and that anything you say or do could end up on Facebook Live or a media report.

Don't speculate. In refusing to speculate on a worst-case scenario, you're not hiding anything; you're just not going to help a reporter scare viewers. Instead, "bridge" back to your key points. "Yes, this is a serious situation and we have responders on the scene right now who are working hard to eliminate the hazard."

Talking points should include, if possible, a prevention message. For example, if a farmer is injured in a PTO (power take off) incident, the prevention message could be, "Rotating PTO shafts are extremely hazardous. Farmers can reduce the hazard by keeping all shields in place, staying away from moving parts, not wearing loose-fitting clothing and keeping long hair tucked under a cap or tied back." By keeping the message general you are not "judging" the individual involved in the specific incident.

Do not say "no comment." That sounds like you're arrogant or trying to hide something. Instead, for example, say, "I can't comment on that now because I don't have accurate information." Or, "here is what I can tell you now for the 6 p.m. broadcast, and I will try to have more for the 10 p.m. broadcast."

Avoid terms like "it was a freak accident." That implies there was nothing that could have been done to prevent the incident.

Key Tips:

1. Establish relationships with your local media agencies before an incident (e.g., invite them to a training, invite them to like your Facebook page).
2. When on-scene, keep reporters out of harm's way while at the same time facilitating their coverage.
3. Attempt to give reporters a reasonable timeframe to expect new information updates.
4. Understand journalism deadlines and work to accommodate them. During an incident or crisis, it is important to be available to help reporters get the facts right before their deadline.
5. What we say and write, while not intentional, can promote unsafe farm practices. Visit Media Guidelines for Ag Safety for a list of do's and don'ts aimed at keeping folks safe and not perpetuating dangerous farm practices.

Power of stories

Stories are powerful and can help influence safety behavior. Each incident can provide a "teachable moment." Consider issuing a press release or incident report with information such as: incident location, time called, what did the responders find, what actions did they take, and final results. Include a safety tip/ prevention message, and an action step, such as a link to a safety resource for more information. Be sure to see "Tractor vs milk truck crash under investigation" with Stratford Fire Chief, Tim Carey.

Media Relations Resources

- PIO 101: The basics of media relations for the fire service (Firehouse)
- PIO 101: Tips for media interviews (Firehouse)
- The Media's Role in a Crisis, Disaster, or Emergency (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Emergency preparedness planning: media relations (The Hartford)
- Media guidelines for agricultural safety (Childhood Agricultural Safety Network)