



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

 Executive Editor:
George Clack

 Writer:
[Marguerite H. Sullivan](#)

 Editor:
Kathleen E. Hug

 Design:
Diane K. Woolverton
Contributing Editor:
Ellen F. Toomey

A RESPONSIBLE PRESS OFFICE

From the author...

Over the past several years, I've had the pleasure of traveling to various Central European and Eurasian countries as a participant in the U.S. State Department's Speakers Program. On these trips, I've met with many government officials and, based on my experience both as a reporter and as a spokesperson for several U.S. government organizations, have advised them on how to run an effective public affairs operation.

This book is a direct response to the many questions I've been asked while on these trips. It has been written as a sort of pocket guide for government leaders and public information officials who want to create an effective mechanism of communication between the press and the government. The choice of material reflects issues raised by these spokespersons, both in terms of the specific topics addressed and the level of detail provided.

The questions discussed here are certainly not unique to any one part of the world; most are the same as or similar to questions I've been asked in the United States and other countries. How do I deal with the press during a crisis situation? How do I develop the message that the government official for whom I work wants people to understand and accept? How do I assess an interview request? How do I set up a press conference? How do I combine a press office's need for a long-term communications strategy with its responsibility for working with the press on a daily basis? How friendly can and should government spokespersons and journalists be?

One topic that this book does not include but about which I've fielded many questions is "sunshine laws" — or the Freedom of Information Act and open meeting requirements — in the United States. For information on this subject, I would refer the reader to the booklet "Transparency in Government," prepared by the U.S. Department of State, Office of International Information Programs. That office is also currently working on another short publication titled "Democracy Paper #10: The Public's Right to Know," which should be available before the end of 2001.

The material in this "insider's guide" also reflects my own working experiences in the United States. I have observed how a government communicates from the outside, as a reporter and columnist covering government, and from the inside, as a government spokesperson working with journalists. As a journalist, I reported on government at all levels — from the local to the national. As a government spokesperson, I responded to and worked with members of the regional, national, and international press. And as president of the Washington Press Club and an official in several government executive groups, I learned firsthand the importance of professional organizations through which you can share experiences, problems, and successes with your peers.

Finally, both inside and outside the United States, I have observed how important the roles of government spokespersons and journalists are in a democratic society — and how they can work together to communicate information about government to the citizenry and respond to their concerns.

— [Marguerite H. Sullivan](#)

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

WHAT A PRESS OFFICE DOES

- [What a Press Office Is and Is Not](#)
- [Journalists and Government Press Officials](#)
- [The Duty of Dealing With the Press](#)

"A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both," said the United States' fourth president, James Madison, in 1822.

"Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe," said Abraham Lincoln, America's 16th president, in 1864.

These U.S. presidents were talking about how a democracy works. Their words hold true today.

For people to exercise power, they must be able to make informed choices and independent judgments. This can happen only if they have factual, credible information. They get that from a free press. A free press serves as the citizen watchdog over government. The media inform the public about governmental activity and spark debate. They hold public officials to the highest standards and report whether or not the government is maintaining the public trust.

From the American Revolution in the 18th century came the idea that the government should be accountable to the people and that the individuals who work in the government are public servants. But serving the people is a two-way venture. In a democracy, serving the people is both the job of the press and the job of government officials.

As U.S. President John F. Kennedy said: "The flow of ideas, the capacity to make informed choices, the ability to criticize, all of the assumptions on which political democracy rests, depend largely on communications."

What a Press Office Is and Is Not

"A government public affairs office is central to the whole system of communicating with the people," says Sheila Tate, who was press secretary to U.S. First Lady Nancy Reagan in the early 1980s and to Vice President George Bush in his successful 1988 presidential campaign. According to Tate: "The government press operation is the daily conduit through which the press gets information on the workings of the government."

Explaining how government programs and policies have an impact on citizens is the major role of a government press office. This public information effort conveys government officials' concerns and plans to the public, and it helps the public understand how various issues could affect their lives.

"Governments have so much information that they need an effective way to distribute it to their citizens, and that's where the government

spokesperson comes in," says Mike McCurry, former press secretary to President Bill Clinton. "The spokesperson is like a reporter working inside government collecting information for the public. [It is the spokesperson's role to get as much information to the public as possible."

Government press officials, then, have two roles. In dealing with the media, they are advocates for the government's position, explaining the merits of official action. They correct erroneous information and try to improve the interpretation and understanding of existing information. They also are advocates for the media within the government, relaying reporters' needs, such as the desire to do a news story on a topic that government officials may or may not be ready to discuss. Spokespersons often do reporters' work in a sense, gathering information for the press and translating what government experts have to say for the media.

"The press secretary's job is to present the president's positions and thoughts in a manner that helps him advance his agenda, while also helping the press learn what the government is doing," says Ari Fleisher, White House press secretary to President George W. Bush. "It's a balancing act that requires careful judgment in service to two masters."

The spokesperson's job is both assertive — trying to emphasize certain aspects of the news — and reactive — responding to reporters' questions. For example, in the United States, every day the White House usually puts out half-a-dozen press releases announcing new programs, appointments, or activities of the president on which it would like coverage. At the same time, reporters covering the White House contact the press office with questions for stories that may or may not be those that White House officials want done.

"Yet the job is more than just disseminating information," says Joni Inman, president of the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC), a group representing U.S. public information officers in local, state, and the federal government. "We definitely are the link between our governments and the people, and the translators of information from government to the people, but we also have to know what is coming our way, hear what is on the street, and translate it back to our government officials," says Inman, who is director of citizen relations for the city of Lakewood, Colorado.

But a government press officer is not a magician who can transform a policy or program that is not working into something that appears to be functioning well. As the National Governors Association tells new U.S. state governors in its orientation material, public relations cannot substitute for effective programs or worthwhile ideas. A press secretary cannot create an image of honesty if government officials are not honest. He or she cannot portray a government that recognizes and responds to problems if problems persist and little is done about them. A press office cannot convince the press to write about the openness of a government that is not open or the management skills of government officials who do not manage. Nor can a press office convey a government's objectives if the government leaders it serves are not clear about those objectives.

Journalists and Government Press Officials

Government press officials should not expect to be friends or foes of journalists. Journalists should be neutral observers of government and of its actions and plans. In a democracy, press and government cannot be partners. They are natural adversaries with different functions. Each should respect the role of the other and yet recognize that a natural tension exists between the two. On the one hand, at times it's a relationship in which officials try to tell their version of events or avoid publicity altogether, and the press looks for mistakes and pushes to get information released. On the other hand, the relationship is reciprocal. Journalists need government press officers to help them understand the government's actions and plans. Government press officers need journalists to get information on the government's actions and plans to the public.

Some government press officers expect that a journalist who is a social friend will not write a story that is negative, but a professional journalist does not let a friendship with an official stand in the way of a story. Being a journalist is a 24-hour-a-day job, and a good journalist is never off duty.

"Spokespersons must have cordial but professional relations with reporters," says former Clinton White House spokesman Mike McCurry. "They, reporters, have jobs to do, and you, spokespersons, have jobs to do. You can be friends with a reporter, but you must remember reporters are always on the job and so are you."

In social situations, government officials should clarify the ground rules under which they are making their statements, such as "off the record" or "for background only." (See "Speaking On and Off the Record.") A good rule is to never say or do anything you don't want to see on the front page of the newspaper the next day.

"Spokespersons can have a friendly professional relationship with a journalist, but a personal relationship can be difficult," says NAGC's Joni Inman. "There will come a time when a reporter needs to ask probing questions or write or air a story that you may not want. You can't just rely on friendship. Something will suffer — either the professional relationship or the friendship. But you need to have the professional relationship. You need to be able to call up a reporter and say, 'You really blew that story.' "

The Duty of Dealing With the Press

In addition, government spokespersons should not stand in the way of a story. Public servants don't have the right to decide what is good for people to know and what is not good. Their job is to supply news material to all journalists, even those perceived as less than friendly.

"A good press secretary should respond to every request for information from legitimate news organizations, even if the response is a simple, 'I have to get back to you,' " says Juleanna Glover, press secretary to Vice President Dick Cheney. "Common courtesy should be the rule. Although the press might be hostile at a given moment, there always will be a time when you need them to transmit a message. When that time comes, they'll remember who was civil and who was not."

Some government officials have expressed surprise when during press conferences, journalists ask questions that are not on the subject of the press briefing. This is normal. Journalists may have little access to government officials, and they ask questions, whether on the stated topic or not, when they get access. It is part of having a free press.

"Press offices could be considered not only as a government subsidy or a government efficiency but as an entitlement that flows from the nature of a free society and the relationship of the state to the citizen," writes presidential scholar Stephen Hess in *The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and Their Offices*. "What more natural function of government is there in a democracy than for it to make available information about how it is governing?"

In a democracy, Hess writes, dealing with the press is a duty.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

THE JOB OF A PRESS OFFICER

- [Roles of the Press Spokesperson](#)
- [Establishing the Press Officer Job](#)
- [Authority and Coordination](#)
- [Relationships With Other Press Offices](#)
- [A Credible Spokesperson](#)

To be an effective spokesperson, the chief press officer or press secretary should have a close relationship, one of mutual respect, with the government official for whom he or she works, whether prime minister, president, minister, or agency head. The spokesperson should be familiar with the official's beliefs and should have direct access to him or her. The spokesperson should be able to walk into meetings and interrupt the official with pressing news without going through a scheduler or other aide. While this flexibility can disturb an orderly schedule, it results in a government that can respond quickly to media issues.

The press officer also should have a role in decision-making so that those formulating policy will understand the public relations ramifications of proposed actions. If, as spokesperson, the press officer has not participated in developing policy, he or she will have difficulty understanding the context of the policies and explaining it to the media.

"It is very important to have the communicator as part of the strategy team," says the NAGC's Joni Inman. "If a government official is planning on taking an action, you need to know how it will be perceived. It is better to have the communicator at the table, engaged in the discussion in the early formative stages, than to have to play catch up or be blindsided by negative public reaction because the communicator, the person with the sense of public sentiments, wasn't there."

Roles of the Press Spokesperson

According to presidential scholar Stephen Hess, on the federal level in the United States, responding to press questions takes up 50 percent of a typical press spokesperson's time, keeping informed and working on agency business 25 percent, and initiating materials and events 25 percent.

But a closer look at these functions suggests that a press officer's job can be broken down into many roles:

- Serving as the government spokesperson who conducts regular or special briefings.
- Managing the day-to-day activities of the press office. Assisting in developing government policies and in developing strategies to convey them to the media and the public.
- Planning and managing media campaigns to put out a consistent long-term message.

- Handling press inquiries.
- Setting up interviews and briefings for the press with government officials.
- Advising government officials and staff on press relations and potential media reaction to proposed policies.
- Overseeing speech writing, or at least reviewing speeches and their messages.
- Staging events such as news conferences.
- Preparing news releases, fact sheets, and other materials.
- Serving as a liaison with or supervisor of other government press offices.
- Arranging transportation and hotel accommodations for the traveling press.
- Issuing press credentials.
- Supervising agency publications internally and externally.
- Evaluating, after the fact, whether an event had its wanted effect and determining how to do better next time.

Establishing the Press Officer Job

In establishing the position of spokesperson, the first responsibility lies with the government official whom he or she will represent. That official must determine with the spokesperson how the press office will be organized and what its responsibilities will be. In doing this, the official has to make three key decisions:

- How available does he or she wish to be to the press?
- What will be the spokesperson's relationship with the rest of the official's staff?
- What will be the relationship between the press department and other ministries and departments? This is especially critical if the official is head of the government or of a ministry with subsections.

The government official also has to consider more detailed issues:

- How often will he or she be interviewed?
- How often will he or she conduct press conferences?
- May the spokesperson speak on his/her behalf? Or will only the government official do press briefings?

In the best of circumstances, the government official is readily accessible to the press, does frequent press conferences, and also has a spokesperson who can speak on his or her behalf. At the White House, for example, the press secretary holds a daily televised press briefing but steps aside when the president appears to address the press in person.

"To make the job work, the press secretary has to be accessible to the press, has to be well informed, and has to believe in the press's function in a democracy," says Dee Dee Myers, former press secretary to President Bill Clinton. "You can't have a democracy without a free press, and even though the press can seem intrusive at times, it is essential. A

press secretary needs to understand the mission of the press and work with it."

Authority and Coordination

The authority the press officer has with the rest of the government official's top staff is also important. Among the issues are:

- Is the press officer the initial point of contact with the press, and does he or she have authority over the staff's relationships with the press?
- Are other offices authorized to answer questions, other than routine queries, without first consulting with the press office? For example, if a reporter calls the scheduling office with a simple scheduling question, such as the time of an event, should it be routed to the press office or can the scheduler answer it?
- Who needs to review the press office's news releases, speeches, and policy statements?
- Must other top-level staff, such as the chief of staff for the office, have sign-off authority on these public statements?
- Will the spokesperson have access to the top-level staff in the office?

In one recent case, a novice U.S. state governor created chaos by ignoring the need for coordination in his office. His chief of staff would give one message on the governor's goals to the press, the chief of policy another, and the press secretary yet a third. The media reported on the resulting chaos, and the governor's public approval ratings dropped precipitously. It was only when the press operation became integrated with the rest of the staff that a coherent message developed, press coverage improved, and the public began to support the governor's programs.

"Without coordination, the job can't get done well," says Susan King, former assistant secretary for public affairs for the U.S. Departments of Labor and of Housing and Urban Development. What will happen without it, King predicts, "is that a staff person will say, I represent my boss — a subsection head — and not the head of the organization. Everyone down the line has to feel they speak for the biggest boss, or there will be tension."

It is best when the press secretary coordinates all interaction the staff has with the media. At a minimum, a press secretary needs to know as soon as possible whether or not a staff member has had any interaction with the press and what topics were discussed. If there are no clear procedures, an administration could respond with contradictory information, and the public would be left confused and ultimately mistrusting of the government.

For a government official and his or her press office, the rule should be: no surprises. Or at least as few as possible.

The "no surprises" rule is also of crucial importance in the relationship between the central government office and government departments, as well as between a ministry and its subsections. It is important to determine how cabinet-level activities fit into the overall government

media relations program and what role the spokesperson plays. Much of the agenda of a government is carried out through cabinet offices and ministries, and ideally there is coordination among them. A key issue is the degree of control a central government official wants and can maintain over the public information efforts of cabinet-level agencies. The issue is the same for a ministry's direction over its subsections.

Coordination is key in most U.S. government press offices. In the U.S. Department of the Treasury, for example, the central public affairs office of the Secretary of the Treasury has a weekly telephone conference call with the public affairs offices of its bureaus by subject matter. One call covers law enforcement and involves the five U.S. Treasury enforcement bureaus; the second weekly call involves the Treasury's domestic finance bureaus.

Through these calls, the Treasury Department's central public affairs office can coordinate and monitor the key communications issues that will come up during the coming weeks. The department also has a rapid response system in place so that its bureaus' public affairs offices can alert the central public affairs office when a controversial issue arises. If an issue is political in nature, a Treasury bureau staffed by career public affairs officers would alert the Treasury Secretary's public affairs office, which is staffed by political appointees, for response.

Relationships With Other Press Offices

Among the issues to consider when setting up a central press office are:

- What will the relationship between the main press office and any subordinate public information offices be?
- How will information move between them? Will they have weekly conference calls or meetings? Will they routinely share schedules of their upcoming events?
- Should the overall press secretary have authority that extends to cabinet-level agencies?
- Who will hire the spokespersons in the ministries and agencies? Will it be the top government press official or each agency head? If the central press office does the hiring, the top government spokesperson has control over the messages delivered, but this can prove very awkward for the head of a ministry. In the best of circumstances, there is cooperation and coordination. In these cases, the agency press secretaries coordinate their efforts with the central spokesperson but have the authority to plan and execute events in their own areas.
- What news will the top government official announce on behalf of cabinet offices?
- How do the subordinate offices fit into the overall media strategy?
- What materials, such as press releases, interviews, and speaking engagements, need to be cleared by the central government press office before being distributed, and how is the review done?
- What upcoming events or situations might impede the message a government official wants to send out? What procedures have been set up to get information from the other agencies and ministries? Sharing schedules among departments, having regular meetings to discuss event calendars, and sharing messages on

upcoming events can help.

In one example of everything gone wrong, a U.S. state governor's press secretary did not appreciate the importance of coordinating messages the day that three state events occurred simultaneously: a state cabinet official announced a program and received major press coverage; a second cabinet official announced a new project and received less coverage; the governor announced another program and received very little coverage. The press office of each cabinet official had made its own arrangements, even though the governor had ultimate authority. There had been no meetings among the press staffs and no coordination of event calendars, and the result was competing press announcements that diminished each other's impact.

Consequently, the governor's press secretary began having monthly meetings with the press secretaries of the governor's cabinet offices. Each week he received their calendars with their planned press announcements for the next month and had a staff member make a master calendar from them. When the press secretary found two major announcements planned for the same day, he requested that one be postponed. If the governor scheduled an announcement for a certain day, no other cabinet official could hold a big press event on that day. Media messages were coordinated, and the governor stopped competing with the cabinet for press attention.

At a minimum, a press secretary should be informed by subordinate press officers in advance of any potentially embarrassing problems or disclosures. In the best of circumstances, the agencies will give the top government official or minister the chance to announce the positive news, and they will announce the bad news.

A Credible Spokesperson

What characteristics make a good press secretary?

According to former presidential spokesperson Mike McCurry, press secretaries need "a sense of humor, enormous patience, an ability to speak and write quickly, and an uncompromising attitude about the truth.

"Credibility," he says, "is the single most important asset of the spokesperson."

In *The Government/Press Connection*, Stephen Hess writes that press officers say they need stamina, curiosity, a helpful nature, good memory, civility, coolness under pressure, an understanding of human psychology, and an ability to predict and handle logistical details. It also helps if a spokesperson learns facts quickly. He or she should be able to handle the unpredictable, manage many tasks simultaneously, deal with constant interruptions, and be quick to react. The spokesperson should be evenhanded with reporters — that is, not play favorites. Above all, the spokesperson should be a person of high personal ethics and integrity.

It is vital that the spokesperson maintain his or her credibility and that of the boss. To be effective, a press secretary must be believed by the press; he or she won't be believed if past answers have proven

misleading. "The government media effort doesn't work when the spokesperson is not trusted by the media or is frozen out from the information flow within the government," says former press secretary Sheila Tate.

In recent years, the role of the spokesperson has become more and more difficult because of the rapidity with which news breaks and its 24-hour availability. Part of the job is knowing who should talk under what circumstances.

"Sometimes you have to strategize what message the people need to hear right now and who the best person is to deliver it," says NAGC's Joni Inman. As an example, she cites a triple homicide. "The message that the people need to hear," she says, "is that they are safe and that it will not happen to them. The most effective person to deliver this message would not be the public relations person but the police captain in uniform. In any particular event, you have to look at the most effective communicator."

Besides giving information, spokespersons should try to make reporters as comfortable as possible.

"Remember that the physical demands of reporting and the long hours make for cranky reporters," says Mike McCurry. "You should try to take care of reporters' basic needs. Make sure they have access to food and drink, that their physical working environment is conducive to compiling and filing their stories, and that the employees of the government press office are helpful."

In sum, the spokesperson's job requires balancing many relationships — with the government official he or she represents, with the rest of the top-level government staff, with the press, and with the permanent bureaucracy, particularly if he or she is a political appointee. The spokesperson must also be visible for the boss when that would be helpful and in the background when the boss has the press spotlight.

"The most important thing to remember," says former presidential spokesperson Dee Dee Myers, "is that even though the job can be aggravating, difficult, and frustrating at times, it is incumbent on government press offices to help the press get the story right. That goes to the core of what a democracy is.

"The system works best when it provides a great degree of openness for the press," Myers says. "Openness is not something to be afraid of."

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

THE PRESS OFFICE AT WORK

- [Thinking Long Term and Short Term](#)
- [Dividing Up the Work](#)
- [Day-to-Day Activities of the Press Office](#)
- [Putting Workers Where the Work Is](#)
- [The Need for Coordination](#)

In the United States, while the myriad government press offices may be structured differently, they all have two identical duties. They deal with the press, and they keep their government colleagues informed on press interests. Some handle only press relations; others manage all communications, such as publications, speeches, even legislative affairs.

Press offices are staffed in various ways. Many have the structure of a newspaper office. If the office has limited staff, as with a small newspaper or news bureau, the division of labor is informal, and most of the employees are generalists. If it is larger, as with a larger news bureau, there may be several press officers, and each may have a "beat" or subject assignment. Other offices are arranged by media specialty, with some press officers handling only print media and others managing only TV and radio. The size of the staff also depends on the number of reporters with whom the office has to deal and the duties of the office — for example, does it handle just press or both press relations and speechwriting?

Thinking Long Term and Short Term

There is a reactive approach to news, and there is a proactive approach. One entails thinking short term and dealing with daily crises and breaking news. The other requires thinking long term and strategizing about the future. A good government press office performs both functions. Often, the reactive and proactive jobs occur in the same office, and if large enough are performed by two different people.

"You can't do the day-to-day spokesman work and provide the more strategic advice and counsel, think through the policy, think through the message, recommend ways to deliver the message," Karen P. Hughes, counselor to President George W. Bush for communications and speechwriting told the Washington Post.

It is difficult to think long term when you also must think short term. The daily crises always overtake the in-the-future scheme. Because of the urgency of a crisis, the future plan often gets put off and then never happens. That is why in high-visibility, fast-paced offices, usually one person thinks short term — daily press — and one long term — strategic message planning for the future.

5 BEST TIPS

The Press Office at Work

- Have someone to think long term. Media efforts should not be just short term and deal only with crises.
- Have daily meetings both with the press staff and with ministry senior staff so that all are on board with the media message.
- To avoid surprises, coordinate with other departments and ministries.
- Keep media monitoring manageable. Clip and copy. Don't just summarize the news. Weekly or monthly analysts can check trends.
- Make the press agenda yours, not just the media's. Filter your phone calls, but call back promptly with a well-thought-out answer.

"If you are always reacting to questions, you most likely are not advancing your best arguments," says former White House spokesperson Mike McCurry. "You must have a proactive plan to deliver your message to the citizens, and you must communicate your message relentlessly."

"In the White House, the job of delivering the news is different from the job of packaging the news, and that is why we had a press secretary and a communications director," says McCurry. "You need to have people who craft the message, prepare the best arguments to put forward, and you need people who can deliver those messages over and over on a daily basis. The first job is that of the communications director, and the second is that of the press secretary. It is similar in business to having one person develop the product and one sell it."

During the administration of President George Bush (1989-1993), Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater handled both the long-term and short-term jobs for nine months. He says that he found it to be an impossible task.

"As press secretary, you are involved in acute problems always on a daily news basis," Fitzwater says. "You have to get immediate answers to immediate problems, and you don't have time to focus on long-term strategies. Even if you get the time, it is hard to reorient your mind to think where you want to be in two months."

Additionally, he says, the press views the press secretary differently when the two roles are combined. "They see the communications director as a propagandist making up the themes of the day, creating the lines, and the press interprets that role as being one of less than candor." But being known for honesty and integrity is crucial to a press secretary's reputation and effectiveness, he says. "You are compromised if you do both jobs."

For best coordination, the two roles are often housed within the same office. Typical duties of the communications director (the long-term thinker) include strategizing, planning messages and themes, writing up a master schedule, monitoring cabinet departments on their upcoming press announcements, coordinating messages with them, planning out-of-town trips, supervising speech writing, and supervising research. Sometimes, he or she also monitors the news clipping office and handles communications with out-of-town media.

In contrast, the job of the press secretary (the short-term thinker) includes handling press questions on a daily basis, initiating media contacts, talking to the press, and managing the news operation, from preparing press releases and fact sheets to arranging press conferences and interviews with government officials.

Sometimes the communications director runs the office, and the press secretary reports to him or her. In the office of former Governor Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, the communications director was in charge. He occasionally handled press questions if he knew a reporter well or if the topic was of particular interest to him. He rarely traveled with the governor. The press secretary, who reported to the communications director, and her staff handled all media questions, spoke "on the record," and traveled with the governor. The press secretary, like the communications director, had direct access to the

governor. Each kept the other informed when he or she took on a media issue.

Sometimes the press secretary runs the office, and the communications director reports to him or her. At the White House, the jobs of press secretary and communications director often have been split into two offices. The press secretary handles the daily press operation. The communications director manages long-range strategy, speech writing, and, often, out-of-town media. They have numerous meetings and coordinate their efforts and the overall administration message not only between themselves but together with the other senior executives in the White House.

"It works well when there is coordination between the two factors, when you are involved in each other's organization, and when both teams know what the other is doing," says Marlin Fitzwater. To accomplish this coordination, Fitzwater included a communications officer in all of his meetings and had a press person from his office attend communications office meetings.

A second crucial element, he says, is having personal compatibility between the two offices. "If either — the personal relationship or the organizational relationship — is missing, then you will have failure."

Dividing Up the Work

Working together is crucial. In one important ministry in a new government, communications duties are split among several offices. The spokesperson to the minister has no staff, not even a secretary, does his own faxing, answers his own phone, and speaks on behalf of the minister and, therefore, the ministry. The press office is a separate operation with its own director reporting to a deputy minister. Its staff of 12 handles research, press clippings, logistics, and out-of-town press inquiries. A third communications office, with a staff of three, does long-range communications and reports to a third deputy minister. The spokesperson, the director of press, and the communications manager meet infrequently, and their staffs never do.

The chief of staff to the minister defends the arrangement because it means the minister's spokesperson can focus on the minister and not be burdened with administrative work. However, the spokesperson admits he feels overwhelmed and sometimes has a hard time getting information. Wouldn't it be better coordinated if the ministry's message were spoken in one focused voice, synchronized by the spokesperson to the minister? The spokesperson could still be spokesperson and have the press operation and the long-range communications function report to him. He could hire an administrative manager to handle the paperwork.

Day-to-Day Activities of the Press Office

Meetings: Frequent meetings may sometimes seem to fill a day, leaving time for little else, but they can be essential to a smoothly operating system. Their goals are the sharing of information, anticipation of news, and the preparation to handle it. In the United States, regular meetings between a spokesperson and government colleagues who are not in press relations, and between the

spokesperson and the government press staff, usually occur daily, often several times a day.

Many U.S. federal offices begin their days with early morning meetings of senior staff, including the spokesperson. Typically the meetings last about 30 to 45 minutes, with the senior staff member talking about the principal concerns of the day — the government official's top issues, schedule, and meetings, for example. Each staff member might then briefly discuss upcoming issues, such as legislation, press interviews, budget questions, and newsworthy topics. The press secretary should provide information about press coverage that morning, what breaking news might affect the government official, and the message of the day, week, or month.

Following this meeting, the spokesperson typically holds a second meeting with the press relations staff to debrief them on the critical issues of the day. This meeting follows the format of the senior staff meeting, with each member of the press staff commenting about what they are working on, reviewing the government official's schedule, and discussing media messages and topics that might be raised by reporters that day. The press secretary makes assignments, and the staff delegates questions to various cabinet offices for response. During the day, the staff may make up a briefing or issues book with government policies or positions on current, important topics. The press spokesperson can refer to this while preparing for a daily press briefing.

At the White House, the press secretary usually includes the press officials to the first lady and the vice president in press staff meetings. Additionally, the press secretary or deputy press secretary has a daily phone call with his or her counterparts in the Departments of State and Defense and the Office of National Security Affairs to formulate a single message on foreign affairs issues. Top officials may have a weekly meeting to discuss politics and planning and how they relate to communications. The group looks at how event opportunities could be used to reinforce the president's agenda. Large departments with many regional offices and many bureaus under them do the same thing. At the U.S. Department of Labor, for instance, the spokesperson usually has a conference call every two weeks with the directors of information in its 10 regions to cover current and upcoming media issues.

The press offices of many U.S. state governors are similar. The gubernatorial spokesperson may participate in a daily morning staff meeting with senior staff that the governor might attend or to which he or she might phone in to discuss the morning's press and events for the day. In some smaller states, the meetings might be held more infrequently, such as weekly. Many press spokespersons to governors also routinely have meetings with the press secretaries for the various state departments and agencies.

One newly elected government official chose his campaign press secretary to be his spokesperson. Although the spokesperson had known the goal of the campaign — to win — since they had taken office he rarely had discussed the "current message" or theme with the government official. The focus was on getting measures passed. There were no meetings between the elected official and his press secretary and his senior staff to articulate and amend goals and assess progress. The spokesperson was left on his own to talk to the press. "How do you

decide on your own what the message is?" the spokesperson asked.

Press clipping and news monitoring: Government press offices usually do some kind of daily - and often twice a day — press clipping or news monitoring to inform their bosses and staff about happenings that could have an impact on their operations. In the United States, the press offices of most governors and federal agencies include staff who read, clip, duplicate, and circulate news stories to top officials, and might also prepare a compilation of television stories. Typically, the clippings are a composite of the most important stories — good and bad — followed by less important ones. Other press offices also subscribe to clipping services, which are private companies that track articles, often in smaller or regional publications.

The White House summarizes as well as compiles news clippings, but many government agencies only do a compilation. In putting together a daily clipping or press monitor package, the first priority of the press spokesperson's office usually is tracking the news rather than summarizing it. Often, making copies of the most important articles — positive and negative — is enough. Rewriting a news article, no matter how brief, can consume much staff time.

In one new government, the most senior staff in a press office daily clipped, pasted, and summarized articles from newspapers and magazines for the dozen top senior staff. Although 80 percent of the news came from television, there was no monitoring of TV as it was felt to be too expensive. The staff also compiled a monthly summary of news coverage. Might it have been more effective if the staff had:

- Clipped and copied stories only?
- Distributed these to more staff?
- Used equipment from the department's TV studio to monitor television news?
- Stopped analyzing the news and hired a private agency to do this monthly or quarterly?
- Moved senior staff, who were monitoring the news, into the press relations department to work with the mainstream media?
- Had junior staff cut and copy newspapers?

Phone calls: In the United States, the press offices of the White House and the top-level departments have a duty officer system so that a press officer is available most hours, including evenings and weekends, to answer questions from the media. A duty officer system enables press offices to operate in the 24-hour-a-day news cycle; because it is often staffed by junior press officials, the main press secretary gets a break.

Sometimes, when they are working on a big story, spokespersons give their cell or home phone numbers to the media - often getting the media representative's number in exchange — so questions can be answered after hours. If a press official has been working with a reporter on a story, this would preclude bringing in a new spokesperson who may be less knowledgeable about the subject. "I would rather have a reporter call me at home and get accurate and thorough information, as opposed to getting a sloppy story because the on-duty spokesperson

wasn't as familiar with the information," says a public affairs officer with a U.S. military organization.

Exchanging after-hours phone numbers or having a staff person on call after work hours is especially important in countries with several time zones.

In some emerging democracies, government spokespersons contend that giving out their cell phone numbers means being accessible to the press, but this is not necessarily true.

Having reporters call you on your cell phone eliminates the "filter" of a secretary or aide answering the phone, finding out who is calling, and determining the subject of the call. And it puts the spokesperson at the mercy of the press when he or she might not be prepared. Having an aide screen the call allows the press officer to be prepared. Also, having an aide answer the initial call means that someone is always able to take the media's questions, and it allows the spokesperson to answer the most important call first and be ready with an informed response when doing so.

It is essential, however, that a spokesperson call back a reporter promptly. And it is important that a spokesperson keep the cell phone switched on. Otherwise, the press will go elsewhere for information.

"Spokespeople should always be available," says Juleanna Glover, press secretary to Vice President Dick Cheney. "Giving out cell phone numbers wholesale is not advisable, but staff answering phones should always feel they can transfer a reporter to your phone once that reporter has called on a landline."

In one European state, the press secretary to a foreign minister was not aware that Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic had been charged with war crimes by the International War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague when a reporter called him directly on his cell phone requesting a statement. Because the press secretary did not know about the war crimes charges, "I appeared totally stupid," he admitted later.

"You don't have to answer a question immediately," says Joni Inman of the National Association of Government Communicators. "You have a right not to be ambushed. It is better to get back to a reporter than to misspeak." Adds Sheila Tate, former spokesperson for First Lady Nancy Reagan, "You can say 'you caught me at a bad time. What is your deadline? Let me get back to you.' "

Putting Workers Where the Work Is

Sometimes, handling media problems effectively does not mean spending more money, hiring more staff, or buying more equipment. It just means shifting resources.

On paper, the media office in a ministry had an enormous communications staff. But the number of staff dealing with the press was miniscule. Most of the employees worked on ministerial weekly or monthly publications that were for sale. Ministry officials felt that this was the best way to communicate directly with citizens. Once, after the fall of a previous communist regime, the publications had filled a void for news, but this was no longer the case. Plummeting sales to the

public meant that the ministry's newspapers and magazines had become, in essence, employee publications.

Television dominated the country's news. Yet the ministry not only did not monitor television news, but it had no one to deal with TV reporters. The ministry's small press staff had no access to the Internet or e-mail and had one computer that was for word processing only. The bulk of the personnel and equipment were in the publications and TV production sections of the ministry.

The spokespersons in the press section felt overwhelmed with the number of media inquiries, and reporters complained about getting little information and having a slow response from the press unit. The ministry would have been well served to shift its resources — people and equipment — to where its citizens got their news: independent television and print media.

The Need for Coordination

Any successful public relations effort depends heavily on coordination with other departments within your agency, with staff in your agency, and with departments outside your agency.

"It is really important that everyone within an organization understand its priorities and mission so that they reflect the same agenda," says Susan King, former assistant secretary for public affairs at the U.S. Departments of Labor and of Housing and Urban Development. "That does not mean speaking in lockstep, but if people don't understand the mission and priorities, they will not speak to the public in a coordinated way, and the organization will be diminished as an effective force."

Why is coordination important? For one, it ensures that a program will get off to a good start. Former White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater asked the communications directors of each cabinet department to report all announcements they felt could make front page news. He did it with the idea that the president could announce some of each department's major news and that he would know about any controversial news before it happened.

Second, someone in another ministry or department could be working on the same program or issue and could be at cross-purposes. The press could rightly ask: If a governmental leader can't keep two ministries on the same track on the same issue, and if two ministries can't work together, just how good a leader or minister is he or she?

Third, even when two government officials agree on an issue, combining their efforts will make a message stronger.

Fourth, you might be surprised and embarrassed if others' efforts are publicized by the press and you don't know about it. In one instance, a cabinet official announced a major initiative without clearing it with the White House. While the policy announcement received much media attention, its reversal by the president received even more. The cabinet official was left embarrassed and was portrayed as having been undermined in the press.

Finally, just exchanging the calendars of government officials is not enough. The press and public affairs offices should coordinate their

plans as well. When government agencies schedule major press conferences at the same time, journalists have complained loudly. "Which press conference are we supposed to pick?" one reporter complained to a spokesperson. "Don't make our job so hard."

The U.S. military, by contrast, emphasizes message coordination. Daily, near the conclusion of the work day, U.S. Navy public affairs offices around in the world e-mail to the Navy's central public affairs office in Washington a rundown of major media inquiries and newsworthy events for that day. The central office summarizes the major inquiries and issues, and e-mails this back to the public affairs offices. The spokespersons contact each other on common issues and coordinate their answers.

"This prevents the press from 'double teaming' by going to various parts of the Navy and trying to get us to say different things," says one spokesperson. "Very often I have found the same reporter called a colleague in a different city with similar questions. Knowing about all the major press activity allows me and my colleagues to coordinate our answers so we don't appear in conflict, and it helps us understand what angle a reporter may really be taking in a story."

Officials in many coalition governments complain that coordination is impossible because there are representatives of widely different political parties in key positions throughout a government. This hurdle does not belie the fact that coordination is just as essential in a coalition government as it is in a winner-take-all election.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

THE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

- [The Message Starts With the Leader](#)
- [Creating a Communications Plan](#)
- [Working Out a Media Campaign](#)

The first step in successfully communicating with the public is developing a plan for getting out your message. Your message is your theme with an objective, such as to persuade someone to do something or to support something. It is capturing your ideas in a way that can be understood and accepted by others. For example, if you want citizens to pay lower taxes, your message might be about cutting taxes to stimulate the economy.

Why not just throw out this message to the public and let it take its course? Because, chances are you won't get anywhere if you do.

You wouldn't get into your car and drive without knowing where you were going, what roads you were going to take, what you were going to do when you got there, and whom you wanted to see when you arrived. That would be a waste of time, effort, and gasoline. You need to plan where you are headed and how you will get there - and even what will happen if you have an accident in your car or a mishap in your plan.

This is also true in developing a message, putting it into a communications plan, devising a media campaign to carry it out, and assessing the strategy as you implement it. If you don't know how to get to where you want to go, you won't get there.

If you want to make economic changes in the way the government is run, for instance, you need to communicate why you are proposing what you want to do, what effect it will have and on whom, how much it will cost or how much it will save, how you will know whether or not the program reaches its goals, and how long it will take to do so. The communications plan is your map to reach your destination; the media campaign represents the roads to get there.

The Message Starts With the Leader

The government public affairs/press office plans and implements a media campaign, but that can be done only when the government leader is on board and has presented clear goals. Developing goals and themes does not rest with the press office. Ideally, the top official, working with his press secretary and senior staff, has articulated three to five objectives or themes that he or she would like to accomplish long term — say, by the end of the year or the end of his or her term in office. (More than five major themes can be too much for the public to

5 BEST TIPS

- Communications Plan
- Work with the leader and senior staff to have clear goals. Have frequent meetings to develop and reassess them.
 - Have a statement of principles and goals. Draw up a media plan on how to reach them.
 - Answer who, what, where, when, why, and how in developing a message for the public.
 - Plan how to assess the program and its success or failure.
 - Work the message into everything the responsible government official does.

absorb.) As an example, these are five that one recently democratized state considered: advance European Union reforms, achieve military reforms to get closer to NATO membership, achieve civil service reforms, achieve privatization goals, push through agricultural reforms.

The themes should be articulated repeatedly and made a focal point of the administration. As much as possible, every action the official takes — from delivering a speech, to giving a television interview, to supporting legislation — should center around these long-term objectives. Certainly, the official will have to develop short-term messages to deal with immediate crises as they crop up, but the overall goals should constantly be repeated and returned to.

A consistent message is most useful when a new issue requires acceptance by the public. Misunderstandings often stem from a lack of basic information and discussion. Thus, the government must provide clear, repeated, and open communication on the issue in order to earn public understanding and acceptance for its objectives.

Governmental leaders sometimes learn this the hard way: when they are not re-elected to office. Surveys in one recently democratized state showed that the citizens knew they had to suffer some difficult economic times to get to an improved economy, but they did not know that was also the plan of the governmental leaders. The government articulated no message. Government officials had said they wanted a stronger economy, but they had never spelled out what steps were being taken to get there, why certain measures had to be taken, how their plan would work, when better times could be expected, who would be affected and how, and where the biggest impact would be felt. Instead, they focused their attention on the legislature and let the press set the agenda. To the public, they appeared to be lurching from crisis to crisis.

Creating a Communications Plan

Once the message is decided upon and the goals are identified, the government press office writes up a plan to move the leader's vision into reality. A first step is research, often by the long-term communications staff, into how the goals can be achieved and what it will mean in the interim and long terms.

With the goals and research in hand, the press staff can do a public relations audit. This is an assessment of how the action and goals are viewed by those within the organization and those outside. It involves talking to government executives to gain their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the organization or a specific program or a plan, and talking to the public to determine their views. By evaluating the two perceptions, it is possible to write up a public relations "balance sheet" of strengths and weaknesses and then develop a plan on how to capitalize on the strengths and deal with the weaknesses.

A communications plan can also be written without an audit. Begin with themes. Decide what you want to achieve at the end of a year or legislative period, or at the end of a term in office. Develop a focused and clear message. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is there a statement of principles?

- What goals do I want to achieve? Pick a realistic number — no more than five a year — on which to focus, and then break them down into what you would like to achieve this year, next year, and so forth.
- What do I want the media to communicate?
- What messages are needed for women, for students, for the elderly, for military personnel, for other audiences?
- What media strategy will communicate each message? You might decide to emphasize a theme a week. You could have sub-themes within an overall theme. For example, if improving education were a theme, subthemes might be improving teacher education, involving parents more in the educational system, lengthening the school day or year, and so forth.

Beginning with this kind of analysis, you can formulate a media campaign that you can use to educate people, influence public opinion, persuade opinion leaders, generate debate, and get people to take an action.

"To communicate effectively, you must identify a need; prioritize what is most important; decide what you want to communicate; have it be relevant to your audience; and then repeat it," says former White House spokesperson Dee Dee Myers. "You can't say everything. You have to decide what is most important to say, focus on whom you are saying it to, and say it in terms that make sense to them. Then you have to repeat the message over and over, because people are busy and have a lot of information coming at them in a 24-hour news cycle."

Working Out a Media Campaign

In working out a media campaign, you would:

- Devise a plan on how to reach your goals.
- Break the plan down by assignments.
- Write out a schedule of who does what and by what date, and update it frequently.
- Appoint a supervisor to monitor the assignments to ensure that work is on schedule.
- Change goals and deadlines as needed.
- Meet regularly with those involved in the plan — everyone from press secretary to the chief of staff, the scheduler, the speechwriter, and the legislative aide.
- Approve the plan with the group.
- Implement the plan.
- Use events to reinforce the themes.
- Put the goals into legislation.
- Focus on the goals in speeches.
- Target various subtexts of your message to your different audiences.
- Have surrogates or outside experts give the same message on your goals as you do.

- Answer the who, what, when, where, why, and how of typical news stories to help move your vision into a message that can be readily understood.

In regard to this last point, it is important to be prepared to tell the public:

- What the program is and what it is not.
- Why it is needed.
- How it will affect them.
- What will happen in the short term.
- What will happen in the long term.
- How this is different from what is already happening.
- What the government's responsibility in the new program is.
- What the timeline is and when changes will take effect.
- What will happen if it doesn't work.
- How the public will know if it has been successful.
- What action the public is being asked to take.

One way to keep your good story going, says former White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, is to talk about what you are going to say, then say it, and then talk about what you said.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)

Message Development

[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Once you have decided on goals, themes, and an overall communications plan, success or failure will depend on your ability to carry it out in an orderly, detailed way. Here are some approaches that have proved useful at this stage.

Annual calendar: Look at your annual calendar — month by month — and fill in major recurring events. In the United States, for example, the president gives a "State of the Union" address to the country, usually in January, at the time the annual budget is released; there are the Group of Seven and Group of Eight meetings in the summer; and the United Nations session opens in the fall. These significant recurring events are linchpins in the White House media calendar in terms of repeating key themes.

Your own major themes might fit into similar recurring events. If privatization is a goal, for instance, that could be a major topic in an annual budget address.

Pick a periodic theme: After you fill in the "must do" events on the calendar, pick a theme for certain time periods, such as a week or a month, relating to one of the five goals to allow you to alternate the "must do" events with your themes. One week, the theme might be agricultural reform, and you would schedule different events that are agriculturally focused. The next week, the theme might be civil service reform, and events would be undertaken to fit that theme.

Make a master calendar: Write the theme for each week on a calendar for at least six months ahead. The calendar will need to be updated frequently because unplanned events will arise and you will need to react.

Select and develop a message for each theme: For example, if the theme for the second week in January is agricultural reform, you would develop a message relating to that theme. Each theme would likely have several subthemes. For example, one subtheme for agricultural reform might be the government's changing agricultural subsidies; another might be new methods for increasing farmers' productivity. During the second week of January, when the theme is agricultural reform, you might emphasize the subtheme of changing agricultural subsidies. You would fill the other weeks in January with your other main themes. Then, you would return to the agricultural theme in February, perhaps emphasizing the subtheme of increasing farmers' productivity. In March, you would again emphasize an agricultural subtheme, perhaps returning to changing agricultural subsidies.

When you pick a theme, know whether or not it relates to legislation or government action. For instance, if the government plans to consider

5 BEST TIPS

Message Development

- Map out your year. Focus first on the major recurrent events.
- Fill in the calendar with themes; one theme a week works well.
- Develop a message for each theme and subtheme.
- Pick the audiences and media for each theme.
- Work backwards on your calendar from the final event and determine who does what, where, by when, and how. Make assignments.

agricultural reforms this year, you would stress that theme before any votes on agriculture are made in the legislature.

Make sure that your message is simple, clear, and direct. Think about how you would like a headline to be written about it and how you would like a first paragraph of a story to read. This will help you refine your message.

For the message of reducing government agricultural subsidies, for example, you could pick three points to emphasize. Having more than three could create confusion and result in their being forgotten. Your points would be repeated over and over throughout the week. For example, you could say that cutting government subsidies would: (1) allow more government funds to be spent on other needed programs, (2) open up more foreign investment in farming, (3) increase private investment and make agriculture more profitable and efficient.

Identify audiences, media outlets, and locations: Ask these questions: Whom do you want to hear your message? Maybe you have several audiences, such as the elderly, students, or women, and each needs a differently focused message. What media outlets are there to deliver your messages? Are there respected third party allies who can reinforce your message? If your message is about agriculture, which farmers' groups would you like to reach? To which media do they pay the most attention?

Select a site with good visual impact to deliver the message. Don't just deliver the message from an office. Make the message visual and relative to what you have to say. If agriculture is your theme for the week, you might deliver your message from a farmers' cooperative on Monday, visit a farmer's family on Tuesday, give a speech to the legislature on cutting subsidies on Wednesday, visit a fertilizer factory on Thursday, and address foreign farming investors on Friday. Invite the press to cover all of these events.

List the media: Look through your media list to determine who would be most interested in your story. If your story is agricultural in nature, plan to contact both those who cover agriculture as well as political reporters. Don't overlook the specialized press, such as agricultural trade journals and magazines read by farmers. Know the reporters and know whether they are reporting on your story positively or negatively.

You might think in stages to ensure that the message is repeated in the newspapers one day after another. In a newspaper campaign, for example, you might focus on:

- Hard news for a first-day story.
- Feature news (the farm family) for a second-day story.
- An editorial page article for the third or fourth day.

A hard-news story transmits a basic set of facts to the reader as quickly as possible. This doesn't happen with a feature story. With a feature, the purpose of the lead or beginning of a story is to attract attention. With a hard-news story the lead imparts who, what, when, where, why, and how. A feature story enhances the basic facts with details and descriptions so that the reader sees a more complete picture of an event or person. While the news story might say "desk," a feature story

might say "light cherry desk."

When you want your message repeated, getting it into different news sections in different forms is often useful. For example, when the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) undertook a campaign on the testing of college students and their knowledge of history and literature, it staged its media campaign so that the news would appear in different sections of the newspaper one day after the other. It mailed its press materials to the hard-news reporters first and to feature and editorial writers second. The latter got the material the day that the hard-news story appeared. The first-day story was a hard-news story about the results of the test. The second-day story was a feature on the test that included the full text of the test, so readers could take it, and a story on how much college students knew when reporters went to local college campuses to quiz them. On the third day, the editorial pages ran editorials on the NEH findings. The result was massive coverage favorable to the NEH.

How to develop a calendar: Decide what material you want to release — press release or media package, for example — on the day you announce your message.

- Work backwards to fill in the calendar and make assignments. For instance, if you need 50 press releases on the day of an announcement, how many days ahead of time do they need to be prepared? How long will it take to get them printed? List that on the calendar and then assign the writing of the press release and establish a deadline by which it must be written, a deadline for its review by a superior, a deadline for it to be printed, and a deadline for it to be inserted into a press package with other materials.
- Also write down the deadline for completion of the targeted press list and identify who will compile the list. Write down the deadline for finishing the official's remarks and when his/her statement must be reviewed and by whom.
- Write down any other task that needs to be done. Assign each task to someone to complete, and give them a deadline.
- Constantly review the calendar to be sure that deadlines are being met.

Written material: Have written material ready in advance for the media. This could include:

- Fact sheet containing economic information on farming.
- Fact sheet on your goals in farm reform — spelling out what you want to do and how it will affect farmers and consumers in the short and long terms.
- Fact sheet on why reform is needed for the country's future economic well-being.

Special interviews: Set up media interviews between government officials and reporters on this topic. Use radio call-in shows to push the issue. In the United States, the president often focuses his weekly Saturday radio address to the nation on issues that will be prominent the following week.

Local interviews: Schedule local interviews on your theme around the country. Emphasize agriculture, for example, with a local radio station in a key agricultural city. If possible, have statistics available showing how the reforms will affect farmers and consumers in that area.

Experts: Develop messages that others can make on your behalf. Prepare talking points from which supporters who are opinion-makers can make statements on the same theme. For example, in the United States, if the presidential administration is advocating changes related to health care, it might encourage a prominent doctor who agrees with its policies to do television interviews favorable to its position. Experts who can give interviews and speeches, appear on TV and radio, and write opinion pieces in support of your theme can influence public opinion. Develop a way to stay in touch with this group as the issue progresses, perhaps through an e-mail list of Web sites.

Coordination: Coordinate your message with others in the government to ensure that the public does not receive conflicting messages. The media often report on conflicts, and having opposing opinions within a government makes a good story. If the press focuses on this sort of controversy, it will get in the way of your message. Additionally, it is easier to get support for a program if you have all groups involved aligned with you.

Assessment: After each "theme week" concludes, assess how you did and alter the schedule, message, and calendar as needed.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)

Tools of the Press Office

[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

TOOLS OF THE PRESS OFFICE

"We handed out papers on everything," says former White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers. During President Bill Clinton's first term, she says, the White House press office distributed to reporters not only texts of speeches, proclamations, and press conferences, but also press releases, fact sheets, background information on policies, media advisories of upcoming events, summaries of points made in speeches and policy documents, analyses of the most important points in a document, and so forth.

"Reporters are busy, especially those covering heads of state and other government leaders," she says. "The breadth of material they are expected to cover is daunting." Putting material in writing for the media helps.

Summarizing the material and distributing it in written form or on-line means not having to rely on someone's hearing it correctly in a speech or statement. It also allows a press spokesperson another chance at restating the major points, Myers says.

In the United States, as much as possible, press offices write and distribute to the press, on paper and on the Internet, statements, policies, actions, and plans. Writing them and distributing them in written form achieves several goals:

- It helps government officials and press officers clearly think out what they want to say and to refine their message.
- It increases the odds that the media will understand the information correctly and cuts down on misinterpretation.
- It provides something reporters can refer back to when writing their stories.
- It obviates having to answer the same questions over and over because the basic information has been provided.
- It stimulates more thoughtful, fact-based questions from the media.
- It increases the chances the story will come out with the emphasis you want.

Handing out summaries and analyses with a statement or speech also enables the press office to restate its interpretation of the news.

In the United States, written communications take many forms. Additionally, press offices have a number of other tools — visual and oral — to communicate with the public through the press. Among the

5 BEST TIPS

Tools of the Press Office

- Have as much written material as possible to distribute — not so much that the press is overwhelmed, but enough that your story will not be misinterpreted.
- Use visuals.
- Use video, audio, and satellites whenever possible so as to enhance the telling of your message.
- Initiate. Don't wait for the press to come to you. Get your message out by writing op-eds, doing editorial boards with newspapers and television systems, and getting the story also told in a newspaper's feature section.
- Use the Internet.

common communication tools are:

Press release, which is written like a news article and is sometimes used as the text of news articles by some publications. A press release is an account of your story told in one or two pages. It should tell who, what, where, when, why, and how in the first paragraph, just as in a news story. The press release should follow an inverted pyramid style, with information appearing in its order of importance so that editors can easily identify key facts. The key information is presented at the top, and the pyramid declines to a point at the bottom with the least important news.

Media advisory, which is similar to a press release, but is prepared to announce an upcoming event so that the media can quickly assess the event and decide whether or not to report on it. A media advisory should also include who, what, when, where, why, and how. It should be only one page in length.

Fact sheet or backgrounder, which is an expanded press release that provides detailed information on a subject. It uses facts and statistics, but usually not quotations, and typically is distributed with a press release. Running up to four or five pages, the fact sheet or backgrounder should be in easily readable form, using techniques such as bullets or bold type for each new fact.

Visuals, such as pictures, graphs, charts, and maps that accompany press releases.

Biography, which is given out with a press release. A biography briefly provides the professional record and accomplishments of a person being appointed to a new job, giving a speech, or participating in an event.

A list of experts who will reinforce your message. The list should include names and telephone numbers.

Other texts, which can include all kinds of material. At the White House, for example, transcripts of the president's remarks and of the daily press briefing by the press secretary and other officials are given out to the media soon after the events. Proclamations, statements, announcements of personnel appointments and nominations, letters supporting proposed legislation by experts or professional associations, and other correspondence to and from the president are also distributed to the press daily.

Clippings, which show primarily "good" stories that have been printed. Officials often make attractive copies of news articles that are favorable to them and put them into media kits or press packets with other materials.

Questions, which are sometimes given by officials to reporters to spark their interest in a topic. In some instances, you might write up questions that interviewers could ask an official. Imaginative questions create curiosity.

Press packets or media kits, which contain several items on a single topic. The items are inserted into a folder with two internal pockets to hold them. For the dedication of a new school, for example, a media packet might include:

- A folder bearing the logo of the featured school on the cover, with inside flaps holding press materials.
- A media advisory that gives details on the dedication time, site, and significance.
- A press release that specifies the details of the dedication service, contains general information about the school, and includes quotes from top officials about the school.
- A media backgrounder that presents detailed facts and statistics, such as specifics on construction, how many students will attend the school, and so forth.
- Biographies of the speakers at the event.
- Visuals such as pictures of the school.

"Pitch letter" or telephone call, which summarizes a story idea in one paragraph and explains why readers - or viewers — will be attracted to it. The pitch letter or phone call provides details, gives names, describes photo opportunities, and summarizes the story concept.

Video and audio news releases, which have the who, what, when, where, why, and how of a written press release but are presented as a radio or television story. Broadcasters may use all or part of the material in a radio or television news story and identify the material as coming from a public relations source. The video news release should be presented on split audio tracks, with the narrator on one track and sound bites and natural sounds on another. This makes it easier for the sound to be rearranged in editing.

Satellite technology, which allows newsmakers to hold a meeting or do an interview and then transmit the feed or news to television stations across country. It offers a media tour without the investment of travel and time. Typically, public information specialists tape an event and then purchase satellite time to transmit it via satellite feed. To do this properly, you need a studio that can transmit live pictures and sound and can give television reporters the opportunity to ask questions over the phone while taping the official answering the questions. Stations need to be notified when the satellite feed will be available and how to access it.

Radio actuality, which is an audio recording of the government official making a short statement as if it were an actual interview. Some U.S. politicians do radio actualities every day at regular times. Either they transmit them directly to reporters or give them a phone number to an answering machine that contains the statement. To do this properly, a high-quality tape recorder is needed with an attachment that connects a telephone to the tape recorder. The material also can be posted on the World Wide Web for downloading.

Separate phone line, which can be used to record the government official's daily schedule for media reference.

Press conferences, at which officials announce news on an issue. To be effective and credible, the news should be timely and substantive.

Interviews, which give officials a chance to talk, usually one on one,

with a reporter and get their ideas across in a more in-depth manner than at a press conference.

Editorial boards, which are meetings between the newsmaker and the editor of a newspaper's editorial page, editorial and opinion writers, and reporters from the news sections to discuss a topic. Major television and cable networks also have similar meetings. The editorial board can give a government official an opportunity to explain his or her ideas in depth, which can lead the media to a deeper understanding of the government's policies and often results in news stories and editorials.

Off-the-record meetings, at which officials meet with reporters to provide background or context on topics of news interest.

Op-eds, opinion pieces, and columns, which are used by newsmakers to express opinions. Some politicians write a weekly column in an effort to get their opinions directly to the people.

Speeches, which are used to promote policies, unveil new programs, explain positions, and build consensus. Advance copies of speeches are often given to the press, and copies are sent to interested journalists who cannot attend a media event. Putting speeches on the Internet is also effective. If possible, when distributing a speech, begin with a summary of the material to give reporters a synopsis of the main theme. Always keep a list of the media to whom material was sent.

Media tours, which move beyond the capital city and reach out to the media regionally. Media tours should give regional press news targeted to their regions and explain how their citizens will be affected by government policies.

Features, which tell a story in a non-hard-news fashion. Public information specialists don't rely only on hard-news sections of print publications when telling their stories, but use feature and other sections, too.

The Internet, which provides a venue to communicate directly with the public without the filter of the media. It also provides for quick communication with reporters. Additionally, the Internet offers the capability for back-and-forth communication between government officials and the public. Press offices can establish their own local electronic bulletin boards. The Internet has it all: text, pictures, video, and sound. Government press offices also use the Internet to direct users to vast amounts of original documents on line. To be effective, the Web site needs to be updated frequently.

E-mail, which includes group e-mail addresses so that with one keyboard command, information can be transmitted easily to numerous interested people.

Photo opportunities, or "photo ops," which allow an official to have his/her picture taken with constituents, such as award recipients, to be sent to the recipients' hometown newspapers for publicity. When a photograph is taken and then mailed, be sure to identify the people in the photo and the meeting.

News materials might be of interest to only some reporters. In the White House press room, for example, a journalist often will pick up a

press release, read it, and put it back because it does not pertain to what he covers. But it is important that it's available to those who do want and need it.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

PRESS RELEASES, MEDIA ADVISORIES, AND FACT SHEETS: A CLOSER LOOK

- [Press Releases](#)
- [Media Advisories](#)
- [Fact Sheets](#)

Preparing and disseminating press releases, fact sheets, and media advisories or backgrounders make up the nuts and bolts of most government press operations. In different countries, these tools of the trade go by different names, but their purpose is the same: to tell a story, announce an event, and give facts and figures.

"Press releases are good disciplinary tools because they encourage you to try to create the story you would like to see," says David Beckwith, former press secretary to Vice President Dan Quayle. "If done clearly and simply, press releases improve accuracy. It is hard to misquote a press release."

What follows are the universally recognized standards and conventions for these basic press relations materials.

Press Releases

Press releases are a summary of facts about a program or issue on which you want media attention. They are presented in a standardized format. The main criterion for a press release is that it must contain news.

Similar to a straight news article, a press release is written in an inverted pyramid style. The first paragraph is the "lead," and it contains the most important information; subsequent paragraphs expand on that information and give more detail in decreasing order of importance. The least important information is at the end.

Like a good news story, the good press release answers who, what, when, where, why, and how. Who is the subject of the story? What is the story about? When is or was the event? Where is or was it happening? Why is the information important? How is this of significance? All of these should appear in the first paragraph.

The sentences and paragraphs in a press release should be short so they can be quickly reviewed by an assignment editor or a reporter, and they should contain no jargon, abbreviations, unexplained details, or clichés. Quotations may be used, but it is more usual to find these in the second or third paragraph; they are always attributed.

Press releases that read like a news story, without a lot of inflammatory adjectives, are more likely to be picked up by the press.

5 BEST TIPS

Press Releases

Before you do a press release, answer these questions:

- Why is this important and how does this make news?
- What are the main points?
- What research is there to back up the information? Can it be checked easily if reporters ask to do so?
- Who can be quoted as an authority on the topic?
- Is a fact sheet needed for additional information?

Typically, press releases in the United States follow a formula that includes:

- Double spacing;
- Plain stationery, preferably with the organization's name and address printed at the top.
- Wide margins — at least one inch (2.54 centimeters) around — providing for ease in reading and allowing editors and reporters to make notes in them.
- Typed on only one side of the paper.

The standard press release contains the following information at the top of the release:

- The date the release is being put out.
- A contact name, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address. Sometimes, cell phone numbers of after-hours contact persons are listed, particularly if the press office deals with reporters in several time zones.
- A release time. Often, news releases are sent in advance of an event but cannot be used until a specific time so that reporters have time to read the material and process the information, particularly if it is a complicated story. If this is done, write "EMBARGOED UNTIL" and the date and specific time the news can be released. If the information can be used immediately, write "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE."
- A headline, summarizing the news of the release, that is attention getting and capitalized.
- A dateline, capitalized, beginning the first paragraph that states where the news originated.

In the United States, press releases typically run one to two pages. If there is more than one page, type "more" at the end of the first page. At the end of the release, type --30-- or #### to indicate the end. Be sure to check for spelling errors, typos, incorrect punctuation, and poor writing.

Press releases can be sent to the attention of an editor, an assignment editor, or a reporter. Follow up on the press release with a phone call. Ask if the intended recipient got your release and would like additional information.

Press materials, such as press releases and fact sheets, should always be written and distributed before a news event such as a press conference, and not afterwards. One new government found that out the hard way. Ministers stayed behind closed doors all night to develop a new economic plan. They concluded at 7 a.m. and alerted the media to an important press conference at 10 a.m. The ministers announced the new economic policies, and then the press staff began writing the press materials. Because the staff was so occupied with writing the press announcement, they did not have time to properly explain the new policies. For hours, the press had no written materials to work from in preparing what was a major and complicated story, and many got some of the details wrong. The government press office had to work for weeks attempting to correct the misinformation.

Media Advisories

Typically, media advisories are used to announce an upcoming event on which you would like press coverage. They are similar to press releases in answering who, what, when, where, why, and how, but they are shorter, intended to entice reporters to come to the event. Some press offices even list this information in bold type, followed by the details, in order to attract attention for the upcoming event.

Media advisories are in the same style as a news release with the date, contact names, phone numbers, and "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" or "EMBARGOED UNTIL" at the top, and with #### or --30-- to indicate the end of the release.

Fact Sheets

The fact sheet, or backgrounder, gives more detail than the press release by using facts and figures, but not quotations, to embellish on a press release. The fact sheet is presented in as readable a form as possible. It often has subtitles in bold type and is highlighted with bullets.

Like media advisories, fact sheets follow the format of a news release with "EMBARGOED UNTIL" or "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE," contact names and numbers, and -30- or #### indicating an ending.

Officials in one government media office observed that the members of the press would come to a press conference, take materials, and leave before the press conference began. The press spokesman decided to distribute the materials after the press briefing in order to keep journalists there. This didn't work. A number of journalists stayed for only part of the briefing, left early, and wrote stories from their notes. Sometimes, the press officers felt the reporters got it wrong. If the reporters had had the written material with the basic facts to pick up before the press conference, they likely would not have misinterpreted issues.

Journalists usually have a number of events to cover, and a spokesperson should not assume that if reporters stay for only part of a briefing they are not interested or will not write a story. Many may want to write stories, but their schedules may preclude them from staying for the entire press briefing, particularly if a briefing runs for more than an hour, as this press office's did. If the reporters had had the written materials, chances are they would have referred to them while writing their stories.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

INTERVIEWS: A CLOSER LOOK

- [Assessing the Interview Request](#)
- [Establishing Ground Rules](#)
- [Once the Interview Is Agreed To](#)
- [During the Interview](#)
- [Staying Focused](#)
- [Being Effective on Television](#)
- [After the Interview](#)

As much as possible, interviews of government officials should be part of any media strategy. Before agreeing to do an interview, a government official should thoroughly plan what he or she would like to achieve and identify who the audience will be. Writing a headline that you would like to see on the story of your hypothetical interview will help you focus on the message to get across.

"An interview request should be viewed from the prism of 'will this forward my principal's agenda?' " says Juleanna Glover, press secretary to Vice President Dick Cheney. "Each request should be researched to establish an author's style or biases, and the parameters for discussion should be set."

Assessing the Interview Request

When an interview request comes in, getting answers to certain questions will help you assess the request. These include:

- What is the topic or news angle of the interview?
- What was the impetus for the story?
- Which publication — or TV or radio system — wants to do the interview?
- Who will the interviewer be?
- When and where do they want the interview?
- How much time is the reporter requesting for the interview?
- What is the story deadline?
- When will the interview be published or broadcast on air?
- What kind of a story is it? A news story? A profile story? A feature? A question-and-answer format?
- Is anyone else being interviewed for the story?
- What are the characteristics of the media outlet and the reporter?

It is useful to find out:

5 BEST TIPS

Assessing the Interview Request

- What is the medium and who is the interviewer?
- How much time is requested; what is the deadline?
- When will the interview be printed or aired, and what kind of story is it?
- What is the media type? For TV, will it be live, taped for uncut airing, or taped for excerpting? And for print, what section of the newspaper or magazine will it be in, and will there be photographs?
- May the interviewee provide visuals?

- If the media outlet has an apparent point of view on the subject.
- How much the reporter knows about the topic.
- If the reporter or media outlet has done anything on the topic in the past. Check press clippings.
- How friendly or antagonistic the reporter is.
- What the audience of the news outlet is.

Other questions to ask regarding a radio or TV interview include:

- Will it be a live broadcast?
- Will the interview be conducted in a studio, by phone, in the government official's office, or in some other location?
- Will it be by remote, with the interviewer not physically present but asking questions from another site while connected by satellite transmission?
- Is the interview being taped for uncut airing, or is it being taped for excerpting?
- Will the broadcast include call-ins or e-mails from viewers, listeners, or an on-line audience?
- How long will the broadcast last?
- What is the show's format? A panel? One interviewer and one guest? Two interviewers and one guest? Two guests debating?
- If there are other guests, in what order will they speak?
- Will it be before an audience? How will the audience be selected?
- Can visual props be used?
- Will film clips or videotape inserts be used? If so, will the press office have an opportunity to review them and prepare comments or responses?

Other questions for a print interview include:

- In which section of the publication will the article appear?
- Will a photographer accompany the reporter and take pictures?
- Will photos be taken before, during, or after the interview?

Establishing Ground Rules

For any interview, you want to establish ground rules — regarding, for example, whether you are speaking on or off the record, whether the interview is live or taped, and the length of the interview — before the interview occurs. Don't attempt to do so during or afterwards; then, it's too late. For instance, if the reporter requests a half an hour for an interview, you can limit it to a shorter period of time. If the request is for a "remote" hook up, you could request that it be in person. If you have a choice, it is often better to have the interview in person. An in-person interview is more intimate and conversational. You can see the other person's body language. You don't require a sound piece in your ear that could fall off or have sound that is interrupted.

In the United States, interview subjects generally don't have the opportunity to review their interviews or quotes before they are published or the segment is shown on radio or TV, although this is

sometimes done in some countries. If you want to review the interview in advance, establish that ahead of time.

Once the Interview Is Agreed To

It is important that the person being interviewed have three points to make in the interview. This will keep the interview focused. More than three major points is too much for the audience to absorb.

It is the role of the press office to develop this information. Before the interview determine:

- What three points the interview subject would like to make.
- For each point, write down supporting information — examples, stories, anecdotes. These help the reader, listener, or viewer better understand the points. For example, if one point is advocacy of a new economic policy, write down reasons why the current policy is being changed, what the changes mean, and how the public will be affected.
- Write down the questions you think will be asked during the interview and the responses that you think should be given. Address more topics than the three key issues, however. Reporters often move from the intended interview topic to other issues.
- Review important topics in the news to help you think of potential questions.

5 BEST TIPS

Once the Interview Is Agreed To

- Have three points to make in the interview and have examples, anecdotes, and sound bites to support them.
- Have practice questions and answers.
- Practice!
- Get an update on the news before giving the interview.
- Set ground rules before the interview.

In developing questions and responses, answer these questions:

- What is the most controversial issue that could be raised and the most delicate topic that could be addressed?
- What would be the hardest question to answer and why?
- To help you shape a story, think of a good quote, or "sound bite," to give during the interview. A sound bite is a short, pithy statement regarding a larger issue that appears to be spontaneous but in most cases is prepared. Often, it is repeated in the story, particularly by the radio and TV media.
- Decide whether you will tape the interview in addition to the reporter's taping it. Taping often is a good idea both to verify the statements that have been made and to inform key staff members who did not hear the interview.
- Practice answering possible questions.
- Arrange a quick update on hot issues just before the interview. The briefer, typically the press secretary, should update the government official with last-minute news. Don't let the official be caught off guard.
- Provide the reporter with information in advance of the interview that might be helpful to your issues. These could be items such as biographies, fact sheets, articles, photographs, and reports.
- Don't be afraid to suggest questions and topics for the interviewer to ask.

During the Interview

Make the interview yours. Much more than you may think, you can control the interview. Just because you are asked questions does not mean you can't control what you say. As one U.S. president once said: "There are no such things as bad questions, only bad answers."

Do the following:

- Establish the ground rules of attribution before beginning the interview. Typically, the interviewee speaks on the record. If that is not already clear, make it clear before beginning.
- Be concise; don't bury important points in long answers with too many details. Speak in short, clear, declarative sentences.
- Speak in sound bites.
- Stay on message and return to the three key points frequently during the interview. Relate all questions back to them.
- State your conclusions and most quotable lines first to get your main points across; then back them up with facts.
- Use positive, descriptive word images that people can understand.
- Give proof. Use facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, quotes, and stories. People remember what affects them, what motivates them, and what others' experiences are. Word pictures, such as "as big as a pick-up truck" rather than just "big," are what people recall.
- Don't assume that the facts speak for themselves. Explain your answers clearly and succinctly. Not every reporter or reader or listener will know as much about a subject as you do.
- Stay positive. If you are asked a negative question, get back to your main points.
- Correct any misinformation quickly.
- Never say anything that you don't want to see in print or hear broadcast.
- Avoid making statements that can be taken out of context or be misconstrued if the reporter or editor chooses to use only that part of your statement and not what came before or after.
- Never say "no comment." You can, and sometimes should, avoid comment by saying something like, "I'm not prepared to discuss that today" or "It would be inappropriate for me to discuss that at this point."
- Don't use jargon.
- Be clear. Don't leave it up to the media to interpret what you mean. They might get it wrong.
- Always tell the truth. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Get back to the interviewer with the answer later.

5 BEST TIPS

During the Interview

- Stay on message with your three points.
- Be concise and clear.
- Give anecdotes, facts, examples.
- Never say "no comment."
- Tell the truth; don't be afraid to say you don't know an answer if you don't.

Staying Focused

Use bridging phrases or words to get back to your three points, such as:

- "The real issue is...."
- "Let me add..."
- "It is important to emphasize..."
- "It is important not to overlook..."
- "What's more important is..."
- "The most important point to remember is..."
- "Along those lines, another question I'm often asked is...."
- "That deals with one aspect of a larger issue..."
- "Yes, and in addition to that..."
- "No, let me clarify..."
- "It's a bit too early to talk about that until all the facts are in, but I can tell you..."
- "I'm not sure about that, but what I do know is"
- "Let me put this into perspective...."
- "That reminds me of..."
- "Let me emphasize that..."
- "I'm glad you asked me that. People may have that misconception, but the truth is..."

Always try to make the interview yours. As former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once quipped at a press conference: "Does anyone have any questions for my answers?"

Being Effective on Television

- Look directly at the interviewer if the interview is in person. Look at the camera if the interview is by remote and the interviewer is elsewhere. The camera becomes the person to whom you are talking.
- Be enthusiastic and energetic; television can flatten and make a person appear bland.
- Wear solid colors, light but not white or total black. Mid-range colors are the best. Do not wear browns, plaids, stripes, or loud prints. Do not wear flashy, shiny fabrics.
- For women, do not overaccessorize your clothes, such as wearing obtrusive earrings that could detract from your message.
- For men, do not wear a shirt darker than your tie.
- Sit forward. Lean into the camera.
- Use natural hand gestures so you don't appear stiff or uncomfortable.
- Don't give monosyllabic answers.
- Don't use trade or technical jargon or acronyms that are not familiar to the average citizen.
- Jump into the conversation if you want to clarify a point or add to the conversation. Don't wait for the host to recognize you, but don't behave rudely.
- Avoid using too many numbers. They bypass the audience. When

you must use numbers, round them off so they are more easily absorbed. For example, instead of saying "four-hundred-and-forty-four thousand," say "almost half a million."

After the Interview

- If you promised additional information to the reporter, follow up immediately.
- Debrief the media staff so they know what to expect.
- Evaluate the interview. Note for your file: What went well in the interview? What could have gone better? Keep the notes for the next interview or press conference.
- Get the name of the reporter, producer, and sound technician conducting the interview and update your media list.
- File the news clipping or tape from the interview in a permanent archive.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

PRESS CONFERENCES

- [Before the Press Conference](#)
- [If the Press Conference Is Off Site](#)
- [During the Press Conference](#)
- [After the Press Conference](#)

Press conferences bring together members of the media and the public and one or more government officials in a question-and-answer session, usually at a location selected by the government official. Press conferences offer a chance for citizens — through the press — to question government officials and a chance for the government officials to take their message to the people through the media.

"When you have press conferences on a regular basis, they allow for steam to be released," says David Beckwith, former vice presidential spokesman. What that means, he says, is that, over time, an aggressive sort of pressure builds up in reporters who have questions they want answered, and that pressure is released in a press conference.

"Having a press conference is a good idea when you have something to announce or something positive to say," Beckwith says. "Think of why you are doing it and what will come out of it."

Before the Press Conference

The first step in setting up a press conference is to be sure there is news. For the head of a country, this is rarely a problem. For the head of a small government agency, attracting the press could be more difficult. Reporters don't like spending time at what they consider a non-event when they have other news competing for their attention. Among the steps to take in setting up a press conference:

- Determine the topic of the conference and whether there is news to be made.
- Decide if a press conference is really necessary, or if reporters can write an accurate, thorough story with a press release, a fact sheet, and a follow-up telephone conversation.
- Decide what the government official will say in his or her opening statement.
- Write talking points for the government official for the opening statement. Just as in doing an interview, focus on making only three points. More than that is too much.
- Identify possible questions that might be asked and appropriate responses to each question. These need to go beyond the intended subject of the press conference since reporters may ask questions on other issues. Some press offices keep a list of topics on their computers to be frequently updated so the material does not have to be newly written each time.

- Stage a mock press conference the day before the actual conference, especially if the government official is uncomfortable responding to potential questions. Have the press office staff pretend to be reporters and ask questions of the official. This allows both official and staff to become aware of potential gaps in their responses.
- Pick the date for the press conference carefully. Check the event against the long-term calendar of other government offices to ensure there are no conflicts with other news events that day.
- Pick the time for the press conference. Mid-morning or early afternoon is often the best for the various news deadlines.
- Choose a location that is accessible and can meet the technical requirements of the media. The site should also be visually attractive and enhancing to your message. For instance, if agriculture is the topic, pick a farm as a backdrop. If it is education, perhaps a school library.
- Determine whether to use visual aids. Is there a good visual, such as a big chart, that the government official can show during the press conference? Have it next to the official so that television cameras can include it. Also, have the visual printed and put in a press packet so reporters can refer to it as they write their stories and have it printed in the newspaper or shown on tape.
- Decide who, if anyone, will introduce the government official at the press conference and who will conclude it.
- Notify reporters. Besides those who cover the official regularly, you might expand the list of reporters, depending on the topic. For instance, if the intended story is on the environment, you might also notify environmental reporters.
- Telephone reporters a day or two before the event to remind them of it. Try to get an idea of who is coming and who is not. You may need to get a larger or smaller room.
- Put the announcement of the press conference on a news wire service calendar.
- Send a fax or e-mail to out-of-town press who may be interested in the topic but are unable to attend the press conference.
- Allow time for the writing, printing, assembling, and transportation of any press materials, such as press kits, press releases, backgrounders, biographies, and photographs.
- Decide if credentialing the press is necessary. That is, will only certain reporters be invited.
- Manage all the technical requirements of the press. Arrange for lighting platforms, special power, translation, and mult-boxes audio equipment that has a single input and multiple outputs that go to recording devices). Make certain that anything that will be used works.
- Assign a staff member to manage the logistics of the conference. On the day of the event, he or she should be at the site well in advance and should be prepared to handle unexpected logistical problems, such as outside noise and bad weather if it is an outdoor event.

If the Press Conference Is Off Site

- Decide if you need a holding room or hospitality suite for the government official.
- Have adequate space that meets the technical needs of reporters.
- Have the names, phone numbers, and cell phone numbers of key people at the site, such as the head of security, the maintenance superintendent, and public relations staff.

Although you are a guest at another location, planning all the aspects of out-of-town events is as important as planning events on your home turf. Things can and do go wrong. For example, one government official traveled several hours to dedicate a new hospital facility. He and his press secretary knew he would take press questions after the dedication, but they neglected to arrange for a place where this could occur. The official wound up giving a press conference for 15 reporters in a hospital hallway, with a school band playing so loudly that reporters could not hear, and in a space so narrow that TV camera operators could not get a good picture.

At least a week before the event, the spokesperson should have asked the hospital for a room to hold the press conference, notified the media as to its availability and time, and had the press aide traveling with him go to the room in advance — even an hour ahead of time — to check it. Instead, the reporters were frustrated, and the government official missed the opportunity of a good-news story.

During the Press Conference

- Have a sign-in sheet for the press and any visitors so you know who was there.
- Tell reporters at the beginning of the press conference how much time the speaker has, and be prepared to cut off questions at that time.
- Keep the press conference and statements short. The press will be more receptive to an official who makes a short statement and takes questions as opposed to one who gives a half-hour speech.
- Allow time for questions.
- Tape the remarks made by the government official so that they can be transcribed for a permanent record.
- Get responses to unanswered questions. If an official is asked a question that he or she cannot answer, he should admit it but promise to get back to the reporter later that day — before his or her deadline — with the information.

After the Press Conference

- Put a transcript of the press conference on your Web page as soon as possible to make it widely available.
- Send hand-out materials and a transcript to any media who could not attend but have an interest in the story.
- Fulfill all promises for additional materials or responses to unanswered questions within deadline times.
- Critique each step of operation, and write up your notes for the next conference.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

- [Before a Crisis](#)
- [During a Crisis](#)
- [After a Crisis](#)

A crisis is an event that occurs suddenly, often unexpectedly, and demands a quick response. A crisis interferes with normal routines and creates uncertainty and stress. A crisis can be a natural event, such as an earthquake or a hurricane, or it can be man-made, such as an explosion, a scandal, or a conflict. Ultimately, it can threaten the reputation of a top official and an organization. A well-managed crisis, however, can not only preserve reputations and credibility but can also enhance them.

The key to effective crisis communication is to be prepared before a crisis occurs. Once an emergency happens, there is little time to think much less to plan. Without a crisis plan, you can be overwhelmed by events.

"Good crisis communications is based on a system already in place," says former White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater. "When there is a crisis, you just tighten it up and make it better. If you routinely had a daily press briefing, you would tighten it up and make it three times a day. A crisis is no time to design a new system."

In a crisis, the best course of action is to be forthcoming and honest and to do what it takes to facilitate stories. The media are going to write and air stories with or without your help. It's in your best interest to participate in a story — even a negative one — in order to have your position correctly represented. The alternative is for the media to write that a government official "would not respond to our inquiries," which only fuels suspicions and rumors.

"In a crisis, bring all the key players into a room and get the facts straight. Never tell more than you know, don't freelance what you think, and constantly update reporters," says Susan King, spokesperson at two federal departments during the Clinton administration. "Reporters have to get information, and if you don't give them anything, they will report rumors."

Before a Crisis

- Maintain trustworthy, credible relationships with the media all of the time. If you do, the media will be less suspicious and more cooperative in the midst of a crisis.
- Select someone to be the crisis manager.
- Have the crisis manager collect information on potentially troublesome issues and trends. Evaluate them, gather data on them, and develop communications strategies to prevent or

5 BEST TIPS

Crisis Communications

- Have a crisis plan.
- In a time of crisis, go public immediately, but only with what you know.
- Get top management to the crisis site.
- Inform your internal publics.
- Update frequently and regularly.

redirect their course.

- Identify members of a possible crisis management team. Have in place their roles, actions to be taken, and possible scenarios. Have a list of their office, home, and cell or mobile phone numbers. Also have copies of their biographies. In a crisis, the press may want to know the backgrounds of those dealing with it.
- Give designated spokespersons training in dealing with the media.
- Determine the message, target, and media outlets that could be used in various crisis plans.
- Have a list of the office, home, and cell or mobile phone numbers and deadlines of reporters who might cover your organization in a crisis.
- Have a plan for setting up a media crisis center. This should cover such items as desks, chairs, phones, parking, electrical outlets, placement of satellite trucks, copy machines, even coffee. You also need to think about how to keep an office secure, particularly for your own staff.

During a Crisis

- When a crisis hits, immediately get the word to the press. Otherwise, the media will get their information through other means.
- Set up a 24-hour crisis and media center at a central place from which news is released, rumors dealt with, facts gathered, and briefings held.
- Immediately "go public" with a trained spokesperson at the scene to conduct press briefings. Let the media — and therefore the public — know that you are dealing with the situation.
- Say what you know and only what you know. Don't speculate. Don't be bullied into saying anything based on rumor. If you don't know something, admit it. Saying "the matter is under investigation" may be the best response.
- Gather information as quickly as possible. Determine the basic who, what, when, where and how. You might not get the "why" until later.
- Get the government or agency leader and other top management to the crisis center. Cancel other plans. People want to see the leader, not just the public affairs staff. Having top management in front of the press during a crisis lends credibility and shows that the organization is not treating the situation lightly.
- Inform your internal audiences — the staff and other government offices — at the same time you inform the press. If the press is the only source of information for the staff, morale can be damaged and employees can become confused and hurt, especially if the incident is reported inaccurately in the press. Because of where they work, the staff will be viewed as sources of information, and they can be the origin of leaks and rumors. Be sure they have it right.
- Communicate with your internal audiences by e-mail, if available, or through press releases and statements delivered to each office. If the staff is small enough, call a meeting at which members of

the crisis team are available to answer staff questions.

- Maintain a calm, gracious, and helpful presence. Avoid appearing flustered or overwhelmed.
- Pre-empt negative publicity and communicate the actions being taken to solve the crisis. Verify news before releasing it.
- Arrange for media access to the scene of the crisis, if at all possible. TV wants pictures. If there are space constraints, use press pool reports, with a representative of each type of media — wire service, newspaper, TV, radio, magazine, and photography — at the scene, writing up a report and taking pictures for their colleagues. No one may use these reports, including those in the pool, until they have been distributed to everyone.
- Take care of the practical needs of the press, such as parking, phones, electrical outlets, desks, and chairs.
- Keep a log of reporters who have called, what they asked, their deadlines, what you promised, and to whom it was delegated.
- Always return phone calls. If you don't, reporters will look elsewhere for information. They will write a story with or without your help. Being nonresponsive takes control of a story away from you.
- Simple sympathetic gestures can help rebuild the public's confidence. Offer reassurance. Tell what actions are being taken to solve the problem, to help those affected, and to return things to normal. But first make sure you are doing what you say you are doing.
- Make sure the press spokesperson is involved with senior management in every decision and policy made. Every decision has a public ramification, whether management recognizes it or not.
- Avoid fixing blame. That can be done after an investigation.
- Appeal to third-party endorsements for your efforts. Get credible people who have been through similar experiences and command the public's attention to speak on your behalf.
- Update information frequently and regularly. Announce when your next update will be.
- Monitor media reports and correct errors immediately.
- Establish a Web site to inform people about the status of the situation. Put all news releases, statements, fact sheets, and links to other information on the site.
- Establish an assessment group to study the problem and to prevent future occurrences. This is not for show; they should have real power.
- Remember: openness and responsiveness during a crisis enhances your respect and credibility with the media. It can help you in the long run.

After a Crisis

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the crisis plan and how people responded.
- Correct problems so they don't happen again.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

EVENT PLANNING

- [Planning for an Inside Event](#)
- [Planning for an Outside Event](#)

A government press office is called upon to deal with many kinds of public events. There are "media events" - events to which the press is invited — and there are other events, some of which the media attend and some they do not. A press spokesperson should be able to manage participation in any event, media or not, whether you are hosting it or attending it as the guest of someone else.

Think of these events as theater or ballet. Everything should be planned and scripted, and everything should relate to the overall theme of the play or the ballet. Every detail and each person's role is well thought out. There should be a director — from your staff — on site to make sure that things are carried out as planned.

Planning for an Inside Event

Thorough planning is needed for every event in which a press spokesperson participates, but especially for events such as the visit of a head of state or a meeting of several foreign ministers.

- As a first step, appoint a manager to oversee the entire event. He might handle everything, or she might have to supervise several other people who are handling different tasks.
- Then, decide on the theme of the event:
 - What is its purpose?
 - What goals do you want to achieve?
 - What impact do you want to have?
- Establish deadlines for the various components of the event.
 - By what date must a speech be completed?
 - By what date should requests for materials
 -
 - By what dates are approvals needed?
 - By what date should invitations be sent?
- Have regular meetings with those involved in the event to make sure that assignments are being carried out. Make a site visit at least one day in advance to check on arrangements. The bigger the event, the further in advance the site visit should occur — for a state visit, probably weeks in advance; for a half-hour meeting between ministers, an hour in advance. But always have someone from your staff at the site several hours before the event so that they can manage any last-minute changes.

Event Check List

- Get a request in writing.
- Find out when and where the event is and if there is flexibility to change dates and times.
- Clarify the purpose of the event and the role requested of the official.
- Determine whether the press will be there.
- Ask for the number of guests and other participants.

- Prepare a briefing book for the event that includes the schedule, list of participants, talking points or speech, biographies of important people at the event, a summary of political and other key issues, and newspaper articles that are related to the issues.
- Write thank you notes after the event to those involved, such as the key attendees and staff.
- Hold a follow-up meeting with your own staff and write a short report on what went well and what did not so as to improve future events.

A general theory in the United States is that about 5 to 10 hours of planning are required for each hour an event will last.

Planning for an Outside Event

Even if it's someone else's event at which your government official has been invited to speak, review anything related to the official's participation, including the invitation and press materials in which the official is mentioned.

Always have someone from your staff at the site in advance of the event. That way he or she can advocate on your behalf, learn if there are changes to the program, and alert your official. Without this, you will have no control over the official's participation.

An important part of outside event planning is assessing the invitation. Consider this: a government official traveled several hours to give a speech to an audience he thought would be supporters. But once there, he found he was on stage with opponents, whom he was expected to debate in front of an unfriendly audience. No staff had checked the arrangements in advance, so no one knew that the actual event deviated from the invitation, which had been given orally.

To prevent surprises, many politicians request that all invitations be put in writing. That way they know exactly what is being requested and can negotiate their participation according to what is written. Many then respond in writing stating what their participation will be.

When an invitation comes in over the phone, the press spokesperson or scheduler might say: "Our policy here is to have invitations in writing. Please mail, fax, or e-mail a request with the following information:"

- The title of the event.
- Its purpose.
- The date and time(s). In this regard, it's good to find out if there is any flexibility. For instance, if a conference is being held over several days and an official is invited for one specific day on which he/she is engaged elsewhere, can another date be substituted?
- The location.
- The number of people expected to attend.
- Whether there will be other participants, and who they will be.
- Whether there's a tradition of having a particular guest speak at the event. Is that person the official for whom you work - for example, in his/her capacity as governor of a state.

- What the official's role will be — to give the main address, to be the sole speaker, to be one of several speakers, to speak on a certain topic, and so forth.
- Whether the event is open or closed to the press.
- If this is an annual or repeat event, how the media have covered it in the past.

You can then review the written invitation and change what you like and don't like, negotiating from what has been written. And you can respond in writing as to what you want to accept and what will be your participation.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)


CONTENTS
[What a Press Office Does](#)
[The Job of the Press Officer](#)
[The Press Office at Work](#)
[The Communications Plan](#)
[Message Development](#)
[Tools of the Press Office](#)
[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)
[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)
[Press Conferences](#)
[Crisis Communications](#)
[Event Planning](#)
[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)
[In Brief...](#)

ETHICS: CODES OF CONDUCT

The government press office exists in two realms at once. You represent the government's position to the public, but in a sense you also stand for the interests of the press and the people inside the government. This dual role will put you in some difficult moral positions on occasion.

As a press spokesperson, what do you do if your boss tells you to withhold from the press information that is not classified? What do you do if your boss lies to the media, and you know it?

Government press officials have to deal with these questions in every country, including in the United States. To help them do this, many have developed codes of ethics.

Those value systems, by which a person determines what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, just or unjust, set acceptable norms of behavior for working professionals and employees. They are the conscience of a profession. Equally important, a well-recognized code of ethics can give an employer a clear understanding of the standards of behavior that his or her employees will follow.

Government spokespersons must make decisions that satisfy the public interest and their employer, as well as their personal values and professional standards. Because these values can be in conflict, codes of conduct are, ultimately, a measure of correct behavior. In essence, credibility is critically important to a press spokesperson. Although it is important to show loyalty to an employer, anything less than total honesty with the media will destroy a spokesperson's credibility, and ultimately destroy that person's value to an employer as well.

The trust of the media in a spokesperson is hard earned, achieved only over time through highly professional and ethical performance. Thus, the first goal of an ethical communicator is to truthfully communicate the reality of an event, an issue, a policy, or a plan.

While it might seem that the government and the press should be adversarial in their codes of behavior, in a democracy their codes have many principles in common. In the United States, for example, government communicators and press codes of behavior all mandate that a professional be responsible, truthful, and accurate; not have conflicting interests; work in the public interest; be fair; and be a steward of the public's trust.

On the subject of truth and accuracy, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), in its code of conduct, states: "Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly." It goes on to say that significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.

Similarly, in its code of ethics, the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) says that government communicators will "intentionally communicate no false or misleading information and will act promptly to correct false or misleading information or rumors."

Both ethics codes say that their professionals will serve the general welfare, not themselves, and that they will be responsible for the work they produce. Regarding public interest and public trust, the ASNE code states that freedom of the press belongs to the people. "It must be defended against encroachment or assault from any quarter, public or private. Journalists must be constantly alert to see that the public's business is conducted in public. They must be vigilant against all who would exploit the press for selfish purposes." The NAGC code says that government spokespersons must "conduct their professional lives in accord with the public interest, in recognition that each of us is a steward of the public's trust."

The ideals expressed in these codes provide a guide, but how can ethical issues be tackled in places where they might not have been thoroughly thought out? Public information practitioners could consider the following:

- Write up codes of ethics for government spokespersons and circulate them widely both to those in the profession and to the employers as well.
- Have meetings of government spokespersons. Form professional associations and clubs. Peer pressure to perform to certain levels of behavior can be a counterweight to unethical actions. And talking about frustrations, common interests, and conflicts may help reduce them.
- Enhance educational programs for those who want to go into press relations.
- For those already in the profession, encourage training both in country and out of country. Seeing how others perform offers the opportunity to pick up best practices.
- Establish publications, newsletters, and Web sites to exchange information on dealing with similar problems.

The following provides the key sections from the ethical code of the National Association of Government Communicators.

"Members of the National Association of Government Communicators pledge and profess dedication to the goals of better communication, understanding, and cooperation among all people.

"We believe that truth is inviolable and sacred; that providing public information is an essential civil service; and that the public-at-large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable, and timely facts about their government. Members will:

- Conduct themselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, responsibility, accountability to the public, and adherence to generally accepted standards of good taste.
- Conduct their professional lives in accord with the public interest, in recognition that each of us is a steward of the public's trust.
- Convey the truth to their own agencies' management, engaging in

no practice which could corrupt the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.

- Intentionally communicate no false or misleading information and will act promptly to correct false or misleading information or rumors.
- Identify publicly the names and titles of individuals involved in making policy decisions, the details of decision-making processes, and how interested citizens can participate.
- Represent no conflicting or competing interests and will fully comply with all statutes, executive orders, and regulations pertaining to personal disclosure of such interests.
- Avoid the possibility of any improper use of information by an 'insider' or third party and never use inside information for personal gain.
- Guarantee or promise the achievement of no specified result beyond the member's direct control.
- Accept no fees, commissions, gifts, promises of future consideration, or any other material or intangible valuable that is, or could be perceived to be, connected with public service employment or activities.
- Safeguard the confidence of both present and former employees, and of information acquired in meetings and documents, as required by law, regulation, and prudent good sense.
- Not wrongly injure the professional reputation or practice of another person, private organization, or government agency.
- Participate in no activity designed to manipulate the price of a company's securities.

"When a member has evidence or suspicion that another has committed an unethical, illegal, or unfair practice, including violation of this statement, the member shall present the information promptly to a proper authority, who may include the president of NAGC or the chairperson of the NAGC Ethics Committee. Members found to be in violation of the organization's Code of Ethics may be asked to leave the NAGC."

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)



CONTENTS

[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)

IN BRIEF...

- [Do's and Don'ts in Dealing With the Media](#)
- [When There Is an Error or Bad News](#)
- [Organizational Arrangements](#)
- [The Media](#)
- [Photo Shoot Checklist](#)
- [Speaking On and Off the Record](#)
- [Press Schedules and Names](#)
- [Pool Reporting](#)
- [The Event Location](#)
- [The Briefing Book](#)
- [On the Internet](#)

DO'S AND DON'TS IN DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Do's

- Do tell the truth — ALWAYS.
- Do be honest and accurate. Your credibility and reputation depend on it.
- Do admit it if you don't know the answer to a question. Offer to get the answer, and do so as quickly as you can.
- Do correct mistakes immediately. State that you didn't give an adequate answer, and you would like to clear up the confusion.
- Do avoid using jargon. Speak in plain language.
- Do assume that everything you say is on the record.
- Do be as open with the media as possible.
- Do call reporters if a story appears that is inaccurate. Politely point out what was wrong and substantiate it.
- Do keep a list of accomplishments. Update it frequently. Things happen so quickly that you may forget what you, the official, and your ministry or government have achieved.
- Do always return phone calls, or have an aide return the calls, in time for reporters to meet deadlines.
- Do try to get the information reporters want even if it means an extra effort, such as staying at work late or hand-delivering material.
- Do have a sense of humor.

"Frustration is almost built into the fabric of the job," says former vice presidential spokesman David Beckwith. "Unless you have a sense of humor, it is a grim business indeed."

Don'ts

- Don't lie — EVER.
 - Don't say "No Comment" — EVER.
 - Don't improvise, don't speculate, and don't guess. Good reporters check facts. If you are wrong, your credibility will be destroyed.
 - Don't try to put a comment "off the record" after you have said it.
 - Don't be unresponsive.
 - Don't make news until you have in hand the information to go with it. Don't make an announcement and then later prepare a press release and fact sheets. If you have the material prepared before a press conference, you can spend your time after an announcement explaining it to the press.
-

WHEN THERE IS AN ERROR OR BAD NEWS

Dealing With Mistakes

If you are misquoted in a story or if misinformation is given, act promptly. Speak to the reporter. Don't make threats. Have facts, and expect everything you say in correcting the mistake to be on the record. If you don't get anywhere with the reporter, go to his or her editor.

You can ask for a retraction or correction of an error, and many officials do this. But others feel it only keeps the misinformation in the news by dredging it up again. With the Internet, however, incorrect news can be accessed in perpetuity. For this reason, requesting a correction is often the route to take. What you actually do depends on the mistake and its severity. But at a minimum, you should contact the reporter and correct the misinformation or misquotation.

Dealing With Bad News

- Don't lie.
 - Don't cover up. If you lie or cover up, you lose your credibility.
 - Don't avoid reporters' phone calls.
 - Acknowledge the problem.
 - Explain how it is being corrected.
-

ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

How do U.S. government departments handle the various press office functions? While every cabinet official can arrange the office to his or her specifications, the following paragraphs look at four arrangements.

Department of State: In the U.S. Department of State, the under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs heads the department's public affairs, media, and communications efforts. Under this office is the assistant secretary for public affairs, who speaks for the secretary of state and oversees five offices. These are:

- The press office, which daily prepares the background material, media guidance, and questions and answers that the assistant secretary uses to prepare for his or her daily press briefing.

- The office of media outreach, which schedules regional interview appointments within the United States with TV, radio, and print outlets for State Department officials.
- The office of public liaison and intergovernmental liaison, which arranges speaking engagements and meetings around the United States for State Department officials, handles liaison with state and local government officials, and sets up briefings in the department for visiting groups.
- The office of electronic information and broadcast services, which runs the department's Web site and digital video conferencing. It also produces interactive television via satellite.
- The office of strategic communication planning, which coordinates other offices, both within and outside the department, around a certain strategic message.

Also reporting to the under secretary is an assistant secretary for education and cultural affairs, whose office oversees cultural and citizen exchanges and a coordinator of the Office of International Information Programs, which sends speakers overseas, puts out statements by U.S. officials, and produces publications and Web sites for overseas use.

Department of Defense: At the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), the assistant secretary for public affairs is the senior public affairs official in the department and serves as the spokesperson for the secretary of defense. The spokesperson also manages several sections:

- Media relations, which responds to questions from the media. Desk officers in this section are subject-matter experts for issues with which the department deals on a regular basis.
- A planning section that is responsible for long-range communications efforts by topic and by region of the world.
- Community relations, which evaluates, coordinates, and approves requests for DoD cooperation in public events and community activities.
- Command information, which is an internal armed forces information service for military personnel.

Each section of the Defense Department and armed services has a similar structure, with a top spokesperson at the head and the subsection structure under him or her. The chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the president's principal military adviser, for example, has a public affairs chief who oversees media relations, planning, community relations, and command information sections. While the public affairs chief is the official for whom they work, the section spokespersons also look to the public affairs office of the Defense secretary for guidance.

Department of the Treasury: At the U.S. Department of the Treasury, the assistant secretary for public affairs is the top communications official. He or she serves as the press secretary for the secretary of the treasury, manages the office, and prepares long-range communications strategy for the department. The assistant secretary also supervises an office of public education, which handles campaigns designed to inform the public about new occurrences.

A deputy assistant secretary for public affairs reports to the assistant

secretary, speaks for the department's deputy secretary, and backs up the assistant secretary. The third official in the office is the director of the office of public affairs, who manages press area specialists, the department's photographers, and the personnel who prepare news clippings. The director also backs up the deputy assistant secretary. The director supervises four press officers, all dedicated to different policy areas under the department's jurisdiction: international offices, enforcement offices, taxation and economic policy offices, and domestic financial offices.

Department of Education: At the U.S. Department of Education, a director of communications oversees news media relations, publications, internal and external communications, and public inquiries. The director is the long-term communications strategist and talks to the press only on rare occasions. Under the communications director is a press secretary, who speaks for the secretary of education and manages the press office. The press office operates on a beat system, with one media specialist dealing with the press on elementary and secondary education, another on vocational and adult education, another on special education, and so on. There is also a speechwriting unit and an office of public affairs managed by a deputy communications director.

THE MEDIA

Even though many journalists report on a daily or even hourly basis, they need time to research, interview, and write stories. They also like to know about news events in advance — a week or two ahead, at least — so they can approve a story idea with their editors, schedule a photographer, and do additional research.

When there is a breaking news story, such as a sudden political controversy or crisis, a reporter may have to cover the story with little background, making the task of writing a well-informed article harder. Consequently, the more information and research that can be made available to reporters the better. It also is important to learn the lead times and needs for each type of media. They vary a good deal.

Newspapers: Newspapers provide in-depth coverage of stories and can be good at reaching the public and those in decision-making positions. Newspaper reporters typically have "beats" or specialized areas on which they write, making them experts on certain issues such as economics or politics.

All reporters like detailed written documentation — facts, figures, anecdotes, graphics, and examples, such as press releases or media backgrounders — to bolster a story. The material needs to be able to be substantiated, and with sources given. Giving reporters written material such as quotes and fact sheets increases the likelihood that a quote or fact will be reported accurately.

Newspaper reporters answer to an editor who assigns stories and edits their writing. They operate on tight deadlines. Morning newspapers have late afternoon deadlines; afternoon newspapers have late morning and early afternoon deadlines. If a news conference is at 11 a.m., for example, and the news deadline is at 5 p.m., the intervening time would give morning newspaper reporters time to put together their

stories, camera operators and photographers time to deliver their visuals, and editors time to edit for final production. Similarly, weekly newspapers have deadlines on certain days.

Newspapers run all types of news: hard news, features, profiles, analyses, editorials, opinion pieces (typically on the editorial pages), and letters to the editor. Other media have these types of news, too, but newspapers often have the broadest range of formats.

Similarly there are different kinds of newspapers:

- National newspapers with broad interests and a definite national focus.
- Regional newspapers, which are focused on regional concerns.
- Local papers and weeklies, with a strong local focus.
- Trade publications with specialized audiences, such as an energy newspaper for petroleum executives or a magazine for mothers of young children. Called "niche" publications, these include newspapers, magazines, and on-line sites for every kind of occupation, job specialty, leisure activity, and interest.

Newsletters: Newsletters are trade publications that can be in a magazine or a newspaper format. They are usually geared to very specialized audiences.

Wire Services: Wire services put out articles that are used by all media either for direct reprinting or for story ideas. A newspaper editor, for instance, might ask for a feature story with local interest after seeing a wire service hard-news story. The Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence-France Presse are among the best known of the news services.

Magazines: Like newspapers, magazines range from those with a general news focus to very specialized publications covering, for example, economics or foreign affairs. Typically, magazine writers have more time to develop a story in depth than do newspaper reporters. Magazines often have editorial calendars mapping out topics they will cover throughout the year. These are useful to government and other public relations offices in developing story ideas around particular magazine issues.

Radio and TV: Radio and television carry a variety of programs — national shows, local or regional shows, straight news, human interest programs, talk shows, documentaries, and interview programs. Radio and television reporters and assignment editors often get their story ideas from newspapers and news wire services. Unlike newspaper reporters, some radio and television journalists, particularly at smaller stations, are more generalists than specialists on particular topics because of the wide variety of their assignments. TV reporters usually cannot report an issue in the depth of print reporters, and complex stories are often reduced to short news segments. TV is a visual medium, and reporters and assignment editors prefer stories that can be told with pictures. TV news deadlines are tight.

On-line news: On-line news is the newest medium. Like radio and television, news appearing on Internet Web sites has immediate dissemination, as well as offering — through talk radio shows, for example — the ability to have a two-way dialogue. There are all types

of on-line news, from newspapers and magazines to chat rooms, plus e-mail to targeted audiences.

Given the varying deadlines of different media, a press official should be fair. That is, he or she should take the various deadlines into consideration and not always favor the deadline of one medium over another when scheduling events such as press conferences. Scheduling should also occur so that broadcasters can cover events and have time to produce their news segments.

PHOTO SHOOT CHECKLIST

Pictures, like words, tell a story. In using pictures:

- Decide what you want the photo to do.
 - Draw what you are looking for as guidance.
 - Take Polaroids of each shot or look through the camera's viewfinder before the pictures are taken.
-

SPEAKING ON AND OFF THE RECORD

Speaking on the record is the preferred way to speak to the media. Since you want the information about your program, your idea, or your message to reach the public, why not have your name attached to it?

"The safest course of action is to assume that all you say to a reporter will end up in the newspaper, especially in the beginning before you know the reporters you are working with and are confident in who will accept the terms of the agreement," says former White House spokesperson Dee Dee Myers.

As you develop a relationship with a reporter, you learn to whom you can speak freely. "Then you can use 'background' as a way to explain more complex subjects without having to risk being taken out of context," she says. "But in emerging democracies, where rules aren't clear, you can get burned talking off the record."

The ground rules of how you are speaking **MUST** be established before you speak. Not afterwards. Here is what the terms mean.

- **On the record.** When you speak on the record, everything you say to a reporter may be used and attributed to you by name.
- **On background.** When you tell a journalist you are speaking on background, he or she may publish what you say but cannot attribute it to you by name or title. Rather, the reporter attributes your statements to a previously agreed upon identification, such as "a well-informed source" or "an expert" or "a government official."
- **On deep background.** When you establish before an interview that you are speaking only on deep background, a reporter may use the information but without giving any attribution. Anything said in the interview is usable but not in direct quotation and not for attribution.
- **Off the record.** When you speak off the record, you give a reporter information that is for his or her knowledge only and that cannot

be used, printed, or made public in any way. A reporter should not take the information to another source in the hopes of getting official confirmation.

Sometimes, spokespersons use an off-the-record briefing to provide context for an issue when a reporter appears to be off the mark on a story and privacy laws prevent putting the information on the record. Knowing the background can give a fuller picture of the story.

"Getting a story killed can be an achievement," says one government spokesperson, "and it can lead reporters or editors to back off an inaccurate account they may be ready to publish. Sometimes, the best successes in this business are when you have precisely nothing to show for all your hard work and efforts. You killed a story that would have been wrong if it ran."

PRESS SCHEDULES AND NAMES

So you can quickly respond to breaking news and target your media when you have a story to tell, maintain up-to-date lists of media contacts.

- List the names of reporters, their affiliations, their beats or special interests, addresses at work and at home, cell phone numbers, beeper and fax numbers, and e-mail addresses. Also keep separate lists of reporters by beat or interest and by geographic region.
- Make sure the lists are kept up to date.
- Know how each contact wants to receive news — by fax, phone, e-mail.
- Know each reporter's deadline and don't call during deadline times.
- Find out who in the various media decides what news will be covered and at what time of the day, week, or month story decisions are made. Learn how far in advance of an event a media outlet wants to be notified.

POOL REPORTING

Pool reporting is used when the site for an event or press conference is not large enough to accommodate all the reporters interested in covering a story. For example, in the United States, it is used frequently at the White House, where the space in the president's office and other areas is limited.

Pool reporting involves representatives of each type of media "pooling together" to cover an event; they write a report on or tape the event and make their materials available to their colleagues in the press or broadcast media. The material is given to everyone at the same time, no one can use the material until everyone has it.

A typical "pool" consists of a wire service reporter, a print reporter, a magazine reporter, a broadcast reporter, a camera person, a sound person, and a still photographer. Sometimes, it might involve just a

single camera filming the event for transmission to reporters in a nearby room.

A "pool" can be even smaller. When President Bill Clinton attended a funeral at the U.S. Naval Academy, the size of the chapel and protocol for the event dictated the use of a pool report. One camera was allowed in the chapel. Reporters and other cameras were in the basement receiving a live transmission of the event, and they prepared their reports from the transmission.

THE EVENT LOCATION

Once you've decided on the "message" for an event, you should determine the best place to hold it to get across the message to the public. For example, if an event concerns an announcement about education, the best spot could be an educational setting such as a school. Once you've selected a school, consider the following:

- What is the best classroom for the event?
 - Should older or younger children be involved?
 - What visual picture do I want to present; what backdrop best achieves that and fits the message?
 - Who else should be there to help develop the message? For example, are there teachers, school administrators, perhaps the minister of education, who should be included either as speakers or as guests? Decide when they should be invited, who should invite them, and what role, if any, they should play.
-

THE BRIEFING BOOK

In the United States, when a top official such as a state governor, a cabinet member, and certainly the president and vice president participate in an event, they receive a briefing book in advance. This book is prepared by the staff of the person staging the event. The book is intended to maximize everyone's participation...and to avoid surprises.

Typically, a briefing book addresses the following:

- The purpose of the event.
- The attire, or dress — casual, business, formal.
- The weather forecast for the day of the event.
- The size of the audience.
- Whether the press will be there. Whether cameras are expected.
- The location for the event.
- The name of the staff coordinator for the event, along with telephone, cell phone, and beeper numbers.
- The major political issues of concern in the area where the event is being held. The briefing book might include copies of supporting newspaper articles.
- The names of the participants, their titles and affiliations, and a summary of what they will be doing or saying at the event.

Provide biographies if appropriate, along with correct pronunciations of names if they are unusual.

- A minute-by-minute agenda or schedule for the event.
 - What questions are likely from the press or audience, along with possible answers.
 - A list of issues to be addressed and those to be avoided.
 - The names of any people the official should recognize from the podium.
 - A diagram of the staging area, including where the official sits and stands, and next to whom.
-

ON THE INTERNET

Any national government agency in the United States — and most state, local, and regional agencies as well — can take their messages to the public via the World Wide Web. The media home pages of the principal federal departments might include a schedule or calendar for their key officials covering both home and satellite events; copies of news releases, speeches, and testimony; fact sheets and media advisories; photos and slides; special reports and publications; even a radio news broadcast service...all available from a single source.

To get an idea of the depth and breadth of coverage that the press offices of the United States' 14 cabinet departments offer on the Internet, check out one or more of the Web addresses listed below. You can also link to the on-line media offices of more than 60 specialized independent agencies and corporations of the U.S. government at http://www.firstgov.gov/us_gov/establishments.html.

Department of Agriculture

<http://www.usda.gov/newsroom.html>

Department of Commerce

<http://www2.osec.doc.gov/>

Department of Defense

<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/>

Department of Education

<http://www.ed.gov/news.html>

Department of Energy

<http://www.energy.gov/press/index.html>

Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.hhs.gov/news/>

Department of Housing and Urban Development

<http://www.hud.gov/news/index.cfm>

Department of the Interior

<http://www.doi.gov/doipress/>

Department of Justice

<http://www.usdoj.gov/03press/index.html>

Department of Labor

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/public/media/main.htm>

Department of State

<http://www.state.gov/press/>

Department of Transportation

<http://www.dot.gov/affairs/briefing.htm>

Department of the Treasury

<http://www.ustreas.gov/headlines.html>

Department of Veterans Affairs

<http://www.va.gov/opa/>

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top](#) ▲

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)

**CONTENTS**[What a Press Office Does](#)[The Job of the Press Officer](#)[The Press Office at Work](#)[The Communications Plan](#)[Message Development](#)[Tools of the Press Office](#)[Press Releases, Media Advisories, and Fact Sheets: A Closer Look](#)[Interviews: A Closer Look](#)[Press Conferences](#)[Crisis Communications](#)[Event Planning](#)[Ethics: Codes of Conduct](#)[In Brief...](#)**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Marguerite H. Sullivan is a public affairs and communications specialist. She began her career as a reporter and columnist for Copley News Service, and then served as executive editor of Washington Woman Magazine from 1984 to 1986.

Ms. Sullivan moved into the political arena in 1991, as director of communications for the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 1991, she became part of the White House staff, where she was assistant to Vice President Dan Quayle in the administration of President George Bush (1989-1993) and chief of staff and press secretary to Marilyn Quayle, wife of the vice president. She subsequently worked in state government as a cabinet member and director of federal liaison for then New Jersey Governor Christine Todd Whitman.

During the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, Ms Sullivan was chief of staff and press secretary to Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice President Dick Cheney. She is currently vice president for communications and external affairs with the International Republican Institute, a private nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing democracy worldwide.

This site is produced and maintained by the U.S. Department of State's Office of International Information Programs (usinfo.state.gov). Links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

[back to top ▲](#)

[IIP Home](#) | [Index to This Site](#) | [Webmaster](#) | [Search This Site](#) | [Archives](#) | [U.S. Department of State](#)