

## Avoid Unnecessary Quarrels with the News Media

*Triad Associates*

What is the one thing you can say to an editor or reporter that is guaranteed to sully your relationship for years to come? That's an easy question with an easy answer. All you need to utter is this one memorable phrase: ***"I demand a retraction!"*** Then step back and watch your former media friend bristle faster than an enraged porcupine.

Bet you've made that statement – or wanted to – on at least one occasion.

There's an old adage in the newspaper business which reads: "Never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel." In this modern media age, you can extend that saying to include "or who broadcasts into the homes of your constituents".

Public figures are, well, public. The statements you make and the actions you take are under review by those who carry the banner for the Fourth Estate. Once you choose to seek elective office, or accept a public job, you are fair game for scrutiny by the various forms of media which distribute information to the people you serve.

Realistically, most of the time reporters do a credible job of conveying the news. Occasionally however, they get your information flat out wrong or somewhat distorted. So, two questions emerge. The first: How do you avoid getting burned by a mistake or a misunderstanding? The second: What can you do when the information is not portrayed in a fashion which you consider to be accurate? Preparation is the key to avoiding the dissemination of information which is somehow off target.

Are you putting together a news release? Are you planning a press conference? No matter how you intend to spread your message, do some serious game planning. Know exactly what you want to say. Stay on message. Huddle with the others in your group who will present so there are no surprises. Put your critical points in writing, especially the quotes you wish to have directly attributed to you, and lay out a path for

the media to follow. A fact sheet is a wonderful tool to deploy at a press conference so that all in attendance get the same data in a format which says exactly what you want it to say.

Everyone has occasions when the information being put out to the public is not exactly pleasant: taxes go up; government officials make errors in judgment which cause poor results; and employees in your charge can get into legal trouble a thousand different ways. You know this. If you've been in office for any length of time, you most certainly have an instance you can cite where the media positively drooled over the chance to put out information which would cause your governmental body embarrassment.

Even if it's bad news, you **MUST NOT** hedge; layout the complete story. Otherwise, the news hounds will track down the facts you attempted to cloak and you will die the death of a thousand cuts. Full disclosure is the only antidote.

So, you've taken all reasonable precautions, and still somehow a media outlet has botched the information. Do not immediately pick up the phone and begin ranting at the reporter or editor. Do cool down and think through what went wrong and how the situation can be remedied. Do not use words which will inflame the situation, such as "retraction" or "correction". Never, never, never utter the word "lawsuit". Nothing will freeze a discussion faster than threatening legal action. Be conciliatory; understand news organizations are under tremendous deadline pressure. Editors, not reporters, write the headlines which you might find offensive or misleading. Many reporters are young and eager, but inexperienced in the processes of government. You will rarely find one who will intentionally misconstrue the information you provided.

If you must make that phone call, here is the secret word: "**clarification**". Calmly explain where you think the reporting went astray. If you can prove your point, just ask the editor for a clarification of the original story. This gives both of you a second chance to get accurate information out to the public. Play it right and you might

get an entire second day story which puts your organization in an even more favorable light.

Of course relationships with the media can be difficult at times. Just remember that reporters and editors need you as a reliable source, and that you need them as a reliable means of connecting with your constituents.

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*Triad Associates is currently the League's Grant Consulting Firm. Their firm, which is known for its expertise in community and economic development, including strategic planning, redevelopment, acquisition, relocation and funding, has brought diverse plans and projects to life by generating more than \$580,000,000 for over 120 public, private and nonprofit clients throughout the Northeast region since 1978. Every member of the Triad team is personally committed and dedicated to the success of its clients and the projects that benefit communities.*