

Guidelines for Dealing With the Media

- Helpful hints from Ron Wilkinson of Media Matters

Most relationships with the media result from an enquiry by a reporter (including during a crisis or problem time) or from your desire to attract publicity.

The same principles apply to both.

These guidelines tend to, first, look at responses to enquiries and then at techniques for obtaining publicity. However, all the guidelines apply to all media contacts

Show Respect

Accept that the media and its individual members have a legitimate and important role in any society, especially in a democracy.

Never attack the reporter for performing the role.

Recognise that parents and all members of the New Zealand public have the right to know about your school, its policies and its activities because of taxpayer funding and of the impact it makes on society.

One of the key roles of the media is to represent the non-powerful in understanding and questioning those with power (and you are one of those with power).

Deal appropriately with actions that relate to an individual's privacy or to any legal process.

*Everyone has the right to freedom of expression,
including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information
and opinion of any kind and in any form*

NZ Bill of Rights 1990

Are you the appropriate person?

As a principal, in most cases you will be the speaker on behalf of your school. A deputy or other person may have that delegated responsibility in your absence or for a specified activity.

There are times, when the Chair of the Board or other designated member, is the appropriate person because of the governance implications.

If you have the responsibility, do not delegate.

If the issues are both operational (Principal's responsibility) and governance (the Board's domain), then ensure that you are speaking in concert.

If you need to refer the reporter to a more appropriate person, then try to make that contact easy, by providing a phone number or offering to ensure the alternative makes contact quickly.

Be Confident

You occupy a controlling position, but in many media interactions, the journalist is in control. Accept that and be confident in yourself, your school and its processes.

Welcome media contacts.

Make yourself available

Media interest and deadlines will often not be convenient to your plans. By making yourself available, immediately or as quickly as possible, at the time initiated by the media representative(s) you will have the best chance of having your information or views presented in a timely and influential fashion.

Be and sound welcoming

Prepare

If it is media-initiated, find out what it is about.

Gain time to think and gather immediate facts (preferably 5 minutes rather than 5 hours – check to see if the reporter has an immediate deadline and try to meet it).

Clarify what specific points you want to make, irrespective of what other issues might be canvassed by the reporter.

Be ready to respond from a positive viewpoint.

Consider any areas that must be off-limits and decide how you will deal with them

Be open and honest

Take the view that you should provide the information, unless there is a legitimate reason for not providing something at this time (embarrassment is not a legitimate reason).

Always tell the truth and do not exaggerate – anything less is likely to rebound on you.

If you do not know something, say so – do not try to bluff; offer to find out.

If there are many details or the subject is complex, consider offering to fax or email that information in writing (inviting the reporter to call back if there are still questions). If you do that, be quick to provide the material and be conscious of any media deadlines involved.

Accept that it is appropriate for you, holding a position of responsibility and power in the community, to be named in any report. Do not try to be anonymous.

Never say “No Comment”

This implies that you are trying to hide something and encourages further enquires of other sources. It is a statement that has been brought in to disrepute by others in the public eye.

If you cannot provide the information because of confidentiality, privacy or legal aspects, or because you are not the appropriate person to respond, then say that, ensuring your reasons are clear and truthful

“Off the Record” is dangerous

A journalist’s role is to obtain and disseminate information – it is not about keeping secrets, even for a short period of time.

Information comes from many sources, and “off the record” will not necessarily prevent it from being used from another source or

another reporter, thus jeopardising the relationship between you and the original reporter.

In most cases the journalist is a member of a team, and may not be able to agree, on their own account, to something being kept out of the public domain.

An "off the record" statement needs to be agreed in advance by both parties. Using the phrase and giving the information, without pause for agreement, does not stop the reporter from using it. It is not uncommon for speechmakers to make that mistake.

Many journalists will not agree to receive an "off the record" statement.

Manage the impression

Ensure that you create a positive impression of your school, or of the people involved, or of the process being used to handle a news interest issue.

Know well in advance what impression you want for your school and make sure you live up to it.

Impression management is part of normal everyday life and interaction.

Publicity is good

Seek publicity through the media (and other means), do not shy away from it or assume you will get what you deserve by default.

Develop relationships with the media at times outside of a crisis.

Know the constraints on each individual organisation and journalist with whom you deal. Especially understand their deadlines, interests and workload.

Contact the media organisation appropriately. The Editor is often not the best level of contact when you are offering a story.

Recognise that other news and personal demands may not allow the medium or the individual reporter to contact you or attend an event to your timetable. Find a way to assist that by sending news releases and photos to the medium as though you were the reporter.

Consider what internal help you might need with this type of contact.

Short statements are best

If you want to be quoted or you have a key point you want used, then short statements work best.

Consider those statements ahead of time and, possibly, write them down - keep them brief.

People remember pithy statements of a few words. If they properly sum up the situation, they may continue to be used in subsequent coverage.

Have an up-to-date media plan

This needs to be in writing and available to staff and board members.

Consider –

- The *image* you want to display
- *Techniques* you use to support that image
- Clarify your openness to the *Media*
- Identify the key *spokesperson(s)* and how to deal with casual factual enquiries
- Refer to your *crisis* plan or summarise the media aspects
- Provide relevant information on your general *publicity plans*
- *Review* it regularly

There should be no surprises within the school community

Consider who should be told about the pending media coverage. Often the Board Chair should be informed, you may need to tell staff, pupils, parents, or principals of neighbouring schools.

Ron Wilkinson of Media Matters designs and leads workshops for Principals, Chairs and members of school boards and senior staff. For more information:

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