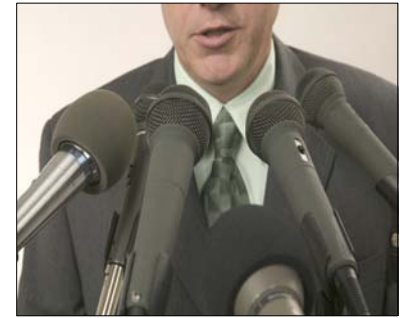




Handling the Media During a Crisis

by Kelly Heavey

The media doesn't have the best reputation these days. Between entertainment gossip, slanted coverage and some misrepresented news situations, many people just don't trust news sources. But the media still play a critical role in our communities during an emergency. As a representative of a public transit organization, you have the responsibility to respond to the media through thick and thin. If disaster strikes—a security threat, natural disaster, or serious accident for example—the aftermath is a delicate burden to bear. The situation must be first understood by reporters, and then communicated to your public accurately. This article will provide some tips on how to interact with the media in a transit emergency.



Responding to Disaster

The first step is preparation. Most Kansas transit agencies are too small to employ a professional public relations representative, but an alternative is to name one person in your agency as a media contact. This individual will be your agency's "face" to the public, and all media inquiries should be referred to him or her. This establishes one voice and prevents contradictory quotes and information from different workers in your agency. In the case of an extreme disaster, however, this rule might have to be broken to have your most senior management representative or elected official speak publicly. "The bigger the incident, the higher-profile person you want up front," Gary Gleason, president of Colorado-based Communiqué USA, says. "Many times you have a spokesperson who handles the media, but when it's a really serious event... certainly you want the chairman of the board or the CEO out there. The public expects that." Your designated media contact should be trained on what information is appropriate to share with the public. Think about what happened, what it means to "John Q. Public," and what you are doing about it. The rule is, "maximum disclosure, minimum delay."

Practice Makes Perfect

If a press conference needs to be held, practice makes perfect. The representative should rehearse what will be said and have company statistics handy—such as the average number of riders and average route times—in case an unforeseen question comes up. When responding to an accident, it is important to readily have details about the accident investigation process and your agency's drug and alcohol testing procedures. If you can't comment on something—a personnel matter for example—tell the reporter why.

The Press Release

Press releases are designed to answer questions and clear up potential confusion. If you address newsworthy topics, the media will disburse the information to the public through their outlets. The release should address the who, what, and where of the event, as well as what is

being done about it. This doesn't mean the media won't call for clarification or more information, however. Always list your designated media contact's information at the top of the page.

The Joint Information System/Joint Information Center

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) requires use of the Joint Information System (JIS), and recommends use of a Joint Information Center (JIC) during major emergencies. Sharing of information through the JIS ensures that the numerous stakeholders involved in a crisis deliver to the public the most accurate, coordinated, timely, appropriate, and understandable information possible.

JIS and JIC are not interchangeable terms. A JIS is the concept of information sharing between agencies so every one is on the same page. A JIC is an actual location where representatives gather to handle emergency public information. Gleason is not aware of any transit JICs in Kansas, but cautions that a transit emergency can strike anywhere.

“Without question, every transit agency faces the risk of a mass casualty accident ... immediate [media] attention on that would be enormous. The only way to manage that kind of pressure is to plan for it and have systems in place to accommodate that.”

Other Resources

As a rural transit agency, it is important that you communicate with the Local Emergency planning Committee (LEPC) in your county for information on how you might be a resource in a local emergency, or what resources you might need. If you aren't sure who your LEPC contact is, visit the Kansas Division of Emergency Management at http://www.accesskansas.org/kdem/contact_us/cocoordinator_lepclisting.shtml.

In 2000, the U.S. National Response Team published a guide book, *Joint Information Center Model*, for any agency or organization. It states that a JIC's purpose is to serve as a “communication hub” for stakeholders. To read the manual, visit [http://www.nrt.org/production/NRT/NRTWeb.nsf/AllAttachmentsByTitle/A-55JIC/\\$File/JIC.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.nrt.org/production/NRT/NRTWeb.nsf/AllAttachmentsByTitle/A-55JIC/$File/JIC.pdf?OpenElement).

More recently, the NIMS Integration Center released an online course in emergency public information, something that should be completed by whomever you designate as your agency media representative. That training module can be found at <http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is702.asp>. As the saying goes, better safe than sorry. And if you can't prevent the accident, you can try to prevent misunderstanding by providing information to your news resources. For more information on managing the media during disaster, go to: www.disasterprep.info.

Sources:

“Managing the Media During Disaster,” by Gary Gleason.

“Communications 101: Dealing with the Media,” by Scott Bogren,
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Reference: Kansas Trans Reporter, January 2008