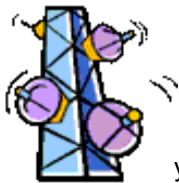




## Communications 101: Working with Media

—Dick Kronick, LTAP freelancer

In a NACE conference session, Kevin Gutknecht, MnDOT director of communications, provided useful ideas about how to work with the media. He observed that Americans think the news media are useful and important—but that they also think the media are more influenced by powerful interests than by what's good for society. “And people think the local media [are] more trustworthy than national media. So when you need to communicate with the public, ask yourself, ‘Who serves the public that I want to reach—a reporter from the local newspaper or one from a national media outlet?’”



He also pointed out that, “With today's competitive 24/7 news cycle, you have to get the news out fast or it might never get out at all—and that means you may need to compromise on depth of information in order to be heard. The good news is that the media crave information about transportation, and that puts us in a strong position because we're the best source. But each reporter wants to find a different angle on the story. So you'll be questioned more—and in fact, your credibility might be questioned.”

Next Gutknecht asked the rhetorical question, “What makes news news?”—and answered his question twice: as seen by the media themselves and as seen by the public. “The media care about proximity; they're mostly interested in what happens in their immediate vicinity. Also, they're looking for conflict. If someone opposes you, that's when it becomes news. And the media's favorite conflict is one between a homeowner and government.” From the public's perspective, he said news means issues about money. “So they're very interested in snowplowing, road construction, speed limits, and litter.”

### Communicate to the public through the media

Gutknecht said the job of the county engineer is to provide the media with clear, accurate, timely, and consistent information—because “that's how you can help inform, educate, and involve citizens. That's why it's critical to the success of your agency to have good working relationships with the media.”

“When you need to give out information,” he continued, “the first decision is: Who's going to handle it? A staff member? You? Or some other subject-matter expert? Next, decide how to communicate. And today, you have to develop both a traditional media strategy and a social media strategy. Will you get the news out by phone, e-mail, or by holding a news conference? Or should you use Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube? News releases are a good option because they allow you to send complex information to several media outlets simultaneously. “We've found that Twitter and YouTube have changed the nature of TV and video because it allows stories to remain available for extended periods.”

### Choose the right medium for the message

Gutknecht characterized the various types of media that might want to interview an engineer: “The nature of TV makes reporters hungry for action. Also, they're usually working on short deadlines. If you want to provide in-depth coverage of an issue, local cable TV is a good option. It's a natural for transportation and transit projects.”

Next Gutknecht pointed out that, in general, TV and print media are talking to different audiences. “People who read print media usually have more advanced education,” he said, quoting a 2009 study by the consulting firm iMedia Advisory. “Print can give you more in-depth treatment and it automatically lends a certain weight to the content. And their stories tend to stick around longer.”

“While print media are having trouble surviving, radio is doing great,” he continued. “About 85 percent of people 12 years or older listen to radio every day. They typically listen to several stations, tuning in for short periods of time. Radio stories have less impact initially; you tend to forget the content because there's always another story right afterwards. But the audience tends to be captive—often in the car.”

## Control the interview; don't be controlled

To illustrate how not to be interviewed, Gutknecht showed a video clip from *The Bob Newhart Show* in which Dr. Hartley is cajoled into an interview by a flirty TV host who proceeds to reveal herself as a diabolical attack journalist. The moral of the story, Gutknecht said, is to decide if it's a good idea to allow yourself to be interviewed in the first place. Then he provided tips on how an engineer can maintain control when being interviewed.

### **Before the interview**

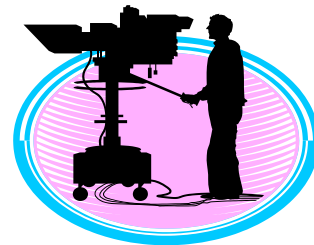
"Be prepared! Contact your public affairs person, information coordinator, or other department heads for background on the reporter or the media outlet— and arrange to have those colleagues present during the interview. Be sure to inform your organization that you're going to do the interview. When setting up the interview, ask the reporter what the scope will be—and who else has been interviewed— and what the deadline is. On TV, think about where you want to be interviewed and pay attention to the background of the camera shot. Get out of your office; you look like a bureaucrat there. Be interviewed where there's action, like a job site. To prepare yourself, answer these questions: Why am I conducting the interview? Who is my audience and why do they care? How will information affect them?"

### **During the interview**

- Gutknecht provided excellent ideas on how to maintain focus during an interview:
- Keep it simple and brief; remember, they may only use a few seconds of what you say. Make it so your brother the art major can understand it.
- Prepare three main points that you want to get across and weave them throughout your answers.
- When you've answered the question once, stop talking.
- Avoid negative information; turn a negative question into a positive. To achieve that, talk about benefits, not features; for example, tell them the end result of the highway project—not about the delay.
- Don't provide personal opinions; provide public information. If they ask "What do you think?" say you represent the county.
- Don't go off the record; there's no such thing for some reporters.
- Don't say "No comment." If you don't know the answer, say so. And never comment on an issue in litigation; those issues should be tried in the courtroom, not in the media.
- Don't speculate; your speculation will be taken as reality.

Next, he gave tips on personal appearance on TV:

- Control how you react to questions; don't make funny faces.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor.
- Control your hands.
- Don't label the question by saying, "That's a good question."
- Don't say the reporter's name during the interview; remember: you're talking to the public.
- Sit still—don't rock, chew gum, or slouch.
- Forget the camera; keep your eyes on the interviewer; that makes it easier to relax.
- Use a normal tone of voice.
- Remember the photographers and thank them; sometimes they have been there forever while the reporters come and go.



### **After the interview**

Finally, Gutknecht talked about what to do after the interview:

- Monitor the coverage you get in all media.
- Thank them for a job well done—or if the story has factual errors, call the reporter and correct the inaccurate information. Print media will print a retraction. Broadcast media may or may not.
- Let your organization know you've done the interview.