Module 9

Read Ahead

Media Communications
Module 9: Media Communications

Objectives

After attending the training in Module 9, participants will be able to:

- understand how a crisis may arise and what necessary steps to take with respect to media.
- demonstrate proper media communication techniques during a crisis.
- understand the media and different tips for print, studio, and broadcast interviews.
- develop spokesperson skills and the confidence to be effective with the media, if necessary.

Importance of Media Communication

Increasingly, it is not only the Media and Communications Bureau personnel who are required to speak with the media but also employees in a wide variety of technical, emergency, and specialist roles. Media exposure can provide excellent opportunities to publicize ALDOT and portray our work in a positive light. However, getting it wrong can be incredibly damaging. Poor media coverage can take years to repair. In today’s media-savvy society, leaders have only one chance to make a good first impression. The most successful leaders speak powerfully, knowledgeably, and succinctly.

Imagine that a crisis has hit in or on an ALDOT location. You are in the middle of the situation whether it is a fire, an explosion, or a natural disaster. Suddenly, there are more than a dozen news reporters with cameras waiting for you. Well, here you are, the only leader “on the scene.” You are not in Montgomery, so calling the ALDOT spokesperson is futile because he or she could not arrive in time to talk to the media anyway. What do you do?

Now, imagine that when you begin speaking in front of those cameras you appear confident, authoritative, and knowledgeable. You have a clear, verifiable message that outlines exactly what has occurred, what you are doing to improve the situation, and how you feel about anyone who may have been injured in the accident.

Nobody enjoys being in the middle of a crisis, but anyone would want to sound intelligent, communicative, and empathetic. Not only is ALDOT’s reputation and credibility at stake, but also your own. Because of how you deal with the reporters, you and ALDOT may be able to develop a better reputation for honesty and transparency in the eyes of reporters, stakeholders, and the public.
Anatomy of a Crisis

As mentioned previously, when the media is involved, it is always appropriate to call leaders who are experienced and/or have authority to speak with the media. Likewise, ALDOT may have policies stating that Media and Communications Bureau personnel are to be contacted when an opportunity arises for media communication. Yes...but what if an emergency occurs, a crisis happens?

What is a crisis? It is defined as a serious incident affecting, for example, human safety, the environment, and/or product or corporate reputation—something that has either received or been threatened by adverse publicity. In short, it is “unexpected bad publicity.”

A crisis may involve one or more of the following areas.

- Politics
- Finances
- Environment
- People’s lives
- Safety
- Other unique situations

When looking at a crisis and its definition overall, three thoughts usually prevail. In fact, these thoughts could be called lessons.

- Someone is to blame.
- Something is at stake.
- Someone finds out.

In most cases, except major political and financial scandals, the publicity is much bigger if it concerns the “person on the street” or if it occurs geographically “close to home.”

If we are dissecting a crisis, there are more lessons to consider. Think about these, and document your ideas of what these may mean.

- “It’s a moving picture.”
- “Perception is reality.”
- “We operate in a goldfish bowl.”
- “Turn crisis into opportunity.”
ALDOT Preparation

Having a positive influence is a valuable tool in the workplace. ALDOT is a state agency, and typically, the role of a state agency is to serve the public. ALDOT’s role is to ensure motorists are able to travel safely and efficiently on maintained roadways. Day-to-day, most of the things we do to carry out this role go unseen. Typically, the only time we receive feedback from the public is when something inconveniences their commute. To deal with issues effectively, it is critical for supervisors, managers, and leaders to establish a positive working atmosphere and maintain it. Media communication involves a variety of influences found in the workplace.

In examining influences, the best place to start is with the preparation you, along with your bureau, division, or region, have made for handling media communication. Here are some questions to consider:

- What kind of management notification system do we have in place if a crisis occurs during non-business hours?
- What is our departmental emergency response plan?
- What internal problems or other vulnerabilities do we have that could be damaging if they were made known to the public?
- Who would be our spokesperson(s) in a crisis?
- How much information would we give out if we had a crisis?

A lot goes into preparation, and it can be more effective if the media communication comes from an effective leader—one with influence. Several ideas need to be considered when thinking of the message we or the department might send. We must consider that people always want to see a human face during a crisis. From that face, the public wants reassurance. They want the reassurance that ALDOT will make it right, make any amends, and ensure (or try to) that the crisis will not happen again.

Handling the Crisis

This Module cannot possibly cover everything involved in handling a crisis. That is why leaders “handle the crisis,” and we have media personnel who handle the media. Once again...what if you are the only person available to talk with the media? The following list is important for us to consider.

- Holding action.
- Assess the situation.
- Decide on the strategy.
- Identify the audiences.
- Decide on the messages.
- Prepare and effect a plan.
- Brief relevant people.
• Centralize information.
• Give reassurance.
• Resist combat.
• Be flexible.
• Think long term.

What should occur if an ALDOT leader or staff member receives a call from media who are asking about a crisis? First and foremost, ALDOT has a Media and Communications Bureau, and most calls to an office can be deferred to someone who is trained to speak with media. Here are a few instructions:

1. Do not give any details—even your name.
2. Do not be drawn into conversation.
3. Assure the journalist or reporter that you will pass the inquiry to an informed spokesperson who will call back immediately.
4. In taking their information, establish the following:
   • Who is calling?
   • What is the person’s job or title?
   • Which publication or program?
   • What is the telephone number?
   • What specifically does the person want to know?
5. Pass the inquiry and details to an authorized person immediately.

Again, leaders should exert their positive influence when speaking about the crisis. With this influence, they should communicate the details of the situation (preplanned if possible) while remembering to utilize nonverbal communication skills. For example, a person’s facial expression should match what is being said. It is sending mixed messages if someone is describing how ALDOT has things under control while shaking the head back and forth with “no.” Another example is smiling while talking about lives or safety.

As mentioned previously, most people want to experience reassurance. When communicating with the media over the phone or in person, make sure to bring up what ALDOT is doing currently and will do soon to remedy the crisis or prevent it from happening again. It is quite effective to describe briefly our track record in these instances. Obviously, this part of the communication must be planned. Often it is important to brief the reporter or interviewer on the background of the situation. Always end the communication by telling people where they can go to receive additional or future information.

**Overall Successful Media Interviews**

Media interviews are those communications that have been scheduled in advance, for the most part. During a crisis, a leader may need to sit down and talk with media soon after an event. It is imperative to plan, think about, and write down what needs to be said.
The two most common locations for planned interviews with the media are an ALDOT office or conference room and the news studio. Our appearance and presentation manner can be visually distracting if we do not think about what we are doing. Here is some simple advice to follow:

- Sit up straight, and lean forward slightly.
- Use a facial expression that “looks alert” and attentive.
- Be sincere in your wording.
- Demonstrate an emotion appropriate for the crisis.
- Maintain eye contact with the reporter or interviewer.

As mentioned, there tend to be two types of interviews. One is with a reporter. It is typically short and to the point about a very specific instance. The second type is a press interview, which is usually longer and has no audience. It allows the ALDOT representative to explain more complicated subjects in depth.

The key to either type of interview is giving the message you want to give. Say what you want to say, not what they want you to say. The media member may have an agenda depending upon the subject or crisis. It is appropriate to be polite and listen to the questions or comments. However, if the interview content is inappropriate, incorrect, or negative to ALDOT, there are techniques to use so that you can say what was prepared and planned.

- Use the questions as a “bridge” for your message.
- Do not let the interviewer butt in.
- Do not get sidetracked.
- Refute any incorrect statements.
- Never go “off the record.”
- Ask the interviewer to read back what you will be quoted as saying.
- If the media get it wrong, make sure they are made aware of it.
- Be positive, and stay away from being defensive.

**Interview Ground Rules**

Here are a few tips for the spontaneous interview:

- Ask the reporter’s name and affiliation.
- Ask, “What’s the story?”
- Ask that cameras, lights, and microphones be kept at a reasonable distance.
- Keep the interview confined to the original subject.
- Remember that the reporter is looking for information and a good quote.
- Never say “No comment.”
- Do not go “off the record” at any time.
• Ask for a re-take on a fumbled answer.
• Break off the interview after a reasonable time.
• Ask when the interview will be broadcast or appear.

Below are a few tips for the office or studio interview:

• Know the subject or topic ahead of time, so you can do research.
• Find out the format of the show or article.
• Prepare quotable “selling points” and supporting facts.
• If possible, ask ALDOT’s Media and Communications representative to be present.
• Make the physical environment as comfortable as possible.
• Make your own tape of the interview.
• Make yourself available for follow-up questions if needed.

For the most part, reporters or media interviewers will be hospitable before and during the interview. If it is a challenging topic, this will be apparent because it will already have been in the news or public opinion. In either case, preparation is the key.

For the office or studio interview, here are a few more tips:

• False Choice or the A/B Dilemma
  There are times when reporters may try to trick the interviewee. In such a case, they may ask a question but provide a false choice or a multiple choice answer. Pause and think through the question.

• Multi-part Questions
  It is important to listen carefully during an interview. The reporter may ask you a series of related questions. Remember as much as you can about the questions. Answer them succinctly. If you cannot remember a question, simply ask that it be repeated.

• Hypothetical or “If” Questions
  On rare occasions, a reporter may seek answers to “what if” scenarios. If you are familiar with what is being described, then it is fine to answer. However, scenario questions can be something that has not been planned. It is fine to simply suggest that this “scenario” has not yet occurred or did not occur and repeat what actually has occurred.

• Negatively Phrased Questions
  Especially if the topic is contentious, a question may be phrased in a negative manner. It is appropriate to pause, think about the answer, and answer with a positive spin.
• **Absent Party Comments**
  Rarely, but at times, an interviewee might be asked to speak in place of someone or be asked what someone else may have said or thought. It is appropriate to defer that answer to the person. Do not attribute anything to anyone on camera.

• **Needling**
  If a reporter or interviewer becomes sarcastic or reports false information, simply restate what was said previously and, if possible, support it with additional information.

• **False Interviewer Statements**
  If the interviewer’s statements are known to be incorrect, point that out. If unsure, reiterate the ALDOT messages and state that you are happy to get back to them about the other issues.

**Print Media**

The University of Leicester Media & Communication Department teaches the top ten keys to remember when giving an interview for print or online media.

• **Do not get drawn into an interview unwillingly.**
  Before starting an interview, ask the reporter what the focus of the story is, who else is being interviewed, and the types of questions you are going to be asked. Then negotiate an interview time that gives you at least 30 minutes to prepare.

• **Know who you are speaking to.**
  Jot down the journalist’s name, the newspaper, and a contact telephone number.

• **Respect journalists' deadlines.**
  Journalists work to deadlines, and they rely on having stories ready very quickly. It is very important to return their phone calls and keep to the deadline the journalist gives.

• **Do not be elitist.**
  Try not to distinguish too much between phone calls from the various print news reporters because any preconceptions you may have are unlikely to help you give a good interview. It is best to treat all interviews with the same degree of respect and preparation because you never know where the story might get picked up.

• **Preparation is key.**
  When preparing for the interview, identify a couple of key simple messages you want to get across. Rehearse the sentences and answers you want to give. Journalists look for snappy soundbites, so if you can prepare a couple of these in advance, it will help in the interview. Use everyday language. Avoid jargon and specialist language.

• **Mention the name of your company or business.**
Try to mention ALDOT’s name and your region or bureau at some point during the interview. If you don't, you run the risk of ALDOT not being mentioned at all in the article.

- **Avoid “off the record” comments.**
  Even if you know and trust the reporter, he or she is aiming to get the best (which may be the most controversial) story. Do not say anything you would not want to see in print. Just because a reporter puts away a notebook or turns off a tape recorder does not mean the interview is over and that you can say something that will not be used.

- **Accept that you cannot control what is written.**
  Once the interview is over, accept that it is out of your hands. Keep in mind that the reporter you have spoken to may not write the headline. The sub-editor of the publication may do this.

- **Keep in touch with the reporter/publication after the story has gone out.**
  Let the reporter know the next time you have some newsworthy work. By becoming a reporter’s contact, you will be the first point of call the next time a story breaks relating to your area of expertise.

Internal advice from ALDOT identifies a few more tips for print media interviews.

- **Set the stage.**
  If the interview is at your office, have all telephone calls and interruptions put on hold. Ensure someone is outside the office to secure the area. Place your radio and cell phone on mute.

- **Take the initiative.**
  As mentioned with other media, you may need to be assertive but very polite about getting out what you know needs to be said by ALDOT.

- **Flag your selling points.**
  You know what needs to be said, the points that need to be heard by the public. Ensure that you find time to mention all points and do so with enthusiasm.

- **Stay on track.**
  Do not ramble. This is the reason for planning and preparing ahead of time.

- **Summarize.**
  If given the opportunity, end the interview with a summary statement of your goal for the interview.
Broadcast Interview Tips

Whether it is television or radio, broadcast interviews are a great channel to tell your story and educate the broad public about the given crisis or about what you do in general. A well-prepared interview can maximize your impact. Here are some tips provided by the Safety Energy Communication Council on the website of Public Narrative that we recommend:

1. **Define Your Message:**
   What’s the issue, and what do you want to happen?

2. **Know the Interviewer and your Audience:**
   Who is going to see and hear you; what is the most effective way to communicate your message to them?

3. **Simplify:**
   Keep it simple and clear, in both concept and context. Hold on to one theme and two or three central, reinforcing points.

4. **Practice the 3 R’s:**
   Rehearse, role play, and revise.

5. **You are the Message:**
   Focus your words, voice tone, facial expressions, and body language. Emote without shrill attacks.

6. **Control the Interview:**
   Stay on target with your message. Use “bridging.”

7. **Being Nervous is Normal:**
   “Reframe” your fear into excitement and enthusiasm. Use breathing, centering, and other relaxation techniques you know work for you.

8. **Create a Relationship with the Interviewer and the Audience:**
   Use interviewer’s first name, anecdotes, and succinct, colorful sound bites to connect.

9. **It’s OK not to be the “Know-It-All”:**
   Say “I don’t know” in a way that adds to your credibility instead of detracting from it.

10. **Be Prepared:**
    Repeat Step #4.
11. **Anticipate:**
   Be ready for hostile questions and questioners.

12. **Remember:**
   Your point of view is the most important thing at that moment. You are being interviewed because of what you know and what you think is of value. Stay centered, and stay focused.

**Using the Bridging Technique**

Several times this Module has mentioned how important it is to ensure that what needs to be said is said. This is the ALDOT leader’s responsibility, and a reporter or interviewer may not have the same plan. How can this be accomplished?

A model called the “Answer - Bridge – Sell” model is the key. In other words, the reporter may be asking certain questions, but ALDOT has a message or point to make that has not been asked about. Now is the time for the transition called a bridge. The question is how the leader interjects the point(s). Very simply and thinking quickly, the leader answers one question. As that answer is ending, the leader must make a transition to his or her point. It can be that the interviewer is asking a very negative question. It is the leader’s responsibility to answer the question and then "bridge" to a selling point that makes ALDOT look positive. This model is shown in the graphic below.

![Answer Bridge Sell](image)

So, what will an interview look like? How does a leader carry through on this transition? First, you must be prepared. Anticipate what questions or comments may be put forth. Preparedness cannot be stressed enough. In preparation, practice pausing after a question. Never echo negative words after the reporter states them. Do not go full circle to the negative question premise. Answer the question but do not over answer. Bridge to specific, positive information that contains facts, evidence, and anecdotes to support your selling points. Reporters like facts and figures. Instead of just voicing an opinion, back up your opinion with facts and figures.