

NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERS

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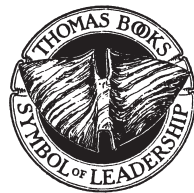
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By

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CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

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©2012 by CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.

ISBN 978-0-398-08806-4 (hard)
ISBN 978-0-398-08807-1 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-398-08808-8 (ebook)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2012006892

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*Printed in the United States of America
CR-R-3*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Garner, Gerald W.

News media relations for law enforcement leaders / by Gerald W. Garner.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-398-08806-4 (hard) -- ISBN 978-0-398-08807-1 (pbk.) -- ISBN
978-0-398-08808-8 (ebook) 1. Police and mass media--United States. 2.
Police and the press--United States. 3. Police-community relations--United
States. I. Title.

HV7936.P8G367 2012
659.2'936320973--dc23

2012006892

To Kathy

PREFACE

It is a fact that many veteran law enforcement officers who would not hesitate to enter a darkened building in search of an armed criminal are deathly afraid of facing a young man or woman armed with nothing more than a microphone or notepad. Fear and loathing of anything that smells remotely of the news media is common among peace officers. That's a shame, as today's news organizations, while being a pain at times, can aid law enforcement in a number of ways.

The law enforcement leader cannot afford the questionable luxury of avoiding the media. The experienced leader has already figured out that the media can do a lot to help (or hurt) his or her organization. He is not interested in making things harder for himself, so he has elected instead to work with the press to benefit his organization while avoiding the media-related pitfalls that exist in plenty. He is aware that journalists and law enforcement leaders can help one another without surrendering the ability to keep a wary eye on each other.

The law enforcement leader who reads this book will learn a little about how today's journalist works. He will gain some knowledge of the peculiarities of the Internet, television, radio, and newspaper. More important, he will learn about what each of these media elements can do to help him distribute the facts and thoughts he wants put in front of a public that is always hungry for cop shop news. He likewise will learn how to give an interview or hold a news conference that suits his needs at least as much as those of the media. He will learn how to write an effective news release, and he will become familiar with the personal rules for guiding an effective and ethical relationship with the ladies and gentlemen of the media. In short, the attentive reader will become an effective user and consumer of the modern news media.

Neither this book nor any other can guarantee that the law enforcement leader's relations with the media will be rosy always. Bad news will happen and be reported from time to time. There almost certainly will be difficult

moments with the press. The aim of this text is to keep those times to a minimum and speed the leader's recovery from their effects.

Every law enforcement leader can enjoy a winning relationship with the news media. Every leader can help his organization and himself in the process. This is how it is done.

G.W.G.

INTRODUCTION

To one extent or another, dealing with the news media is a fact of life for every American law enforcement leader. Reporters and the news organizations they feed are not going away. Neither is the huge public audience for the stories, articles, broadcasts, and Internet pieces that they produce. It is therefore to the distinct advantage of the policing professional to learn how to use the advantages presented by the media while minimizing the negatives originating with the press. That, in a nutshell, is the purpose of this book.

Authored by a veteran police leader with extensive media experience, the text steers clear of theory and the intangible and gets down to the practicalities of working with the news media. Armed with this handbook, today's police leader should find his or her frustrations and worries about the media reduced to manageable proportions. Ultimately, he or she may actually experience enjoyment and a real sense of accomplishment from a newfound ability to work with the press.

This book gets down to the practical in a hurry. Chapter 1 explores past troubled times but focuses on what cops and reporters have to offer each other. Chapter 2 defines news and breaks it down into some of its technical, component parts. Chapter 3 reveals the secrets for establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with reporters. It also discusses the absolute necessity for credibility on the part of the law enforcement leader.

Chapter 4 will assist the law enforcement leader in developing some common sense policies and procedures covering his or her agency's relations with the news media; Chapter 5 emphasizes the importance of an effective Public Information Officer. The chapter also goes into the selection process and preparation for the key job of PIO.

The next four chapters explore several vital but very different elements of the media and how each may be used for maximum benefit to the law enforcement agency and its leaders. Chapter 6 looks at newspaper journalism, Chapter 7 covers the all-seeing eye called television; and Chapter 8 sounds out radio for what it has to offer. Chapter 9 looks at Internet news and

examines what the Net can provide the police officer laboring in twenty-first century America.

Law enforcement leaders can learn how to give an effective interview that suits their needs as much as the reporter's in Chapter 10. Meanwhile, Chapter 11 will help them produce news releases that actually get used by the media. Chapter 12 teaches the art of leading a successful news conference; Chapter 13 unveils the dirty tricks used by the occasional, unscrupulous journalist. The chapter also provides solid advice for overcoming this media misbehavior.

Chapter 14 helps prepare the leader for dealing with the special media challenges to be found at the scene of a major crime, disaster, or other high-profile incident. Chapter 15 instructs the reader on the responses required to recover from an episode of bad news. Finally, Chapter 16 shows the law enforcement practitioner how to bring to the public all of the good news that the agency generates. The importance of human interest stories and creativity is emphasized here.

The text is conveniently packaged for the reader in a hurry by concluding each succinct chapter with a quick summary via a list of vital points to remember. It finishes with a glossary of terms often encountered in the ever-changing news business.

News Media Relations for Law Enforcement Leaders should be read and re-read in its entirety for the depth of understanding and media skills it can impart. It also can be brought out as a "how to" manual or troubleshooting guide any time a particularly challenging media situation is encountered. The wise law enforcement leader will keep it close at hand and share it freely with his or her subordinates.

That said it is time to commence an examination of what the media has to offer law enforcement. The alert reader should discover that it amounts to a great deal indeed!

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NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERS

Chapter 1

COPS AND THE MEDIA NEED EACH OTHER

Finally, after years of fussing and fighting, thoughtful leaders in both law enforcement and journalism have figured it out. They need each other.

Intelligent, progressive police leaders recognize bickering with the news media for what it is: wasted time and effort. They see the tangible benefits to be gained from working more closely with the media. For their part, smart bosses of the news industry have figured out that they can work alongside law enforcement without surrendering their role as watchdog on government.

In an era in which both the public and the private sectors must secure more “bang for the buck,” cops and journalists alike can ill afford the wasted energy involved in pointless battles. Both sides will still fight the fights that ethics demand must be fought. Now, however, the goals must be worth the dispute. For example, the people's right to know what is essential for the public safety is still inviolate; law enforcement's need to protect an ongoing investigation must be respected.

It is both possible and logical that by working together or at least coexisting in relative peace the journalist and the law enforcement officer can sometimes make one another's work easier. Each can help the other succeed at his job. In this way each can better serve the people who “pay the freight” for lawman and reporter alike: the citizens of the community.

There is absolutely nothing inherent in the journalist's tasks or the peace officer's duties that decrees the two disciplines must clash or otherwise work at cross purposes. The truth is that the law enforcers

and the newshounds share some of the same concerns: a desire to help others, serve the public good, and protect the weak and disenfranchised. Conflict between the two fields of endeavor is simply counter-productive, not to mention unnecessary.

At the same time, it is not too hard to understand why traces of mutual distrust and bad feelings remain here and there. Much of it can be traced back to times past when real and perceived misbehavior on both sides resulted in ill feelings. These times might even be referred to as . . .

THE BAD OLD DAYS

“I made the chief of police mad at me,” said the ex-reporter. “And so he threw me down a flight of stairs.”

The reporter was Benjamin Bradlee, later to become Washington Bureau Chief for *Newsweek* and the celebrated Executive Editor of the *Washington Post*. Bradlee, now retired, was referring to a long-ago day when a rookie reporter’s story angered a New England police chief who retaliated with violence in response to the novice’s reporting. What had Bradlee reported to light the chief’s fire?

“I told the truth,” Bradlee recalls. “The police were using a woman as a decoy to catch a rapist. The cops screwed up and she got raped.”

Even in the old days few police-reporter conflicts resulted in physical assault. Still, enough bad feelings existed to fuel decades of mistrust and ill will. Some of the feelings were, no doubt, based on actual misconduct by one side or the other. On other occasions, simple misunderstandings resulted in horror stories that were told and retold for years, the offenses perhaps growing with each telling. In such an atmosphere it is hardly surprising that cops and reporters often did not get along.

At times accurate, more often exaggerated, the complaints from each side depict legions of ignorant, brutal cops and hordes of lying, bleeding heart reporters, or so it would appear. Those gripes from the news gatherers included (and, to a lesser extent, still sometimes include) the following:

1. **Law enforcement is obsessed with secrecy.** Blame it on paranoia, a desire to cover their tails, cynicism, actual dishonesty, or what-

ever, it is almost impossible to pry information out of law enforcement types. Some cops foolishly insist on pointless secrecy even when releasing the facts would be beneficial to themselves.

2. They flat out lie. What else can you call it when they tell us that they have no leads and then we find out they already have the perp in custody? What is it when Smilin' Jack the Public Information Officer tells us they are going to transport the suspect at 9 AM, and they do it at midnight to avoid our cameras?

3. They stick together and conceal their own misdeeds. Cops are clannish to a fault. They think that no one can understand them but other cops. They will stop at nothing to protect the guilty within their own ranks. They see everyone else, particularly journalists, as the enemy.

4. Cops are arrogant and exaggerate their own importance. They are highly egotistical and are immediately defensive when questioned. They obviously believe that if it were not for them the world would be overrun by barbarians. They think that they are better than we are and it shows.

5. They oversimplify issues. Officers see everything as black or white with no shades of gray in between. They see everyone, particularly reporters, as either for or against them. They refuse to acknowledge that a journalist is just as obliged to report on a corrupt cop as to do a story on a drug dealer.

Of course, law enforcement leaders have at times been just as quick to condemn the actions of the news media. Cops, too, are not immune from including some untruths and exaggerations on their laundry list of media offenses:

1. Reporters always believe the crook over the cop. Left-wing news people have a built-in need to blame the police. If the local thug claims the cops roughed him up, what he has to say will get more media attention than will the accurate information provided by law enforcement. The police are always in the wrong.

2. They destroy crime scenes and create a circus atmosphere. It is hard to say whose DNA is on the scene now that these guys have showed up and run around. They get in the way and draw a crowd of rubbernecks who want to get their picture on TV. They have no appreciation for what we are trying to get done under difficult circumstances and just make a mess.