When the Headline is YOU—Strategies for Managing Media Challenges

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How to Effectively Communicate your Values, Voice, and Vision
You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere.

—Lee Iacocca

Public libraries are having a moment. It seems every day, librarians and libraries all over the country are making headlines. Whether it’s a censorship protest or an emotionally charged county council meeting, some days library land can feel like a book battlefield. With so many challenges, navigating these potential communication landmines can leave many scrambling for not only what to say, but also how to say it.

Understanding core concepts of media relations like the importance of talking points, when to develop a crisis communication plan and how to effectively tell your story, can help turn any crisis into an opportunity for you and your library.

Serving the second most populous county in South Carolina, Richland County, Richland Library’s 13-location library system spans multiple cities with its main location firmly nestled in the heart of the state’s capital city, Columbia, South Carolina.
Preparation is Key

Tamara King

In 2019, our library began making plans to partner with our state’s LGBTQ+ support organization, SC Pride, for its 30th Anniversary. While we had joined the annual celebration each year, due to this important anniversary we increased our participation. We joined the community-wide #BraveTheRainbow initiative by displaying colorful #BraveTheRainbow window clings at library entrances. These clings indicated our libraries were safe, supportive spaces for everyone in our community.

Also, for the first time, we helped support the Drag Storytime taking place at the organization’s annual festival. Due to another local library controversy and subsequent political fallout from their Drag Story hour event, we knew we had to be ready to possibly make headlines. As our programming department began working on the event elements, our communications team went into action. We crafted staff talking points; we engaged our board of trustees; we made our county council members and elected officials aware of our involvement in the SC Pride celebration, to ensure they wouldn’t be surprised. Additionally, we also conducted media training for designated library staff spokespeople.

Our proactive approach meant we were prepared when the emails started rolling in. We were ready when concerned library customers said the #BraveTheRainbow window clings made them feel “alienated and unwelcomed” at our library. We had a plan in place when those same customers created a petition demanding the clings be taken down and voiced their concerns with local elected officials. We knew what to do when we started getting complaints about our involvement with Drag Storytime. When the time came, we didn’t waiver, we didn’t waffle.

We saw this potential crisis as an opportunity to affirm our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our library had been doing so much work in this area for more than four years, but we had never formally communicated our stance to our customers or community. This was our chance to tell our story and communicate our values. Our preparation paid off.

I fully understand that not every library has a public relations or marketing team poised and ready to handle a scandal.

I am also aware when the camera light is staring back at you, it is easy to feel the full weight of this pressure. To stumble. To fumble. To make you question whatever career choice landed you in this unfortunate situation in the first place. In this article, I want to help release the pressure valve. Here I will share some hard-earned tips and tricks gleaned from my extensive 20-year tenure in public and media relations.

When navigating the media landscape, using what I have coined as the five Bs of Communication as a road map, will help staff make the right decision in the moment and deftly handle any potential media issue that may arise.

The 5 Bs of Communication

BE CLEAR

Whether prepping for an interview about the freedom to read or the famous, in-demand author coming to town, being clear about the message you need to communicate is step one. In the book, “Media Secrets: A Media Training Crash Course” by Jess Todtfeld, he says before going out to do an interview you have to ask yourself “What is my goal for the upcoming interview?” “What do I need I need to have happen as a RESULT of this interview?” Being clear about your message is essential to communicating effectively.

BE CONCISE

One of the important rules I stress in my media training is, when answering interview questions, it
is best to create a stray-free zone. Talking too much is a natural human response. In fact, in an article titled “The Science of Why We Talk Too Much (And How to Shut Up)” (bit.ly/2PGWQzW),1 author Lydia Dishman explains, “Science says that humans, being social animals, are programmed to use communication as a vital tool to survive and thrive.” So, when you are in the throes of a crisis and survival mode kicks in, it can trigger you to talk too much.

To help curb this natural response, it’s important to have what I call “your top three” prepped and ready to go. Having your top three talking points at the forefront of your mind helps quell your tendency to ramble or scramble. In television news there is a saying, “The more you say, the better chance you will stray.” By staying on track and sticking to your talking points, you lessen the opportunity to divulge too much or to say something that will reflect badly on you or your library.

To put this in play, our communications team prepared two statements (figure 1) that our staff members can use anytime a reporter or customer asks them a question they are unequipped to answer, specifically in times of crisis.

Richland Library employees can use these prepared responses interchangeably or in part, based on the situation. They communicate a clear message and ensure that staffers are not caught off guard. Richland Library employees are introduced to these messages on day one of their orientation because you never know when or where a crisis may strike.

To get our employees on board and trained on how to respond to a crisis we:

- provide quarterly media and crisis communication training opportunities for all staff, annually;
- maintain a list of subject matter experts from across the library system who have been media trained in the last twelve months, that can be deployed to speak to the media about preapproved topics aligned with their work.

It is imperative that people from other departments and all library locations are trained and prepared. By empowering them with the correct message and providing them with the tools they need to respond in various situations, we have created a stray-free zone.

**BE HONEST**

Of all the Bs this one may be the hardest. When a crisis or potential challenge occurs and your organization or library is to blame or has the potential to be seen in an unfavorable light, sometimes it can seem problematic to tell the whole truth. But in reality, it can be more detrimental to your organization to tell a half-truth or a lie in the midst of a challenging situation.

In today’s media-savvy ecosystem, the truth will always find its way to the surface. By facing the situation using transparency and honesty from the beginning, you eliminate the chance of a scandal erupting by being caught in a lie from the original
When navigating the media ecosystem of the 21st century do not neglect the power of social media. Many reporters scour social media for their next story. Having designated staff members to execute social listening during a crisis can help maintain an awareness of how far a situation has spread and what the court of public opinion has ruled on the matter.

**BE READY**

This communication principle evokes memories of my late grandmother, who passed away at the age of 95. During her funeral services, family members lovingly recalled her impeccable style, even when she was simply lounging in her favorite chair at home. When questioned about her consistently polished appearance, she confidently replied, “If I stay ready, I don’t have to get ready.”

This is not only a valuable life lesson, but also an essential rule in effective communication. Being prepared is at least 75% of any successful plan. If you begin thinking today about tomorrow’s potential challenges or issues on the horizon, you set yourself up to be able to successfully respond.

Our library marketing and communications team drafted a bevy of staff talking points to address several potential library challenges. These include our inclusive collection policy, our support of Black Lives Matter, our COVID protocol, even our budget. Having talking points at the ready helps ensure that facts rather than opinions are communicated when a crisis arises. By staying ready, we do not have to get ready when the media come knocking on our door or ringing our phones.

When preparing for a potential crisis, it is important to keep in mind that there is a difference between a statement and talking points. A statement should be a carefully crafted and matter of fact explanation of where your organization stands with the potentially controversial subject matter. Statements are ideal for written communications and inquiries. A statement will likely be reserved for use by the executive director, marketing director, media coordinator, or otherwise designated spokesperson depending on your organization’s structure.

Talking points should have more expanded elements of the statement and should guide real-time conversations about the potentially controversial topic. Remember when creating talking points, you want to anticipate the questions staff members might be asked and provide real answers that capture the messaging that your library system or organization wants to convey. It is important that your answers are concise and digestible so that staff can repeat them naturally, when approached by a customer. See figure 2 for an example of a statement crafted by Richland Library ahead of the #BraveTheRainbow window cling installation.

**BE IN CONTROL**

This is your story and your story to tell. You may not be able to control the questions or the intent of the interviewer, but you can control how concise you are, you can create a stray-free zone, you can be honest, and with a thoughtful and proactive approach, you can be ready for the questions that come.

Another critical point to remember when dealing with the media, and making sure you stay in control of your interview is there is no such thing as off the record. Keeping this in mind will help you stay focused and communicate your message effectively.
Richland Library Statement

We support the efforts of South Carolina Pride (SC Pride) to honor the struggles, celebrate the successes, and acknowledge the contributions of the LGBTQ+ community. Richland Library remains steadfast when it comes to providing customers with unfettered access to resources, services, and programs for all.

Our libraries are safe, supportive spaces for everyone in the community. Everyone is welcome here. Everyone has access to our resources, services, and programs that meet the interests and needs of the community in which we serve. Everyone is encouraged to be a part of a culture where all dimensions of diversity are accepted, valued, and utilized . . . where we all thrive and belong.

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Now let’s look at an example of talking points provided to Richland Library staff ahead of the installation of the #BraveTheRainbow window clings:

| Why did Richland Library decide to participate in OUTTalks and Drag Queen Storytime during SC Pride Week? |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • Richland Library’s vision is to enhance the quality of life for our entire community. We know customers span all ethnic and racial backgrounds, nationalities, religions, socio-economic classes, sexual preferences, and abilities. That’s why Richland Library is committed to equity, diversity, and inclusion. |
| • The underlying message is to value, respect and celebrate each other. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where does Richland Library stand on providing LGBTQ+ programs to the public?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Richland Library remains steadfast when it comes to providing customers with unfettered access to resources, services and programs for all. We support the Library Bill of Rights, which defends the First Amendment right of speakers and participants to express themselves freely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local residents have access to safe spaces and trusted, competent facilitators who encourage courageous conversations.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>How does that stance apply to the library’s meeting spaces?</th>
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<tr>
<td>• All meeting spaces across our library system are available for the public to reserve—regardless of origin, background, or views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meetings that are held in these spaces must remain open to the public. Ticketed events (either free or fee-based) are not permitted.</td>
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For a more detailed look at Richland Library’s room reservation policy, please visit www.richlandlibrary.com.

Crisis Communication messaging was crafted prior to the crisis being realized to proactively prepare staff.

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**Controlling the Message**

**Anika Thomas**

In my first ten years of managing communications strategies for institutions of higher education, domestic violence coalitions, and most recently public libraries, I quickly learned the importance of a solid Crisis Communications Plan and an effective media relations strategy because it is not a matter of if a crisis will arise, but when. As the Community Relations Manager for Richland Library, the “Five Bs” of communication, detailed above, serve as the foundation of my media relations toolkit. Whether you are two years into your media relations career or 10 years into your media relations career, or maybe media relations tasks are your “other duties as assigned,” having a plan will make all the difference. Understanding where you hold power can help you better leverage relationships for your desired outcomes.

Often, one of the best lines of defense in a crisis is controlling access. To stay in control when dealing
with the media during a crisis, I prefer to offer to provide a statement on an issue rather than give an interview. Depending on how the situation at hand is unfolding, providing a statement can sometimes keep the media at bay while allowing your team to gather more details. Providing a statement also helps you maintain your “no stray zone” by eliminating the potential for curve balls or on-air questions that could catch you off guard.

However, everyone makes it under the bright lights eventually. When your library is the headline, things can shift to “lights, camera, action!” in the blink of an eye. Prepared with the “Five Bs” in your media toolkit, you might feel ready to take the media world by storm. Whether entering an interview amidst a crisis or not, having a solid grasp of media interviewing best practices ensures a seamless and effective interaction for both you and the interviewer.

Interview Etiquette
- Speak in concise, impactful quotes or soundbites. Keep in mind that reporters or video journalists will only use a small portion of your entire interview. While maintaining a conversational tone, be mindful that snippets will be extracted. Your prepared talking points will serve as excellent quotes or soundbites.
- Don’t hijack the interview. Keep it conversational by concisely answering questions and allowing room for additional questions. This also prevents rambling and oversharing.
- Leave notes printed pages behind. Avoid looking down or shuffling papers during an interview. You want to appear confident and in control of the subject being discussed.
- Don’t fidget. Try not to speak with your hands or bounce your legs during an interview. In addition to being distracting to the interviewer, fidgeting can convey nerves when communicating in a crisis.
- Keep your composure. Examples include raising your eyebrow, giving the “stink eye,” or audibly gasping. Don’t let the audience “judge you by the cover.” Maintaining an even composure allows the messaging being conveyed to remain the focal point of the conversation.
- Stick with what you know. The interviewee (YOU) controls where the interview goes. The interviewer cannot make you say something that you do not want to share. Focus on facts and not opinions. Go back to your key messaging/talking points and what you are comfortable talking about.

Keep in Mind
- Assume the microphone is always hot, meaning act as if the microphone is always on and recording, even if you believe it’s turned off or not in use. The reporter/video journalist may ask you some questions prior to the start of the interview in an attempt to make you feel more comfortable (How are you doing; What’s new; How are things at the library?). Just be aware that while they may not be recording, anything that you share could potentially be broadcast or published.
- No such thing as “off the record.”
- Do not lie or make something up.
- Avoid saying “no comment.”

ANIKA THOMAS’ TOP TIP FOR MANAGING MEDIA IN A CRISIS
My number one tip for handling media during a crisis is to ensure the crisis isn’t the first time the media encounters you or your organization. Establishing relationships with media professionals and nurturing goodwill in those connections can be invaluable when it comes to conveying your organization’s narrative during challenging times.
Armed with a well-stocked tool kit, you may still find yourself feeling nervous once you are in the proverbial hot seat. Do not underestimate the power of taking a breath before answering a question. It’s preferable to pause and deliver a confident response than to stumble while trying to find an answer. Reporters are trained to bring the answers out of you and can sometimes get creative in their questioning. If you find yourself at a loss for words, needing to gather your thoughts, or if you feel the reporter is attempting to reel you into unsafe territory, you can use bridging statements to buy yourself a moment to regain your footing and redirect the conversation back to your talking points. Here are some examples of bridging statements:

- “Let me emphasize again . . .”
- “As I mentioned . . .”
- “And what this all means is . . .”
- “I want to make sure everyone understands . . .”

Staying prepared ahead of a crisis can truly make or break your experience when dealing with the media. Most of the time, dealing with the media will be pleasant and an opportunity to inform your community of all the wonderful things your library system offers. Sometimes, though, you will be navigating tough conversations and unfortunate situations. Every time you interact with the media, you should be confident that you have prepared well and can convey the messages of your library system, without wavering, while championing its values, centering its voice, reinforcing its vision, and telling your library’s story, your way. 

REFERENCE


Learn more about Managing Media Challenges at the PLA 2024 workshop “Media Training: When Your Library is the Headline,” which will be held on Tuesday, April 2, 2024. Get more information and register at placonference.org.