
Developing Good Media Relations

by Barry McLoughlin, Maureen Boyd and Richard Cl  roux

Good relations with the media can be the key to success or failure in politics. This article is based on presentations to a Library of Parliament Seminar held on January 30, 1997. Barry McLoughlin is a media consultant whose firm, Barry McLoughlin Associates, specializes in media training and strategic advice, Maureen Boyd, a former CBC reporter, now works as a communications consultant at Rideau Hall and for other clients. Richard Cl  roux writes for several newspapers including the London Times.

Barry McLoughlin: Let me begin with a few general words about news. The media often say they do not make news they just report it. That is not entirely correct. True, the news media do not tell us what to think but they do tell us what to think *about*. They define to a great extent the political agenda.

The media also tell us not so much what is important but what is *urgent*. A crisis is something that is highly important and highly urgent. One of the challenges of trying to make news is when you have an issue that is highly important to you but not considered urgent at all by the media. News is also highly subjective. What is highly newsworthy to one individual may not be to another. There are no hard and fast rules. It is a combination of a slow news day, style and personality.

The media are far more attracted to heat than to light. If you get angry for a few seconds during a long interview or during several days of testimony as was the case with General Boyle, that becomes the story. Managing one's emotions with the media becomes extremely important. Forty-five minutes of grilling by a skilled journalist is enough to make anyone crack. One may do well for 44 and a half minutes but the other 30 seconds may become the story. I always suggest that politicians take a public affairs person with them when they go to shows like the *Fifth Estate* or *60 Minutes*. If the same question gets asked over and over, you must step in and say "we have covered this, unless there are some other issues we should wrap it up". Unless one is prepared to do this, eventually most people will make a mistake because even politicians are not as skilled as journalists who have spent years perfecting their techniques.

Let me turn now to some principles for developing good media relations. The first principle is to know what is your message. Many times politicians go to an interview with the attitude of "ask me a question and I will give you an answer". That is exactly what journalists want. But if you cannot succinctly indicate your message the journalist will do it for you. The classic case was Kim Campbell's answer to a question about unemployment at the start of the 1993 election campaign. She said that although the OECD was predicting high unemployment for many years, she was confident that with the right programs Canada could see a decline in unemployment by the year 2000. Of course, the message that went out in the headlines was "no new jobs till the year 2000."

General Boyle got clobbered on a conditional question that began "What would you think if a member of your staff concealed information or destroyed documents?" This was the proverbial "when did you stop beating your wife" question. Anyone trained in media relations should immediately recognize and beware of conditional questions beginning with "what if". The General never saw the train coming down the track.

When dealing with the media one must be careful to never be accidentally interesting. A lot of things can be said with a sense of humour or a sense of irony or a wink or a nod. But when that context is removed or edited out, you are left with just the words and the meaning may be entirely different and not at all what you wanted.

Another principle concerns accessibility. If you are not accessible to the media then you are like the tree that falls in the forest and no one will ever know about it. There is almost never an excuse not to call back a reporter. Even

if you do not want to talk or give an interview call back and say so. Similarly be honest and tell the truth. Suppose one has information but is under strict orders not to give it out. What do you do when a reporter asks a direct question? Lying is one possibility but it is certainly not recommended. Much better is something like "I am not at liberty to talk about that issue". The reporter can run wherever he wants with that but I would rather limit what I say than tell a lie.

Anyone in public life gets asked a number of "off the wall" questions. My approach is to say "You don't really expect an answer to that do you". Usually the reporter will say "No, but I thought I would ask anyway." They probably had no reasonable expectation of getting an answer but they know that if they ask an outrageous question over and over they will eventually get someone to answer.

A few other hints contain basically common sense. If you do not tell a reporter anything useful, you probably will not see him back. Reporters get very tired of being spun. They figure out who knows what and who is worth talking to. If you have nothing to offer but spin wait until you have something. Political staff should be helpful and recommend people that reporters can talk to. Usually that is all they want. Everyone is very busy and there are many possible sources of information.

If you can provide a reporter with the right sources that is going to be appreciated. Encourage the front door approach otherwise journalists use the side door. They will seek information from indirect sources.

Barry McLoughlin

Finally be prepared to "have a bad day". Everybody makes mistakes. I have a sign on my wall which says, "Have a bad day." Because if you are not ready for a bad day you will have a bad week, or a bad month or a bad career. Things go wrong. Do not be afraid to admit that you made a mistake. Sometimes in Ottawa we are influenced by the myth of ministerial infallibility and whatever we do we must protect this mystique. The Canadian public does not mind when a politician says I made a mistake and I think journalists can also appreciate that errors are sometimes made.

When something does go wrong, communicate early and often with the media. Waiting 24 hours is too late. You have to act in the first two hours. Get all the bad news out at once. It is not the initial wave, it is the ripples that kill you. Anticipate do not just react. If there is bad news

you should announce it. If that fails do not hesitate to lay low for a while. Most news blows over in a short period. Finally mop up after the mess. Look upon media relations as a long term investment.

Maureen Boyd: Say "media relations" and the mental image springs up of mysterious "spin doctors" talking overtime to spread their view of a political event. That is pretty far from the truth for the overworked political assistant trying to get some coverage for an issue of concern to their Member of Parliament or Senator.

The good news is that practising good media relations is not rocket science; it is common sense. The bad news is that it is a lot of hard work.

Maureen Boyd

News organizations, like government departments and private sector businesses are facing cutbacks. This means that journalists are expected to cover a lot of ground on the Hill. The more useful information you can give them, the more valuable you will be to them. To do that, you need to know your journalists. You need to find out their interests, the stories they have to cover and the stories they want to cover.

How do you do this if you do not know any journalists? The easiest place to start is with the Parliamentary Press Gallery. The Gallery puts out a pocket-size booklet which lists every news organization operating on the Hill and every Gallery member's name and phone number. Phone assignment editors to find out which reporter covers what. Go through news clippings to find out what journalists are writing about.

Once you know who is interested in your issue, for example, a committee hearing on a specific issue, write a short backgrounder. Always use primary sources, i.e. quoting from the actual bill or minutes. Never rely on information you have gleaned from clippings unless you have verified its accuracy. You must give accurate information to journalists if you want them to trust you. It is your reputation on the line and, remember, corrections never reach the same audience.

Your backgrounder will also include all the relevant details on where and when hearings or the next development will take place. Fax your backgrounder to the personal attention of your journalists – and then phone them. You will be amazed how many people will not have received your fax! It has been mis-directed, mis-filed or mis-placed. When you are dealing with large

news organizations, be sure you target specific shows or specific sections. One fax to the CBC will get you nowhere; there is local and national news in both English and French as well as all the separate shows.

If the issue you are trying to promote focuses around a committee hearing, for example, make sure you are there early and introduce yourself to all the reporters. Let those who did not attend know what happened. Write up an official summary with quotes and suggest a followup. Build the story. Keep in touch. The reporter might "bite" later on.

No one will bite, however, if there is no substance. Is what you are saying new and significant? The media is not the message anymore; the message is the message. Make sure you have one. You also need to think about how it ties into today's news, i.e. is there a hook or spinoff to a larger issue?

Knowing your message, by the way, is different from delivering your message. That means preparation. If you are preparing spokespersons, make sure they practise in front of you, not a reporter. Watch out for the too cute sound bites – they might get you on television but the effect may not be what you want.

If you strike out with the Parliamentary Press Gallery, remember that there are lots of other ways to get your story out. Try sending an editorial piece to the national newspapers. One of the most effective ways to get published is to send out camera-ready stories to the weekly and community newspapers. Community or neighbourhood newspapers have tremendous readership; people often read them from cover to cover. They are usually run by volunteers who are looking for material. Just ensure it is relevant to their local interests.

In all you do, remember that effective communication rests on three pillars: caring, knowledge, and action. The image you want to portray is that your Member of Parliament or Senator is knowledgeable about the issue and cares enough to take action.

One last thought – do not forget that reporters are human. Their work is on display every day. Their work is read, viewed, listened to – and judged – every single day. Would you like the same?

Richard Cléroux: I agree with many of the points that have already been mentioned but let me add a few others from my 25 years in journalism. First, the journalist is a bit like a hungry wolf. You have to keep feeding it. We have to stay on top of many stories at once and our focus is very different from someone who is trying to get a

particular story into the news and who may have been working on that story for weeks or months.

Sometimes political staff complain because we do not use material that has been prepared for us or we get something wrong. We are not perfect but it is usually a mistake to cut off a journalist because you are unhappy with what he or she writes.

If someone stops sending me material or calling me I will get the information elsewhere. Trying to cut off journalists is probably going to hurt your cause more than it will hurt the journalist.

Richard Cléroux

This is not to say that I or anyone else wants to receive information about everything that is going. Know the journalists and their interests and target your information. A lot of paper goes through my hands and much of it goes directly into the 13" circular filing cabinet. Stories on local issues should be directed to local journalists. Do not bother sending press releases about local improvement to the national media. Sometimes a telephone call to one journalist with a particular interest in a story will produce more coverage than a thousand press releases sent to everyone in your database. I wish I could give guidelines about how to write an effective press release but it depends on the story, it depends on what else is going on that day.

When doing interviews it is very important to establish the ground rules at the outset. Do not wait until after the interview and then say, "Oh, by the way that was off the record". And make sure you distinguish and the journalist understands the difference between "off the record" and "not for attribution". I have had people complain that I never used the material they told me because they said it was off the record, but what they meant was they did not want to be quoted by name. For a journalist there is a huge difference. Get into the habit of using these terms correctly. Let the reporter know your rules at the start.

I would also emphasize what others have said. You have to build up relations with journalists and this can only be done by telling the truth. Sometimes the truth will include, "I do not know." You are not expected to know everything but sometimes you can find out and get back to the journalist and sometimes you may have to say no comment.