

MEETING THE MEDIA

A practical guide to assist
military personnel and DOD civilians in
preparing to speak with representatives
of the news media.



U.S. Air Force Public Affairs
Center of Excellence

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This pamphlet contains information applicable to any and all Air Force people who may engage the news media. As closely as possible, this handbook conforms to military public affairs policies published by the Department of Defense and Department of the Air Force. 15 October 2003
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Introduction

Nearly 700 journalists embedded with U.S. forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom lived night and day alongside our warfighters. Hundreds more covered the hostilities independently, stumbling upon clandestine special operations or arriving on scene before the military forces. They reported “live and in living color” via satellite, providing real time, round-the-clock coverage of live firefights, aerial bombings and enemy resistance.

Stateside, an aircraft crash off base is videotaped by amateur photographers who offer their prize to news networks starving for exciting imagery. By the time security forces arrive on the scene, the nation is viewing the crash site and speculating on the particulars.

We live today in a global information environment. The news media are everywhere, with the technology to publish in real time “24/7.” What we do as Air Force warfighters frequently makes “news” and the American public has an inherent, indeed a legal right to know what we are doing. The question is thus, not if you will be interviewed by a news reporter, but when.

The rights of free people to express themselves and to obtain information about their government are guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. Because the very existence of the Air Force depends on the “consent of the governed,” we have a duty to keep the citizenry informed on our mission, our performance of that mission and our stewardship of public resources. To survive in the future, we must continue to earn the public’s trust and support. In our society, the public depends on a free press to keep it informed. If we wish to maintain public support, we must learn to work effectively with the news media. That is the purpose of this booklet.



American forces were joined by more than 700 embedded reporters during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but there were more than 2,000 “unilateral” reporters covering combat on their own. In either case, any Air Force person could have been interviewed without Public Affairs support.

Military-Media Relations

Department of Defense Directive 5155.5 spells out public affairs policy: provide accurate and timely information so that the public, Congress and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy. Requests for information will be answered in a timely manner subject to the following principles:

- ◆ Information will be made fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by current and valid security classification. The provisions of the Freedom of Information Act will be supported in both letter and spirit.

The news media is an international conduit through which the US Air Force communicates with the American public and our allies and serves notice to our enemies of US resolve in a manner that provides global influence and deterrence.

- ◆ A free flow of general and military information will be made available, without censorship or propaganda, to the men and women of the Armed Forces and their dependents.

- ◆ Information will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment.

- ◆ Information will be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Services.

National security and public accountability are not incompatible. DoD policy is very explicit: maximum disclosure with minimum delay. Bad news does not improve with age and the mere appearance of withholding or manipulating information can destroy our credibility. Getting our side of the story out as soon as possible and as completely as practicable is essential to maintaining the high level of credibility and public support enjoyed by the U.S. military.

The news media are neither our friend nor our enemy. They are a conduit, albeit filtered, to the American public. The public formulates its opinion of an organization quickly, as much on how we respond to a situation as on the cause itself. The media are a tool that we can use or we can allow them to use. We must understand how to deal with the news media to get what we want from an interview in order to perpetuate public support.

Perception

Perception

In this technologically advanced era, reality is not what actually exists, but what it is perceived to exist. Most Americans gain whatever knowledge and appreciation they have of the Air Force, not from direct contact or experience, but from remote observation. Usually this information is derived through the media.

Much of the public's high opinion of Air Force effectiveness comes from press accounts. News media have covered every major engagement in which we have participated.

We must actively seek to keep the media informed so that our story will be told. At the same time, we also need to respond to legitimate news media requests for information and be prepared to understand that the resulting story may not always be to our liking.

Whether the coverage is good or bad, if we are to effectively represent the Air Force position on an issue, we must understand the communications process. Our positive image represents years of dedication to duty and the personal sacrifice of thousands, some of whom gave their lives. We have a duty to tell their story and the story of our military. If we don't, who will?

Understanding the Media

"Why is it that reporters always pick the worst possible times to show up?"

When the media appear on your doorstep, you may not feel like being interviewed. Cooperation with the press is essential to projecting a strong, positive image.

As many organizations have discovered, the days of ducking the media have vanished.

Sometimes we must react to unanticipated events, such as accidents. The best approach is always to be PROACTIVE and plan your approach to public communications actions as carefully as you would plan any military operation.

To do this, we need to understand certain features of media coverage which might distort our messages:

- **Short Deadlines:** Reporters operate under tight deadlines which can vary, depending on the medium.
- **Time/Space Limitations:** Print, radio and television have small spaces (such as a sentence or paragraph) or short time periods (such as 10-30 seconds). You must organize your thoughts and be prepared to condense them into a few sentences or thoughts. Be brief and to the point.

- **“Pack” or “Trend” Journalism:** Important or breaking stories are often followed by a spate of follow-on stories on the same or similar subjects. For example, if a series of aircraft accidents occurs over a short period, the collective media pack generates stories focusing on aviation issues related to the aircraft or the type of incidents involved.

- **Inexperienced Reporters:** Some reporters without first-hand experience will not know the difference between a M-16 and an F-16. At the same time, many military ranks and acronyms can be confusing, even to an experienced reporter. Try to translate military terminology into civilian terms. Simple, “plain English” descriptions and a positive attitude will score points and reporters will appreciate the assistance. More importantly, a helpful attitude will usually generate credibility and help you get your point of view across. Make every possible effort to educate the reporter to your terminology before the interview.

Proactive communications with the media neutralizes critics and eliminates embarrassing distortions. Prior planning is critical; don’t “wing it.” Before granting any interview, contact your local public affairs office. Remember, the media will not hesitate to remind you of your oath to the U. S. Constitution, which includes support for a free press.

What is news?

Most journalists agree there are key elements of “news.” They are:

- Immediacy** - something that has just happened or is about to happen
- Proximity** - the closer to “home” the better
- Prominence** - public figures, elected officials, famous persons
- Oddity** - something bizarre, unusual or unexpected
- Conflict** - arguments, debates, or situations where there is a winner and loser
- Suspense** - when the outcome cannot be foreseen
- Emotions** - situations that stir up sympathy, anger or other emotions
- Sex or scandal** - inappropriate behavior sells

Using your Public Affairs Office

Your public affairs office is a valuable resource in dealing with the media. You can rely on them to:

- ☞ Advise if the proposed interview is authorized or appropriate.
- ☞ Research potential interview issues, including questions likely to be asked.
- ☞ Assist in helping you prepare for the interview, including review of possible questions and answers and conducting one-on-one rehearsals.
- ☞ Make all arrangements for the interview, including ground rules, time and location.
- ☞ Monitor the interview, if necessary, to provide an in-house record of the interview, as well as follow up on items to be provided later.
- ☞ Act as a liaison with the news organization and provide follow-up video copies, news clippings, etc., of the resulting story.
- ☞ Provide after-action review and feedback: did we get our message out and, if so, how effectively?

Public affairs personnel have been trained to tell you the bad news as well as the good news. Make it easy for them to be absolutely honest, even critical, with you. The most important role Public Affairs has is to prepare people to deal with reporters. In this era, anyone can be tapped to be the spokesperson with very little warning, and the individual selected should not be thrust into the spotlight unprepared. Every commander, civilian executive, senior officer and senior NCO should know and be able to apply the techniques required to deal effectively with the media.



Public Affairs will escort the reporter, monitor the interview, and follow up on items requested.

The Media Interview

While many in the military are reluctant to talk to the media, it usually is in the best interest of the Air Force for us to do so. Interviews are opportunities to correct the record, answer the critics, or praise outstanding performance.



Effects-based targeting of messages: Before you go into an interview, decide what you want to get out of the interview, or in other words, what effect you want to achieve. Then decide how you can best achieve that effect.

Having agreed to the interview, establish the ground rules. When an official and a reporter meet, the ground rules must be stated clearly understood and mutually agreed to by both parties before the interview begins.

Establish the parameters of the interview. Be very clear about what you will or will not talk about. It is perfectly legitimate to request a list of potential topic areas in advance. Remember that once you have given permission for an interview, you have given up the right to censor what is written or broadcast. Please understand, you have no control over what questions you are asked, but you have 100 percent control over what you say during an interview.

The best rule of thumb to avoid embarrassment is to grant only “on-the-record” interviews. There

is no such thing as an “off-the-record” interview. Anything you say to or in the presence of media can be reported.

Types of Interviews

There are several types of news media interviews. Circumstances can range from an impromptu or pre-scheduled encounter on a routine subject to an accident, incident, crisis or contingency situation. No two situations will be alike. By mastering certain basic techniques, however, you will be well prepared for most interview situations.

Planned interview: Normally a one-on-one encounter. A reporter will request an interview with an officer, either in connection with a specific event or issue. A decision on whether to grant the interview is made on a case by-case basis.

How sensitive is the issue?

Is the area beyond the responsibility of the person to be interviewed?

If so, refer news media to the appropriate official. Never talk about an issue that is outside your jurisdiction or above your rank.

Contingency situations: Accidents, incidents or crises can present some of the most difficult media encounters you may experience during your career. Extensive property damage, injury or even loss of life may have occurred. A contingency operation may be underway or imminent. These situations are usually dramatic: the confusion of an accident scene, a fire raging with a rescue in progress or airmen launching aircraft. The already emotionally charged atmosphere will intensify, especially if the media begins to believe that they are being denied information, including access to the site, interviews with the participants, etc., for reasons other than safety or the needs of an operation or investigation.

Controlling the Interview

To control the course and content of an interview, prepare for it by identifying and organizing predetermined, positive messages. No matter what the interviewer asks, you should feel free to steer your response to the related message. The key is to develop your messages and learn the techniques you will need to deliver them.

Situational Control

There are several steps you can take to gain and keep control of the situation:

Make a brief statement: Normal procedure calls for the senior officer present to make a brief statement or take a few questions at the earliest opportunity. This can vary depending on the type of story and immediacy of news deadlines. A little consideration can establish trust and defuse concerns or rumors as to what is actually happening. Remember: the media feels an obligation to keep the public informed and your respect for their position will go a long way. Your intended audience isn't the reporters, but it is the people who read the newspaper or magazine, watch the TV or listen to the radio.

Keep the press informed: Media are present because they just like you, have a job to do. At a minimum, let the media know your plans in as much detail as practical. Don't make a big deal out of it. It's usually best to keep it informal and let them know as much as you can tell them about what is happening. If you do, don't be surprised if they try to keep you informed.

Be aware of what the press can do: As a commander, don't overlook their ability to assist you in reaching out to Air Force families and to the public. The press can help you acknowledge those involved; single out those who made special contributions; inform the public as to actions they need to take; or assure them appropriate action is being taken.

Developing Your Messages

No matter the event, you need to develop positive messages. This is not always easy but it must be done. Consider a "worst case" scenario: an aircraft accident involving loss of life. Although it is difficult to expand on the positive aspects of negative events, it can be done. This is always the best method for dealing with a difficult issue. Being "positive" does not mean that you try to downplay an event; only that you accentuate how you feel - that you are concerned, for instance, or what you are doing about it - such as taking immediate action. For example, if an aviation mishap occurs:

- Express the Air Force's concern for the people (including families) involved.
- Emphasize that we take any accident seriously and that a thorough investigation will be started immediately.
- Discuss the importance of ongoing aviation safety programs and provide factual information on the safety record of the type of aircraft involved to reassure the families of those still flying in similar aircraft.

In short, by assuming an assertive and positive attitude, you will not be victimized by events no matter how disastrous. Always answer questions with your primary "messages" in mind and look for opportunities to deliver them.

In most cases, you will not be confronting a disaster; but it is just as important to develop positive messages and the means to deliver them. You must determine what is important to the public or to your audience about the planned news story.

Developing Your Interview Answers

Most news organizations don't have enough time to get into the details. A videotape of your interview will be rushed to the studio, often by microwave or satellite, edited and shown, all probably in less than 12 hours. A lengthy newspaper interview will probably be condensed into 10-20 inches of news print column.

You must be prepared to express your major points in short, dynamic statements. By organizing your thoughts, you make it more likely that your position will be understood by the reporter and less likely that you will be misunderstood.

"It (the military) must seize such opportunities to put across its own view of the situation, and 'shape the battlefield. For the military, a few 'clever images' will never compensate for a coherent explanation in summarizing the nuances of a particular issue or situation."

-- Ajay K. Rai
Military-Media Interface:
Changing Paradigms New
Challenges

Don't try to memorize a response. Develop an understanding of the one or two main points, which promote the Air Force side of the issue. Then, work to condense those main points into a 10- to 20-second statement. Pre-planned messages that are triggered by an interviewer's question will result in the delivery of accurate, concise information. Experience has shown information received through the television medium, in particular, must be singular and short. Plan all your messages in 15 second "bites."

If you want to elaborate or explain your answer in detail, go ahead, but do so only after the main points have been established.

Techniques for Controlling the Interview

Flagging. Tie your information together with verbal clues to follow such as tone of voice, and nonverbally with hand gestures or facial expressions to emphasize a point.

Example: *"There are three new programs we've started this year to enhance flight safety."*
(said while holding up three fingers)

Bridging. Verbal maneuvering to what you want to talk about (your communications objective). This technique links the answer to a question to the message, usually in the form of a conjunction.

Examples: *"The F-22 does cost a lot, but this aircraft delivers"*
"Fifteen airmen died in combat today, however, they died defending ..."
"This base is not closing, and our mission here will ..."

Hooking. Grab the attention of the reporter. He or she may not understand or know the entire issue, whereas you have years of experience. A hook must be valid, but does not have to be fancy.

Examples: *"What concerns me even more ..."*
"In my experience..."
"The critical issue is ..."
"That's one perspective ..."
"I've heard that, but the real focus should be ..."

Interview ► Do's and ► Don'ts

Treat the media as you would want others to treat you. If you are distant and hostile with the media, you'll get what you give. Media need and want information. Spokespeople who are accessible and sensitive to a reporter's need for information will generate credibility and create a good working relationship.



► Make short, simple and specific statements. If your quotes don't stand on their own, then you failed - not the reporter.

► Respond to a question then stop. Don't feel you have to keep talking. Make the interviewer keep the interview going.

► Discuss only matters of which you have direct knowledge. Avoid hypothetical situations. Remember, there is no such thing as a personal opinion when you are speaking for the Air Force

► You aren't obligated to tell everything you know

► If you can't answer the question, give a reason why. There's nothing wrong with "I don't know" or "I can't answer that for security reasons." Be sure to follow-up with a pre-planned message or promise to get the information immediately following the interview (then do it).

► Take a second or two to think about your answers. Not only do rapid responses appear rehearsed, but also may not represent your best answer.

► Avoid "no comment." To many reporters and the public, it may falsely suggest you are hiding information, lack concern or don't wish to cooperate.

► Use personal examples in your responses so those who read, view or listen to the story can relate to

you and those you represent as “real people.” Further, a reporter can’t argue with personal experience.

▶ Talk from the perspective of the American public’s interest, not from the viewpoint of the military’s interest. Tell the audience how the nation benefits, not what the military stands to gain.

▶ It’s a good idea to encapsulate the question into your response for a taped interview. When the interview is aired or printed, the question may not be identified, and you need to make sure the subject is established.

▶ When given a multiple-part question, answer the one segment that allows you to make a positive point. Ignore the others. If the interviewer wants to return to unanswered questions, he or she will.

▶ Avoid repeating or using “color words” that may have a negative connotation. Words such as “massacre,” “scandal,” “deaths,” “corruption,” etc., induce overly strong, emotional reactions and may be counterproductive to your objectives.

▷ If the interviewer is hostile, don’t mirror his or her attitude. Don’t get angry or lose your temper. Control the interview: the audience will only see your angry answer, not the question that instigated it.

▷ Don’t answer with just a simple “yes” or “no.” Don’t be curt. There is no such thing as a dumb question; treat every question as a chance to state the Air Force position or message.

▷ Don’t pretend to be perfect. Admitting mistakes from time to time demonstrates candor and the integrity of our organization.

▷ Don’t use acronyms, technical terms or jargon. Speak conversationally as you would to a non-military high school friend.

▷ Don’t begin with gratuitous phrases, such as, “I’m glad you asked that question,” or “That’s a good question.” It wastes time, doesn’t convey anything, and implies that all the other questions were stupid.

▷ Don’t lie or dodge questions. Answer as honestly and completely as you can. The Air Force’s reputation and public trust rests on your veracity.

▷ Don’t use — or repeat — unverified terminology or “facts” given by a reporter, unless you are positive of their accuracy. Politely correct a reporter if you know the real facts. State that you are not aware of the validity of questionable figures or if you have not personally verified the accuracy of the referenced information. By using incorrect information or failing to correct erroneous statements, the public will associate them with you and assume they are true.

The Cardinal Rule to interviews

There is no such thing as “off the record.” It is the reporter’s job to use any and all available sources and information for a story. Watch out for the “hot mike.” Assume the camera is always “on” and the mike is always “hot” anytime you’re within 50 feet of the camera. The interview begins as soon as you make contact with the reporter.

Follow Up

Don’t forget to tie up loose ends after the interview. Ensure your staff follows through on securing any information that you said you would find out. Inform your interviewer that you are available for additional information or clarification if needed.

Summary

Members of the media are a link between the Air Force and the public. They form the conduit of communication that is vital in keeping a flow of accurate and timely information to the American public. This information is the bedrock of the public’s perception of the military.

It is the responsibility of each airman, and particularly those who deal directly with the media, to become familiar with the process and feel comfortable in this environment. As a spokesperson for the Air Force, you must keep the conduit free of obstruction by providing honest and accurate information to the public.

Remember that your Public Affairs Officer is your local media expert and can provide the best advice before, during, and after your interview. Seek the PA’s counsel and take advantage of his or her experience with the media.

APPENDIX A

Interview Decision Process Checklist

Step 1: Conduct basic research

- Determine the reporter's purpose.
- Determine your purpose: Why conduct the interview?
- Determine the reporter's background: How well does he or she know the issues?
- Consult with your boss and the PAO.
- Are you the right person to do the interview?

Step 2: Develop your communication objective

- Create a message geared to the reporter's audience.

Step 3: Research potential questions

- Brainstorm: Look for questions you won't like.
- Look for local angle on national issues.

Step 4: Prepare written answers to each question

- Don't try to "ad lib" during the interview.
- Review written responses, use staff as necessary.
- Answer from the audience's perspective.
- Keep answers simple and concise: If you can't write simple sentences, you don't understand the issue.

"If you wear it,
operate it, eat it,
promote it, or
shoot it, you can
generally talk
about it."

Army guide



APPENDIX B

Rules of Engagement

1. Reconfirm the interview topic.
2. Establish subjects not open for discussion. Most journalists understand and respect ground rules.
3. Find out if reporter has other sources.
4. Set time, location, date, and a time limit for the interview.
5. It is all right to tape the interview. It is a matter of accurate record, not a matter of mistrust.
6. It's OK to have pre-interview discussion:
 - Puts both parties at ease.
 - If it's a TV interview, ask if the interview is "live" or taped.
 - Helps determine and, perhaps, supplement the reporter's knowledge.
 - Can determine reporter's slant on story.

REMEMBER: Even during a pre-interview discussion, you should operate under the principle that the cameras are always "rolling" and that the microphone is always "hot."

7. Don't expect to be able to review the story before it goes public. However, if it is a very technical story, perhaps involving a weapon system, you may offer to review it for factual accuracy.

Basic 'On-the-Air' Tips

Here is a common sense checklist to review as you plan to go “on-the-air.” These tips are aimed at a television interview but could also apply to photographs for a newspaper.

- ◆ **Uniform:** Wear attire appropriate to the subject and the setting. Normally, a freshly pressed service uniform although a uniform of the day is acceptable when the interview is conducted on base in a working area.
- ◆ **Eyewear:** Do not wear sunglasses or tinted/ photo-gray glasses. If you wear glasses, wear rims that will allow viewers to see your eyes. If you decide not to wear your glasses during the interview, remove them about 20 minutes prior to the interview to allow your eyes to adjust.
- ◆ **If seated:** Pick a non-swivel, stable, straight-back chair to avoid movement during the session. Do not sit back or let yourself get too comfortable. Don't slouch; a slight degree of discomfort will help you stay mentally and physically alert. It's also best to lean forward slightly and maintain eye contact with the interviewer.
- ◆ **If standing:** Assume a stable, comfortable position at an angle to the camera, facing the interviewer. Stand tall with one foot slightly back, then put most of your weight on that back foot.
- ◆ **Microphone:** Allow the camera crew to get you “wired.” Avoid touching or breathing into the mike; keep the cord hidden. If they ask you for a “mike check,” say your name, rank, duty title and your most important main point you want the audience to understand.
- ◆ **Physical gestures:** Feel comfortable using natural hand gestures for emphasis, but don't overdo it. Avoid nervous habits such as tapping feet, drumming fingers, playing with pens, etc. Your most important gesture is always paying respectful attention to the interviewer and demonstrating your sincerity and honesty by maintaining appropriate eye contact. You don't have to be serious at all times, but be careful not to smile or nod at the wrong time when discussing an accident or serious incident - some people smile out of discomfort or nervousness.
- ◆ **Personal issues:** If you have a hearing problem, a difficulty understanding, nervousness or a physical reason for desiring one profile over another, make this known to the producer of the program in advance.
- ◆ **Relax.** After all, you are the expert and the person best able to deal with your subject.

Watch out for sneaky tactics

The table below lists the most common types of interview questions and provides a few techniques for handling them. Keep these suggestions in mind as you prepare for your chat with a reporter and use them during your interview. These techniques should help you become an excellent representative for your unit.

Type of Question

Puffball

(any “easy” question)

Example:

Q: Are the young men and women entering the Air Force today better or worse than they were 10 years ago?

A: The young men and women we're recruiting today are undoubtedly the best-educated, brightest people we've ever attracted. In fact, this month alone, applicants in our recruiting district have had the highest test scores we've seen in the past decade.

Techniques

- Acknowledge the question
- Don't pass up the chance to include one of your key points

Hypothetical

- Don't address “what ifs”
- Bridge back to key point

Example:

Q: What would happen if the Air Force budget were reduced by, say, five percent?

A: Well, one can't foresee the future. I can tell you, however, that the Air Force is committed to spending taxpayers' dollars in the wisest possible way. I assure you that all of us in this unit will continue to do our best to give Americans the best possible return on their investment in national defense.

Type of Question

Techniques

False Facts/ False Assumptions Putting Words in Your Mouth

- Never repeat mistaken information
- Discount the false facts or assumptions by bridging to a positive point
- If the interviewer returns to the incorrect information, briefly and politely correct the record

Example:

Q: So what you're saying is that the base is responsible for more than 50% of the community's oil spills?

A: No, that's not correct. What I said was that the base's oil containment team has had to respond to 50% fewer incidents this year.

Factual

- If the information is correct, say so
- If the information is incorrect, disagree tactfully and provide facts
- End with a positive message

Example:

Q: Wasn't there a big fire this morning at the fuel depot on your base ?

A: That's right. Workers were disassembling an unused fuel storage tank, and sparks from a cutting torch ignited the fumes. Fortunately, the base fire chief had anticipated such a situation and had a team on site. The fire department crew put out the fire within three minutes of their arrival. Realistic training paid big dividends out there today

Forced Choices

- Don't agree if both choices are incorrect
- Tell the "real story"
- Make the information as positive as possible

Example:

Q: Did the general commit suicide because he was gay or because he was having problems with his wife?

A: First, let me say that this incident has affected everyone on base. The general's death is under investigation at this time, so no one yet knows how he died. General Smith had many outstanding achievements during his career and his leadership will be missed.

Questioning techniques used by reporters are just ways to push source's buttons, to persuade the source to help them frame, support or add color their stories.



APPENDIX D

Communication Objectives/Key Points

Main Points

Story/Example/Description

CONCERN	_____	Taking action. Accountability re-emphasized. Personal interest/caring. Appropriate body language/facial expression
CANDOR	_____	Admit breakdown/confusion. Clearly state the story.
UNIQUENESS	_____	Never happened before. Not the usual case, although training exposes airmen to risks.

Your objectives/messages should be positive, particularly for controversial or negative subjects: critics and detractors will be contacted for their views. If you don't bring out your positive points, no one else will.

Answers that work:

- ① Contain a message - brief, simple, plain language statement
- ② Put the message upfront
- ③ Emphasize benefits versus features, people not programs
- ④ Story-like: jokes, anecdotes that have a beginning, middle and end are usually people oriented, personal experiences
- ⑤ Contain few negative words, are essentially positive
- ⑥ Are not disparaging towards any organization or individual.

APPENDIX E

How to Make the Best of Bad News

If you determine you have been wronged in a news story or that inaccurate or misleading reporting has taken place, you must decide if you want to take action. Bad news is always worse when someone else explains it. Engage immediately to get the facts out to the public.

Bad news correction checklist

- Is it important enough to correct or would a correction amount to nit-picking?
- Just how damaging is the charge, criticism or error?
- Will a correction simply give greater visibility to an opposite point of view?
- Is a correction worth a restatement of the entire problem, including the error, to new audiences?
- Is it possible to reach the identical audience originally exposed to the error?
- Did you respond promptly and accurately to the media inquiries that led to the story?

The more of these elements that apply, the more likely it is that you should seek correction, clarification or retraction. However, we recommend that you proceed only if your situation meets at least four of the six criteria above.

How to make bad news worse

- Lie!**
- Lose your temper.
- Phone the offending news agency and demand a meeting with the management at which you threaten everything from withholding future access to bodily harm.
- Call the reporter and demand a retraction.
- File a lawsuit



APPENDIX F

Developing Your Messages/Objectives

Prepare for all interviews by developing your own agenda. Go into every interview knowing precisely what you'd like to see in print or on the air, and what effect you'd like to create in the minds of the audience. In other words, if you could write the headline or first paragraph for the article, what would it be? What perception do you want the audience to have when you're done?

Just remember: prepare for, but don't expect, perfection.

Here are some tips on how to develop your agenda.

Don't just answer the reporter's question — respond to it! All your answers should stand alone, needing no introduction. Answer + message = Response

Identify two or three points about your mission or a sensitive issue that you'd like the public to understand. These are your key messages or commercials. Keeping these key phrases in minds should help you guide and control the interview.

Don't wait for the right question to be asked — bridge to your key point, move beyond the question asked and tell the public what you want them to know.

Make your responses short and specific — one to two sentences or about 20 seconds.

Write your key points in clear, easily understood language, free from jargon or complicated, technical language. Ensure they are provable assertions or facts that can be independently verified.

Write your points on 3 x 5-inch card and refer to them before the interview starts, then put it away. If you will be citing statistics or something very technical, write those numbers on a card and use the card for emphasis during the interview. Otherwise, don't refer to your points again: you're the expert and should know what you're talking about.

If you don't want to see it in print or hear it on the air — DON'T SAY IT. Engage brain before putting mouth in gear.

On-Scene Commander Quick Reference

Public statements in a crash

- Release as much information as you can, as quickly as you can, as clearly as you can to journalists on the scene.
- Package your information into short “responses” - never just answer a question.
- Answer + Message = Response to journalist’s question. And always add a message to the answer - messages are short, positive, truthful, memorable statements.
- Messages are key points you want to communicate to the public, examples:
 - The Air Force is a close-knit family and the loss of one of our own affects all of us.
 - We understand this was a very tragic occurrence and we are all experiencing this sorrow together.
 - The cause of the accident is under investigation.
 - A board of officers has been appointed to thoroughly investigate the cause of the crash .
 - We ask the public to avoid the accident scene, so cleanup and recovery operations can continue.
 - Realistic training has inherent risks.
- Keep responses short: 15-30 seconds MAX.
- Look at the journalist who asked you the question - NOT the camera - pause before you respond to the question, remain calm, talk slowly, show concern -- people will remember their impression of you, not necessarily what you said.
- If you have a responsible eyewitness to offer the journalist, do so ONLY after the eyewitness has been given “on-the-spot” media training and helped with message development.

What is releasable to journalists?

- ▶ Information about the accident.
- ▶ Time, place or any details that do not speculate on the cause of the accident
- ▶ Number of persons involved, including crew and passengers on aircraft accident
- ▶ Departure point and destination
- ▶ Type of equipment involved
- ▶ Purpose of the mission (if unclassified)
- ▶ If available, when and what were the circumstances of the last crash at the base
- ▶ How many died, where they died, how they died, where the bodies were taken
- ▶ Cause of death as confirmed by medical authorities
- ▶ How many were injured, where they were taken, condition only and if confirmed, say “they were listed in _____ condition,” remember that their condition may have changed since your last report
- ▶ Release name of dead (or those seriously injured) after next-of-kin notification. For dead release: name, rank, title, unit, AFSC, gender, home of record (city and state only), awards and decorations, how long in the military, how many hours of flying time, types of aircraft flown, previous assignments, military PME.
- ▶ If accident off base and if civil authorities identify military victims, ask the journalists to withhold the names until next-of-kin notification

Granting access to journalists

- Grant access to the scene as soon as possible. The imagination is almost always worse than the reality. Don’t make the media guess.
- If there are valid safety concerns, inform the journalists of this fact, then arrange for them to take long-range visuals with their cameras
- If bodies are present, cover the bodies or body parts and allow access
- If classified is present, cover it and have a Security Forces individual accompany the media and PA, then grant access - if it can’t be covered, tell the journalists what the problem is. If the journalist has already taken images of classified, explain the problem and ask for the film or tape and then help him/her replace it, by getting the images he needs for the story. If on-base and classified material has been photographed, Security Forces will confiscate the film or videotape. If off-base, Air Force officials must ask civil law enforcement authorities to stop further photography of the exposed classified material and collect the film and videotape.
- If an off-base accident, ask local authorities to help - remember, you have no authority off base to constrain the media unless a national security area is declared

Interview Preparation Guide

When Public Affairs calls you to with a request for an interview later in the day do the following:

- ♦ Write down the topic that is to be covered on the topic line below.
- ♦ Determine your communication points. What three ideas do you want to get across to the reporter? Write these on the lines below.
- ♦ List three possible questions a reporter might ask. Be sure to prepare answers to these questions. Write questions and answers below.
- ♦ If time permits before the interview, ask a friend to interview you about the topic in question.
- ♦ Videotape the mock news interview.
- ♦ Analyze it for presentation strengths and areas of improvement

Topic: _____

Your Communication Points

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Possible Question

Your Response (Soundbite)

1 _____ _____ _____	1 _____ _____ _____
2 _____ _____ _____	2 _____ _____ _____
3 _____ _____ _____	3 _____ _____ _____

NOTES: