

Working with the Media



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WHY BOTHER?

It's not enough to do a good job; we have to be *seen* to do a good job.

Through the media, we have a golden opportunity to get that message across to a massive audience.

Many employees will have little or no contact with the press but senior managers in particular should always be aware of the benefits afforded by good publicity.

The publicity generated from Fire and Rescue Service HQ or through management channels will only have maximum impact if effective media relationships are fostered at the 'sharp end.' A newspaper editor will hardly look favourably on a county-wide fire safety campaign, for example, if the local station commander is always too busy to speak to his/her reporters.

Within obvious limits each fire station is responsible for its own public relations activities. Anything happening on the station is likely to be of interest to the area's newspapers -- from major or unusual incidents to charity events and school visits. Encourage local journalists to call into the station daily, or at least telephone. By building up personal contacts a station's press coverage will speedily improve.

The central Public Relations Unit at Birkenshaw exists to ensure a professional and consistent approach to both internal and external communication. If in doubt, or in need of extra help, ring **01274 655807**. And remember, let the unit know of any matter which may be worthy of wider publicity, or have serious implications.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: an introduction

The people of West Yorkshire pay for the Fire and Rescue Authority's services through national and local taxation. In essence, they invest in our organisation. As 'shareholders' they have the right to be well informed about what we do. As 'clients' they have the right to expect that our services be provided efficiently and effectively.

The Authority is committed to the principle of open government and tries to allow members of the public free access to all appropriate and relevant information.

A definition of PR

PR is often defined as planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its many 'publics' i.e.

- the external audience (including the general public, other emergency services, Government departments, local opinion-formers);
- the internal audience (the workforce).

Our approach

There are two factors which are of immense help in developing good PR for the Fire Authority:

- people are interested in the fire service
- people feel that they can rely on us to help them in a crisis.

On the other hand:

- the behaviour of just one person in a tight and disciplined organisation reflects on everyone else
- people don't always understand the scope of the job and assume that when we're not putting out fires we must be unproductive.

Because we're all in the same organisation and because of the need for effective PR, we need to take a corporate approach. Basically, this means that we should *all* be singing off the same hymn sheet and that the right hand should always know what the left hand is doing!

MEDIA GUIDELINES

- 1 *To a considerable degree the effectiveness of the Authority's public relations activity depends upon sustaining good relationships with the local, regional and national media. The media is in a unique position not only to heighten public awareness of operational matters but to support and sponsor a host of other important activities such as fire safety projects and recruitment campaigns.*

- 2 *Although the PR Unit has they key role to play in media liaison it is recognised that many other members of staff will, on occasion, speak to journalists. In that context we are all 'ambassadors.' Indeed, given that there are almost 70 media outlets and 50 fire stations across the county it is desirable that individual station commanders, in particular, are encouraged to foster local media contacts. A station which is generally helpful to the media and is seen to take an active interest in its local community will tend to be highly valued by that community. Therefore, and in accordance with the philosophy of functional management, it will frequently fall to station commanders, or their nominees, to determine what information concerning station activities is prudent for release to the local media. Officers releasing operational (i.e. fire and rescue-related) details should have regard to protecting:*
 - *the identity of fatalities (pending Police disclosure)*
 - *the identity of **any** casualty/victim (without his/her express consent, or that of her/his parent/guardian)*
 - *the location of sensitive premises (e.g. a women's refuge)*
 - *the identity of persons involved in an incident who may be subject to subsequent prosecution*
 - *information relating to possible causes of death*
 - *information relating to incidents in central government establishments such as prisons or borstals*
 - *information concerning accidents involving Fire Authority personnel, vehicles or equipment.*

- 3 *The disclosure of information about civil disturbances or attacks on Fire Authority personnel, vehicles or equipment should only be made by a station commander (minimum), prior approval being sought from Operations or the First Call Officer. (The PR Unit should be advised by telephone or e-mail).*

- 4 *The unit will play an active training role to support this approach and will respond to all reasonable requests for guidance and assistance.*

- 5 *The unit must be informed of all local, or departmental, publicity initiatives of corporate significance e.g. CFO Commendations, major fire safety campaigns etc.*

- 4 ***In order to maintain a corporate approach on policy matters all public information of this nature must be channelled through the PR Unit, which will***

liaise as necessary with senior Elected Members and Principal Officers (who, in general terms, will act as the only official, named spokespersons).

- 7 *Policy issues will be regarded as matters the subject of:*
- *past, present or necessary Authority deliberation*
 - *decision or necessary decision by senior management*
 - *public controversy and upon which comment may be prejudicial to the best interests of the Authority*
 - *consultation with other agencies.*
- 8 *[The above stricture does not, of course, preclude public comment on such topics by employees acting in the capacity of accredited representatives.]*
- 9 *Any concerns as to the distinction between operational and policy matters must be resolved with the PR Unit or Principal Officers prior to any action being taken.*
- 10 *In initiating media liaison/responding to media enquiries on corporate issues the PR Unit will act in concert with established decisions of the Authority and its committees, or with the authorisation of a relevant member of the Management Board and/or the Leadership of the Authority (or their nominees), as appropriate.*

***Reporting operational incidents:
Useful tips***

- *Use language that the reader/listener will understand, avoiding fire service jargon e.g. 'four firefighters wearing breathing apparatus' rather than just '4 BA.'*
- *Give details of the incident on arrival, such as flames shooting from the windows, the roof being ablaze etc. If the appliances arrived quickly, say so.*
- *Give details of the property involved -- whether it is a terraced house, a derelict school etc.*
- *Do not speculate as to the cost of replacing damaged property -- say damage was minor, extensive etc. Emphasise what was saved rather than what was destroyed.*
- *Describe how any rescues were carried out.*
- *Try, whenever possible, to put across a fire safety message.*

