

KDLA August 2011 Trustee Tip of the Month Dealing With the Press

Quick Tips

- ◆ Decide who will be the library's spokesperson.
- ◆ Create a media/publicity policy before it is needed.
- ◆ Avoid "no comment" whenever possible.
- ◆ Don't address the press unprepared.
- ◆ Cultivate relationships with local media organizations year-round.

As a library trustee, there are probably few things you dread as much as the prospect of being targeted by the press. Whether it's a new building project, a natural disaster or questions about tax rates, the library is often at the forefront of community events, and therefore on the radar of local media organizations, for better or worse.

Most potential crises that could result in press interest in the library are predictable. This allows you to plan ahead and prepare a response for these events while you are not in the midst of an emergency situation. The better prepared your library is to handle press inquiries, the less stressful being in the cross hairs of the press will be. Creating policies and procedures that address handling press and public relations can ensure that you as a trustee have the tools you need to respond when the library is unwittingly thrust into the limelight.

The First Line of Defense

Knowing ahead of time how your library will respond to press inquiries is essential to dealing effectively with the press. Your first line of defense should be a media/publicity policy that outlines who is responsible for communicating with the press and how these communications will happen.

The policy should identify **one** person as the library's spokesperson, ideally the library director or the board president. If the library has a Public Relations Manager, that person may also be a spokesperson for the library and liaison to the media. In creating an official spokesperson, the library will be able to control the message that is communicated to the public and the press about any issue or situation, ensuring that the message is accurate and consistent.

The policy should also spell out the appropriate response in the event of press inquiries. An appropriate response usually entails conferring with the library director or other pertinent parties, gathering the information you need to answer the inquiry, then delivering a response to the press.



Serving Kentucky's Need to Know

“No Comment” is a No-No

Although your first instinct when confronted with a difficult question from a member of the press may be to say, “no comment” in order to avoid saying the wrong thing, when it comes to handling press inquiries, the worst response is always no response.

If you are contacted by the media and are not the library spokesperson, refer the press member to the appropriate spokesperson, and contact the spokesperson ASAP to let him or her know to expect an inquiry. If you *are* the library’s spokesperson, but don’t feel you can adequately address the question, be candid; ask for the press member’s deadline, and do your best to gather the information you need in time to respond before the deadline.

Be Overprepared

If the press asks you for an interview or prepared statement, don’t just prepare - over prepare. Gather as much information about the issue in question as possible, including facts or statistics about the library that can help to make the issue understandable to both the press and the public. Create both a formal statement and “talking points” that can help you to get your message across clearly.

Notes aren’t just for print media inquiries. For TV and radio interviews, having notes to refer to can help you to stay on point while also alleviating nervousness.

Cultivate the Press

No library trustee wants to be contacted by the press when the library is facing a difficult situation. However, the more cooperative and helpful you are with members of the media, the more likely you - and the library - are to receive fair, unbiased coverage. If you seem like you have something to hide, the media will assume you do, and this assumption will color the coverage of the issue.

Cultivate the press by inviting them into the library. While it’s true that the press usually attends board meetings only when there’s a controversial issue at stake, it’s best to become familiar and cordial with your local press before they arrive on the scent of a juicy story. Ask your local press members to attend meetings where exciting or interesting - but uncontroversial - library decisions are at stake; they may not attend each time you ask, but if the board becomes comfortable with the media on pleasant terms, you’re less likely to be nervous when they attend board meetings where difficult decisions must be made, and more likely to get the opportunity to explain the library’s stance when there are controversial issues on the table.

This is not legal advice and I am not an attorney. If you feel you need legal advice you should consult an attorney.

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