

September 2014 Trustee Tip of the Month When Your Library is in the News

The time to consider how you'll deal with media interest in your library is not when you're getting a call from a reporter asking questions about the library's tax rate or stance on a controversial issue. Knowing how your library will respond beforehand can ensure that you as a trustee have the tools you need to respond when the library is thrust into the limelight.

Assign Responsibility

Knowing ahead of time how your library will respond to press inquiries is essential to dealing effectively with the press. A media plan or publicity policy should clearly outline 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. By assigning an official spokesperson, the library will be able to ensure that press statements are accurate and consistent.

No "No Comment"

While it may be first instinct when confronted with a difficult question from a member of the press 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 a deadline, and do your best to respond before the deadline.

Be Overprepared

If you have time to prepare before an interview, or have the opportunity to draft a prepared statement, remember that there's no such thing as being overprepared. Gather as much information 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 "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.

Understand the Importance of the Local Press to Your Library

It's easy to forget how important the local press is to promoting your library when difficult situations arise, but 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. 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 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.