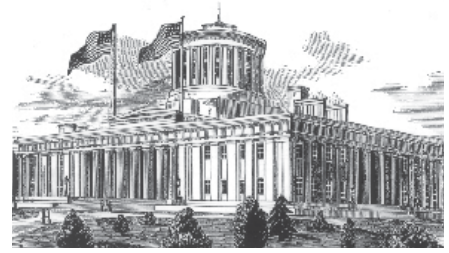

Legislators and the Media



Photographed by Jenna Mann, House Republican Caucus

Members of the media interview the Speaker of the House

Legislators and the Media



Learning about the Media

Effective press coverage hinges upon familiarity with certain fundamental rules. A legislator who knows how the media operate will be able to furnish information to reporters in a way that increases the likelihood that the story will receive favorable and substantial coverage. While obtaining coverage of a story does not require sensationalizing the news, it does require the careful selection of information for release and careful attention to characterizing stories. Audiences prefer stories about people. When a legislator uses stories and references about people to bolster his or her ideas, the audience will remember the story and be reminded of the point it supported. Moreover, if the legislator can show the media how Statehouse news affects people’s lives, most editors probably will give stories better coverage.

Statehouse news stories that directly affect people’s lives are more likely to capture the attention of both editors and the public.

Timeliness. Yesterday’s events are old news. The time element is so important to the mass media that a matter of hours can change the value of a story. If the legislator has any control over the timing or announcement of events, he or she should avoid unnecessary competition with other current news stories. A legislator could release a story on a Monday, for example, when competing legislative news is less likely to be available, rather than on a Thursday, which may be a busier news day.

Proximity. The story should appeal to local interests. Thus, a story about the naming of a park in northwest Ohio would not necessarily be news for Cincinnati, but it might be used effectively by a legislator from Lucas County.

Prominence. News often concerns prominent people, places, or things. If the Governor of Ohio makes a statement about education or crime, for example, that statement is more likely to command the attention of the news media than an identical statement made by a lesser official. The individual legislator enjoys a similar advantage in his or her own district. However, this advantage does not transfer to Columbus, where there are numerous legislators, department directors, and statewide officeholders. On the other hand, a committee chairperson or a prime sponsor of legislation will be a prominent participant in the legislative arena in many situations.

What the Media Look for in a News Story

The reporters in the Statehouse are interested in “significant news.” Significance is determined by the audience to whom the news will be directed, the views of the persons operating the medium, and the nature of the event itself. The following elements constitute “significance” for the purposes of a news story:

Relevance. Events that directly affect the average citizen frequently capture the attention of the media. For example, if a legislative proposal will save or cost the average Ohioan \$100 a month, the story has relevance. It is important to remember, however, that what may be relevant to one audience may not be relevant to another.

Conflict. Conflict heightens reader interest. The media's focus upon conflicts between political parties, between proponents and opponents of legislation, or among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches supports this observation.

Suspense. When the outcome of some event is in serious doubt until the very end, the suspense is likely to capture an audience's attention and, consequently, the headlines of the news. Elements of suspense exist in most events that, if properly handled, can enhance an event's appeal to the media.

Human Interest. Stories that are people-focused and appeal to readers on an emotional level are considered human interest stories. Although Statehouse reporters usually focus on news stories, they occasionally may write articles on human interest topics such as the legislative career of a retiring legislator or the experience of students following the progress of a bill they researched for a class.

How to Work with Reporters

The topic "How to Handle the Press" is frequently discussed among legislators. These discussions usually revolve around the "ground rules" appropriate for legislator-reporter relationships. The following suggestions should aid the legislator in developing his or her relationships with the press.

When communicating with a reporter, the legislator is communicating with a representative of the mass media. Regardless of what a reporter is told or where it is told, the information the reporter obtains is "on the record"; hence, the statement is quotable and attributable, unless the reporter agrees

beforehand not to identify the source or use the information. Many legislators believe that when a reporter is friendly, information informally given to the reporter will be confidential. Only when legislators see the statement in print or hear it broadcast on television or radio do they realize that a reporter is constantly seeking news and is paid to have that news disseminated.

The easiest way for a legislator to avoid answering questions from the news media is to decline comment until a later time. Nevertheless, legislators should be candid with the press. This does not mean that legislators have to tell reporters everything, but they should not tell reporters half-truths because the statements may cause problems later. Of course, legislators should not issue false statements. By the same token, legislative veterans generally agree that members of the General Assembly who serve as "pipelines" by conveying privileged information to the news media are doing themselves and their colleagues a disservice.

On occasion, a legislator provides information for a news item to a reporter and later thinks that the reporter has distorted the information and misrepresented the member's statements. One natural reaction is for the member to appeal to the reporter's publishers; another is for the member to refuse to speak with that reporter again. Legislators should resist these temptations because such action may impair future contacts with other reporters. A more desirable strategy that has been suggested by several Statehouse reporters is for the member to discuss the matter with the reporter. Most reporters agree that if problems cannot be solved and a member continues to think a reporter is not accurate in his or her reporting, the member has the right to take the complaint to a person in a position of greater authority. Conversely, legislators should acknowledge when the media do a good job in their coverage.

There is a limited amount of time and space available for any news, and this is especially true of state government news. Consequently, it is impossible for the media to publicize every story that legislators make available to them. With 132 members of the General Assembly, legislators must take care not to deluge the media with news stories and press releases. It probably is not in the member's best interest to gain a reputation as

a publicity-seeker. In addition, a legislator can generate considerable goodwill with reporters if the legislator understands the limitations of space, the reporters' deadlines, and the importance of timely and sincere communication with reporters.

Legislators should avoid favoring one reporter or one news medium over another. What a legislator does for one should be done for all. This especially applies when granting interviews and briefings. If a legislator distributes a news release, the release should be made available to all interested reporters. This can be done most easily by taking the releases to the news facilities in the Statehouse for general distribution. (A detailed list of the Statehouse media appears in Appendix C.)

Finally, a legislator whose district has both weekly and daily papers should time news releases so that the weeklies can print the stories on the same day they appear in the dailies. This practice also helps build goodwill among weekly editors without offending the editors and publishers of the dailies.

Channels of Media Access: Print, Broadcast, and News Conferences

There are many ways in which legislators can use the mass media to their advantage in disseminating their messages and communicating with the public. In addition to the traditional media of television, radio, newspapers, and news conferences, legislators have access to the Internet, electronic mail, and social media.

The scale of state news coverage that a news medium provides and the size and diversity of the medium's audience directly affects the manner of reporting state news. During recent sessions of the General Assembly, the Associated Press (AP)

wire service, has provided state legislative news to many newspapers and radio and television stations throughout Ohio and neighboring states. Smaller news syndicates, such as Dix Newspapers and the Gannett Newspapers, supply additional news to the print media throughout the state.

Legislative reporting services such as Gongwer News Service and Hannah News Service cover Ohio's state government by means of newsletters and electronic communications to subscribers

across the country. Gongwer and Hannah News Services pay particular attention to legislative committee hearings.

Broadcast reports also are sent to numerous radio and television stations by Ohio Public Radio and Television and the Ohio News Network. Major daily newspapers and radio and television stations also supplement coverage for their local markets during most sessions of the General

Assembly. On rare occasions, even the national television networks will cover legislative activity on issues of national or regional concern.

Some legislators use interactive social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to communicate directly with constituents, voters, and the general public. For suggestions on the effective use of these tools, and cautions about the potential pitfalls they present, see the article "What You Need to Know About Social Networking" in the July/August 2009 issue of *State Legislatures* magazine, available online at http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/magazine/articles/2009/sl_0709-social.pdf.

News Releases

News releases are a primary means of communicating with the media. Legislators can send news releases to newspapers, television stations, and radio stations most often by electronic mail. A few pointers garnered from reporters and legislators, in the preparation of news releases

*All news stories share six traits, regardless of the medium through which the story is disseminated. Each story tells **who, what, where, when, how, and why**. These are the essential elements in any news story and these questions should be answered whenever you are writing a news release, holding a news conference, or communicating via television, radio, or electronic mail.*

and the sample news release below should assist members in using this communication method:

- Prepare and distribute the release before the occurrence of the event. Assure proper release time with an indication of the time of the event at the top of the first page of the release.
- News releases should be typewritten in a double, or preferably triple, space format. Extra space should be left at the top, at both sides, and at the bottom of all pages of the release to allow reporters and editors to make editorial changes easily. The release should be printed on one side of the page only.
- The release should be as short as possible yet should contain all essential information.
- All spelling, punctuation, and capitalization should be correct. Check to see that proper names of individuals and places are spelled correctly. No one likes to see his or her name misspelled in print.
- Provide full names and essential information for all persons who are not well known. This should include such information as the person's position or title.
- The Senator and Representative mentioned should be identified by political party, district, and hometown.
- Be certain to specify who has provided the press release and the circumstances surrounding the statement. This can be accomplished in the release as well as through the use of key words in the identifications at the top of the release.
- The release should be written as if a neutral third person were doing the writing. Use the third person pronouns "he" and "she" rather than "I" or "me" when referring to yourself; the only exception to this would be a direct quotation.
- Short quotations greatly enhance the chances that a release will be used.
- Avoid dividing words between two lines. Complete a paragraph on a single page rather than continuing it on the next. Paragraphs should be short. Short sentences also make the release more acceptable to the media.
- If the release contains more than one page, the word "More" should appear at the bottom center of the first page. The number "30" should appear at the end of the release.

Sample News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 10, 2011

CONTACT: JoAnn Smith
(614) 466-0000

REPRESENTATIVE DOE SPONSORS BILL TO END AGE DISCRIMINATION IN OHIO

Columbus -- State Representative Jane Doe (D-100, Columbus) today introduced legislation that would prohibit age discrimination in Ohio. The bill, House Bill 000, has been assigned to the House Health and Aging Committee. "Our most valuable resource in Ohio is our citizens, and age discrimination limits our use of this important resource," Rep. Doe said in introducing the measure.

"By permitting age discrimination, particularly in employment, we are forgoing the benefit of years of experience and knowledge of our older Ohioans," Rep. Doe said.

According to Rep. Doe, the bill would extend jurisdiction of the existing Ohio Civil Rights Commission to permit the Commission to investigate and hold hearings on charges of age discrimination.

-30-

- List the name and phone number of someone to contact if there are further questions, but make sure that the person listed will be available to answer questions.

Newspapers

Smaller daily newspapers and weekly newspapers usually do not assign reporters to the Statehouse and therefore tend to rely heavily on the wire services for their legislative news. Many members of the General Assembly supplement the coverage within their districts by sending news releases on important issues to their local media. In addition, many members write their own newsletters or weekly news columns for local newspapers and tape weekly radio shows for local radio stations. Generally, these methods can be an effective means for legislators to communicate with the citizens of their districts.

The different news media have their own deadlines and schedules for print and broadcast editions, and most media also post stories on their web sites throughout the day, sometimes within minutes after news breaks. Legislators should be aware of the importance of the time factor in presenting news. Newspapers that publish an afternoon edition usually must have all “copy” by 11:00 in the morning. Late-breaking or urgent stories can be taken until noon or 1:00 in the afternoon. The formal deadline for a morning edition usually is between 6:00 in the evening and midnight. Weeklies have their own deadlines for columns and news items. A legislator should check with the newspapers in his or her own district for these deadlines.

Wire Services

Because of the broad scope of their coverage, wire services and news syndicates normally do not contact individual members for news stories. These groups concentrate on statewide issues and events and focus on the activities of the General Assembly as a whole. Often, these groups direct their attention to the legislative leadership. Reporters assigned to cover state legislative news for the local media, however, concentrate their efforts on members of

the General Assembly from their area. Wire services operate under different deadline requirements than newspapers and other media outlets that subscribe to their services. Wire service subscribers usually have more stringent deadlines, a factor to consider when submitting news releases.

Television and Radio

Although many broadcast reporters now have the ability to go “live” with a story, it is important to keep in mind that reporters prefer to conduct interviews early in the day. Members should allow reporters enough time to properly research the topic and edit the recording for the news broadcast.

The style of television and radio news is different from that of newspapers. Whereas a newspaper may devote a considerable amount of space to the explanation of some subtle point, radio and television must be able to convey their message in a matter of seconds. Consequently, the message must be short, simple, and direct enough to be understood in one hearing. Legislators should try to speak in terms of concrete images that a viewer or listener can clearly understand. For example, instead of saying that a new reservoir will be 600 yards long, a member could say that it will be about the length of six football fields. One television reporter has given these hints for new legislators using the electronic news media:

- Prepare to explain your subject in two or three minutes.
- Use a news release as an invitation to be interviewed.
- Use the same material for electronic and print media.
- Keep your ideas simple and avoid the use of jargon and complicated statistics.
- Schedule interviews for early in the day.
- Be yourself. The real stars of the news are those who are natural.

News Conferences

A legislator may hold a news conference whenever he or she considers a topic worthy of extended coverage or too complicated to explain with a single news release. News conferences

usually are held in one of the Statehouse hearing rooms or in the Statehouse Atrium. One of these rooms may be reserved by contacting the House Clerk's office, by submitting a request in writing to the Senate Clerk's office, or by contacting the Capitol Square Review and Advisory Board. Members and staff may contact their caucus's communications office for assistance.

In determining when to schedule a news conference, a legislator should check with the Press Room clerk to see if any other news conferences are scheduled at the same hour. The clerk can help members avoid conflicts and can advise members on the best time for a news conference. In addition, the Press Room clerk keeps current rosters of members of the Ohio Legislative Correspondents Association, which consists of print and electronic media personnel who are involved in full-time coverage of the legislature and are admitted to membership in the organization.

Notification of news conferences should be sent at least 24 hours in advance to the Statehouse Press Room, which reporters use as a centralized information and scheduling resource. However, in an era when much communication is done by means of phone calls, FAX machines, and e-mail, it is in a legislator's best interest to ensure that the Press Room clerk is not overlooked and is notified of news conferences and other newsworthy events. In addition, e-mail notifications about events may be sent to individual reporters. Contact information can be found on the Ohio Legislative Correspondents Association's web site at www.olca.info.

Persons holding news conferences should have copies of any prepared statements available for distribution to reporters. Some individuals also have found it desirable to record their news conferences for future reference.

The National Conference of State Legislatures' Legislative Institution Task Force suggests that legislators conduct bipartisan conferences with editorial boards and news managers regarding the General Assembly's current activities and goals for the legislative session. Legislators can also provide orientation programs for journalists on both the legislative process and issues pending before the General Assembly.

Ohio Government Telecommunications Media Center

With the restoration of the Statehouse came technological advances that improved public access to the legislative process. Ohio Government Telecommunications (OGT)/The Ohio Channel provides many services to the General Assembly and the State of Ohio, including "gavel-to-gavel" coverage of Ohio House and Ohio Senate sessions, selected committee hearings, and Ohio Supreme Court sessions. Internet access to live and archived sessions is available at www.ohiochannel.org. In addition, OGT/The Ohio Channel offers state-of-the-art technology complete with field equipment and post-production and studio capabilities. For example, the staff can supply a media outlet with the means to feed a signal to its station via the eTech Ohio Commission, the state agency formed to provide Ohio citizens with access to the services provided by public stations.

OGT/The Ohio Channel is responsible for all Statehouse teleconferences and video services for state agencies. Past productions include the Emmy-winning *You Choose!*, a program aimed at high school students to stress the importance of voting, and *The State's House*, a documentary highlighting the history of the Ohio Statehouse and its seven-year restoration. Currently, OGT/The Ohio Channel programming reaches more than one million households through PBS affiliates and cable, public, education, and government channels. Questions about services and future programming should be directed to the Executive Director. (A listing of contact information appears in Appendix C.)

Tips for Successful Interviews

In their ongoing relationships with members of the media, legislators may find it beneficial to follow the interview guidelines suggested by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) in its "Media Interview Guide" published in 2004.

When a reporter calls:

- Get the name of the media organization and the reporter.
- If TV or radio, determine if the interview is live or taped and where it will take place.
- Ask: "What story are you working on?"
- Ask: "What is your deadline?"
- Allow yourself time to prepare for the interview, even if it means calling the reporter back.
- Promise to get back well before the deadline, and do so.

Before the interview:

- Set a goal for the interview.
- Prepare three key message points you want to deliver.
- Think like a journalist and develop likely questions with responses tailored to your message points.
- If unfamiliar with the media outlet, do some research.

During the interview:

- Speak clearly and slowly enough so your comments can be recorded accurately.
- Avoid legal jargon and bureaucratic phrases.
- Include "headlines" or "sound bites" in your response. Back up the headline with facts.
- Keep your answers brief and to the point.
- Wait for the reporter to finish asking the question before starting your answer, especially for broadcast interviews.
- Engage the reporter and express your personality.
- Allow the question to be a "bridge" to a message point you want to get across.
- Offer solutions when asked about a problem.
- Correct false charges or incorrect facts stated by a reporter during the interview, but don't repeat the false charges.
- Avoid using a reporter's negative statements or characterizations. Keep your statements positive.
- Don't be forced into "yes or no" answers or "A or B" dilemmas.
- Acknowledge when you don't immediately know the answer. Promise to find the information if it is available after the interview.
- Always maintain your composure.
- Never lie.

For telephone interviews:

- Eliminate distractions. Clear your desk and close your door.
- Keep your message points in front of you and keep reference material handy.
- Paint pictures with your words, especially for radio interviews.

For television interviews:

- For men, wear dark suits and non-white shirts. Avoid ties with tiny patterns.
- For women, bright colors work well, but avoid clothing with busy patterns.
- Avoid large, shiny, or noisy jewelry that will be distracting for viewers.
- Sit up straight and slightly forward.
- If seated, unbutton suit jacket and sit on tail to avoid "jacket crawl."
- Microphones are sensitive, so there is no need to shout.
- Feel free to gesture, but be aware of how the camera is framing your body.
- Talk to the reporter/interviewer, not the camera, unless directed to do so.
- Keep a pleasant expression; smile when appropriate.
- Assume the camera is always on you, even if someone else is talking or the interview is over.



Additional Points to Note

Legislators should be aware that there are certain limitations to what they should expect from reporters. The NCSL magazine, *State Legislatures*, in its "Tools of the Trade" series, has published several articles addressing media issues of interest to legislators. In the March 2005 article, "How to Be a Media Darling," NCSL Public Affairs Director Gene Rose writes that legislators do not have the "right" to:

- Know the specific questions in advance.
- See the story in advance.
- Change their quotes.
- Edit the story.
- Expect their views to be the only ones in the story.
- Demand that an article be published.

To see other articles in the "Tools of the Trade" series, visit www.ncsl.org/magazine and search "Tools of the Trade." A complete set of *State Legislatures* is available in the Legislative Service Commission library.

Adapted from "NCSL Media Interview Guide" (copyright 2004) and Gene Rose, "How to Be a Media Darling," *State Legislatures* (copyright 2005), p. 31. Used with permission.