

# Talking with the Media



*Horry County Media Handbook*

## What is Horry County's policy for dealing with the media?

Summary: It is important to present information clearly, accurately, courteously and promptly. County employees who are contacted by the media should refer them to the County's Public Information Officer or their Department Head immediately, before responding to the reporter's questions. Employees who receive a call from a media representative that has been directed to them by the Public Information Officer are encouraged to respond to the reporter's questions and then follow up with the Public Information Officer.

That's why it's important that all county employees know what to do when a reporter calls.

### **The basics of the county's media policy are to:**

- ⇒ **Provide honest, complete and open communication** with the public and media.
- ⇒ **Honor the public right to know.**
- ⇒ **Respond promptly and cooperatively** to media calls.
- ⇒ **Increase visibility and awareness** about county programs, services and activities.

## Who should answer a media call?

Every media situation is different. The media policy is flexible enough to allow you to handle a simple media request. But if the call involves an issue or situation that is controversial or complex, it might require a designated spokesperson.

Horry County Public Information Officer serves as the primary liaison between the county and the media. Our job is to connect the reporter with the best source. That might be you or it might be someone else. Reporters often call several people at once. Public Information can help coordinate the county's response.

### **The Public Information Officer can:**

- ⇒ **Handle the media call** or help decide who should.
- ⇒ **Determine what should be said.**
- ⇒ **Coach and help you prepare** for the interview.
- ⇒ **Answer questions and concerns** you have about media interviews and provide helpful tips on doing a successful interview.
- ⇒ **Give you ideas** about how to communicate positive key messages and the most useful information.

## What to do when a reporter calls:

You never have to handle a media call cold. A common misconception is that you have to tell a reporter everything you know immediately. Not so. However, the call should be returned quickly—within 30 minutes. Otherwise we may lose the opportunity to provide our side of the story and tell our message.

### **Ask the reporter:**

- ⇒ What's your name, media source and phone number?
- ⇒ What is the story about?
- ⇒ What information do you need?
- ⇒ Who have you talked to? What did they say?
- ⇒ What's your deadline?

### **Then ask yourself:**

**Who should be the spokesperson?** Am I the right person? Are these questions simple and non-controversial enough that I can answer them, or does this involve broader policy questions someone else should address? Don't forget to call the Public Information Officer and your Division Director prior to doing an interview.

If you are not sure what to do, tell the reporter you will call him or her back and then contact the Public Information Officer at 915-5390.

## How to conduct a successful media interview?

If you are scheduled to have an interview, whether on the phone or in person, the **Public Information Officer can help**. I can:

- ⇒ **Talk through the issues** with you and decide how best to respond.
- ⇒ **Negotiate with the reporter** about how, when and where to conduct the interview.
- ⇒ **Identify key messages** and sufficient **talking points** so you are prepared to answer the most likely questions.
- ⇒ **Conduct a mock interview** with questions we think they'll ask.
- ⇒ **Provide tips** on how to look and speak and how to handle difficult situations.
- ⇒ **Meet the reporter** and escort them to your interview location.
- ⇒ **Sit in on the interview** to provide support and advise you later on how it went.
- ⇒ **Notify appropriate county staff**, Administrator and the County Council about the interview if deemed necessary.

## Before the Interview

The Public Information Officer can help you prepare for your interview by determining:

⇒ Who's your audience? (Hint: It's not the reporter!)

⇒ What should you say?

- **Ask the reporter** what they've heard so far and what kinds of questions they might ask. Usually they'll give you a general idea. Also, ask what your role is—are you the expert, or one of a number of experts?
- **Identify the topic** ahead of time and stick to it.
- What do you want people to know? Develop **three or four key messages**.
- Your **main idea** should be expressed in 20 words or less. It's usually one overreaching idea.
- **Write the messages down**. Say them out loud.
- **What's the current misperception** about this issue? What idea do you need to change to turn around people's thinking and move them toward the facts?
- **Talk about people and benefits**, not programs and projects. People want to know: "What's in it for me? Why should I care?"
- **Get together all the facts you'll need**.
- **Rehearse**. Practice repeating your key messages. If you are making comments at a news conference, time your presentation. Do not wing it, no matter how well you think you know the information.
- **Anticipate the worst questions** you could be asked—and be ready with the answers.
- **Think of examples** to help explain complicated issues.
- If you have **visuals for TV, use them**—reporters love graphs, photos, etc.
- **Keep data practices and confidentiality issues in mind**. Most general statistics and data are public information. If you're not sure, consult the Freedom of Information Act Policy or call the Horry County Public Information Officer.

## During the Interview

First rule: **BE ON TIME.**

### What you say:

- ⇒ **Tell the truth.**
- ⇒ **Answer the questions.** Nothing is more annoying or makes you lose credibility more than to hedge or dance around the question.
- ⇒ **If there's bad news, talk about it first.** If we did something wrong, apologize. Tell how we're looking into the issue, what we're doing to make amends (if that's possible) and how we're going to prevent it from happening again.
- ⇒ **Make your three most important points—your key messages—**as soon as possible and come back to them as often as possible. Imagine everything you say being edited to one sentence—what would it be?
- ⇒ **Point out what we're doing well.**
- ⇒ **Keep it simple, brief, positive, and clear.** Use short words and sentences. Don't answer more than they ask, unless you have a key point to convey.
- ⇒ **Get your facts straight.** If you don't know the answer, say so. Offer to get back with the answer later.
- ⇒ **Again, keep it simple.** Avoid jargon and acronyms. Assume your audience knows nothing about the subject. A good rule of thumb is to tell the story in words a fifth grader could understand.
- ⇒ Look for opportunities to **point out positive or surprising facts.**
- ⇒ **If you get tangled up or confused, stop and begin again.** Say, "Let me rephrase that," or "I'd like to make that clearer."
- ⇒ **If you don't understand a question, ask the reporter to repeat or explain it.**

- ⇒ **Bridge from tough questions to your own key messages**, but always answer the question!
- ⇒ **Choose your own words, not the reporter's.**
- ⇒ **You can use notes**, especially for figures and statistics, but don't rely on them—it will look like you don't know what you're talking about.
- ⇒ **Good key phrases** that capture attention are:
  - “Here's an example...”
  - “The news here is that...”
  - “There are three things I want to stress...”
  - “The key thing to remember...”
  - “What is most misunderstood about this is...”
- ⇒ Take a minute or two to explain something that might be hard to understand, but don't get too detailed.
- ⇒ Provide a phone number, if appropriate, that viewers or listeners can call for assistance, more information, etc.
- ⇒ If something about the interview makes you uncomfortable, say so.



## How you look:

This is one expert's assessment of your impact on your audience:

- ⇒ **7 percent** is based on content.
- ⇒ **38 percent** is based on your voice.
- ⇒ **55 percent** is based on how you look and act.

## With that in mind:

- ⇒ **Relax. Be yourself.**
- ⇒ **Keep your facial expression natural.** Match your expressions with your message. Don't grin when you're talking about program cuts or people who have been hurt. Smile when it's appropriate. Look interested, concerned, competent, warm, and compassionate.
- ⇒ **Stand straight.** If you're sitting, lean forward—look engaged. It shows interest and concern.
- ⇒ **Direct your voice and remarks to the audience.**
- ⇒ **Establish eye contact.** Don't let your eyes wonder, look into the distance or roll back in your head.
- ⇒ **Where do you look?** If you're sitting next to the interviewer (as in having a conversation) look at them. If the reporter is behind the lights and camera, look into the camera—your audience.
- ⇒ **Speak at a comfortable volume**—slowly and distinctly.
- ⇒ **Remain friendly, cool-headed, confident, and sincere.**
- ⇒ **Be respectful of your interviewer**—she or he is asking about an issue the public has a right to know about. If you act detached, arrogant, bored or nervous, you'll come off looking uncaring, unaccountable and shifty.
- ⇒ **Take your time.** Slow down. Stay calm. Talk slowly and evenly.

## A few don'ts:

- ⇒ **Never, never say “no comment.”** It translates: Guilty.
- ⇒ **Don't discuss possible negligence**—let the legal authorities and PIO handle that.
- ⇒ Some reporter will use tactics design to provoke or disarm you. **Don't take questions personally**; don't allow yourself to be provoked into defensive statements. Stick to the facts; stay focused.
- ⇒ **Don't feel the need to fill empty space** or feel intimidated by a microphone thrust in your face. Take all the time you need. When you're done, you're done. Wait calmly for the next question.
- ⇒ **Don't say anything “off the record”**. Nothing's off the record. Be particularly careful what you say before and after the interview—you're always “on”.
- ⇒ **Don't use jargon, acronyms or internal “buzz words”**— only people in your field understand; it sounds arrogant. It's safest to act as if your audience knows nothing.
- ⇒ **Don't repeat offensive or negative questions**—turn them into positive answers and repeat your key messages.
- ⇒ **Don't editorialize, speculate or repeat rumors**. Don't respond to “worst scenario” questions— that's speculation.
- ⇒ **Don't mislead, exaggerate or make promises you can't keep**.
- ⇒ **Don't patronize, talk down to or insult the reporter**. It's rude and it will antagonize your real audience.
- ⇒ **Don't make off-hand, flip or sarcastic remarks or jokes**. They may end up, out of context, as your lead remark. Never, never use humor in a tragic situation.

- ⇒ **Don't chew gum.**
- ⇒ **Don't say, "I can't speak for the county"**. As far as the reporter and audience are concerned, of course you do.
- ⇒ **Don't talk about something another spokesperson**—your director, supervisor, another expert, county administrator, or County Council member should address. Say: "I'm going to let \_\_\_\_\_ answer that".

### After the interview:

- ⇒ **Try to contact the PIO or your Division Director immediately after the interview** and let us know what happened, so we can alert other county officials about a possible news story.
- ⇒ **Ask the reporter when the story will run/air.**
- ⇒ **Make yourself available** after a briefing or news conference for more questions.
- ⇒ If you think of something later that **you need to correct or add**, call the reporter and say it.
- ⇒ **If you're upset about how a story was covered**, call the Public Information Officer and we'll talk about what to do.

### Being proactive with the media

**There's more to good media relations than day-to-day rapport and responding to their requests. The county has many programs, services and activities that can benefit residents. The Public Information Office can help you get the word out about your program, service or policy.**

## We can:

- ⇒ **Arrange proactive media interviews.**
- ⇒ **Pitch story ideas** to individual reporters or producers.
- ⇒ **Issue news releases.**
- ⇒ **Add your program, event, or policy issue** on our website or the Government Access Channel on HTC Channel 14.
- ⇒ **Arrange a news conference** if the issue is major and will elicit a lot of media response.
- ⇒ **Draft commentaries or letters to the editor** that you may wish to submit.
- ⇒ **Solicit the media's help** in publicizing an important topic or situation that involves critical or assistance issues.
- ⇒ Work with you to **draft one-page fact sheets** on programs, services, topics, etc. for reporters; presentations to the public.

*Call the Public Information Office. We're here to help!*