

# THE GUIDE TO COMMUNICATION



Tools, Techniques  
& Best Practices

For Media  
Engagement



# About this Guide

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This guide is designed to enable all leaders to effectively engage the media.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## Effective Communication

### *An essential foundation for leadership*

In a 2010 United States European Command blog post, Admiral (ret.) James Stavridis noted, “The enormous irony of the military profession is that we are huge risk takers in what we do operationally... but publishing an article, posting a blog, or speaking to the media can scare us badly. We are happy to take personal risk or operational risk, but too many of us won’t take career risk.”

The military understands operational risk management and mission planning; however, too few leaders seem to understand the same models can serve them well in the area of communication.

We live in a global information environment. Technology allows every leader to communicate with vast audiences instantly, whether through traditional press outlets or the ever-growing number of Internet-based channels. This dynamic carries many risks, but also unprecedented opportunities for those who hone their communication skills. Leaders who can articulate their organization’s mission are valuable assets.



**Technology empowers leaders**  
to communicate with audiences instantly

U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Rusty Frank

## DoD Principles of Information

- Information will be made fully and readily available, consistent with statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by current and valid security classification.
- The provisions of the Freedom of Information Act will be supported in both letter and spirit.
- A free flow of general and military information will be made available, without censorship or propaganda, to the men and women of the Armed Forces and their dependents.
- Information will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the government from criticism or embarrassment.
- Information will be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national security or threaten the safety or privacy of the men and women of the Armed Services.

### The Charge

The Defense Department recognizes its obligation to provide information to the public in support of a free and open society. *DoD Directive 5122.05, DoD Principles of Information*, requires the department, through its public affairs programs, to provide accurate and timely information to facilitate public understanding about national security and defense strategy. In committing to this standard, DoD seeks to maintain its credibility with the public it serves. There is more to this effort, though, than standing in front of reporters when something goes wrong.

Leaders at all levels need to seek opportunities to communicate the importance of their missions, and how they provide for the defense of the nation. Building understanding, confidence and trust requires time and consistent effort.

Most people gain whatever knowledge and appreciation they have of the military not from direct contact or experience, but from remote observation. News media have covered every major engagement in which we have participated, and much of the public's opinion of military effectiveness comes from press accounts.

While this guide is focused on working with traditional media, keep in mind that these concepts can be used in all forms of communication.

## The Challenge

DoD policy is to provide the most timely, accurate information available, consistent with the requirements of operational security and the privacy of its personnel. Therein lies a constant tension in priorities—one that requires the same care in mission preparation as any other military operation.

Regardless of the event, if leaders are to effectively represent the military position on an issue they must understand the communication process. We must tell our story in support of national security and public accountability.



## 2 ENVIRONMENT

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# The Information Environment

### Understanding the Media

In whatever form it takes—print, video, audio, Internet content—media is the conduit through which we communicate to an audience. It isn't the reporter, blogger, or radio host you're trying to reach ... it's his or her audience. That said, you have to understand the role of the media itself in order to be most effective.

It's a common complaint: "Where are they when everything's fine?" The reality is that disasters and scandals are more attention-grabbing to an audience than reports that all is well.

Since the press must attract an audience in order to garner the advertising revenue it needs to survive, this naturally skews topic selection. It is possible, however, to interest the public—and thus the press—by knowing the elements that make an event newsworthy. Some of the critical ones are:

- ***Immediacy*** - something just happened or is about to
- ***Proximity*** - the closer to home the better
- ***Impact*** - the likely effect on readers/viewers
- ***Prominence*** - the fame, fortune or power of the persons involved
- ***Oddity*** - something bizarre, unusual or unexpected
- ***Conflict*** - arguments, debates or situations with a winner and loser
- ***Suspense*** - when the outcome cannot be foreseen
- ***Emotions*** - situations that stir up sympathy, anger or other emotions to which a reader/viewer can relate
- ***Sex or scandal*** - inappropriate behavior sells

Understanding these elements and recognizing them in issues with which you are involved can help you anticipate the need to communicate, and give you the opportunity to be proactive in reaching out to the public via the media.

## Public Affairs: Advice & Counsel

Your Public Affairs Office is a valuable resource, you can expect them to:

- Work with other staff agencies to determine policy impacts and the appropriate scope of communication.
- Advise regarding desired audience demographics.
- Outline knowledge of likely participating media outlets, including the possibility of conflicting/hidden agendas.
- Research potential interview issues.
- Assist in helping you prepare for the interview, including review of possible questions, draft responses and conducting one-on-one rehearsals.
- Recommend what uniform to wear, or whether you bring visual aids that help clarify a complicated subject.
- Set the time and place for the interview, arrange any needed logistics, and establish the ground rules.
- Monitor the interview to provide an in-house record as well as tracking requests for information that has to be researched and delivered later.
- Act as a liaison with the news organization as the interview material is prepared for publication.
- Collect news clippings, video copies, etc., of the resulting coverage. Monitor analytics—demographics, audience size, etc.
- Provide you an after-action review and feedback.

You could be tapped at any time with very little notice to be the spokesperson. Your Public Affairs Office, working with the rest of your units, will give you the edge to make the most of this opportunity.

### 3 PLANNING

## Communication Strategy



**Begin with the end in mind**  
**What does your audience need to know?**

U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Will Gaskill

Whether you are actively seeking an opportunity to highlight an issue, or reacting to an unfortunate series of events, the process of preparing for media engagement is the same.

Begin with the end in mind. That's how author Stephen Covey described one of his "Seven Habits of Highly Successful People." It's very applicable here as you begin planning your media engagement. At the end of it all, what is it you want your audience to know?

Reporters seek to answer the "five W's" of a story: Why, Who, What, Where, and When. These are useful not only in anticipating the kind of data you need to have ready, but in formulating your own communication strategy.

**Why** communicate? The most important part of planning is understanding why you are engaging the media. Whether providing information about a proposed weapon system or discussing an accident, the urgency of the situation and the stakes involved should guide your preparations.



*Who* needs to know? The local community? Service members? A national audience? Foreign allies and partners? While you should target a specific audience, you must assume that all audiences may receive your messages.

*What* does your audience need to know or understand? This question can help you focus your messages prior to an interview.

*Where* does your audience get their information? The rise of competing cable news channels and the growing reach of the Internet means audiences are more fragmented than ever. If you don't select the appropriate media channels, you may not reach your desired audience at all. You can employ multiple forms of media to achieve your goals.

*When* do you need to inform your audience? In a crisis, the answer is as soon as you can verify and coordinate release of the information. You will have more time to prepare if you proactively plan to communicate.



**In a crisis communication scenario  
provide information as soon as possible**

U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Kyle Gese



## Developing Messages

Now that you've gathered the information to create your communication strategy, it's time to identify the messages you want to deliver. Messages are statements that complement facts you provide to your audience. They don't have to be complex. Nearly everyone has seen a press conference after a tragedy, during which the speaker offers condolences or assurances of assistance. Delivered sincerely, they can create a powerful connection with the audience.

***Plan early to synchronize your communication.*** Does your boss share the same concerns or priorities? How about his boss? As you develop your messages, ensure they are nested appropriately within what other echelons may be saying about the subject.

***Consider the length of your messages.*** While there are a number of common principles regarding interviews, it does make a difference whether you're communicating via print, television, radio or Internet-based media. Electronic media have to package their content in very small sound bites. In general, you should aim for a sound bite of 10 seconds or less... or about 35 words. This is dramatically different from the space afforded by a print publication, which has the ability to get into very specific detail on a range of subtopics. As you prepare, adjust the delivery of your messages depending on whether you will have a lengthy conversation with a print journalist, or a 20-minute television interview.

*Provide useful, actionable information.* You want your audience to know what you are doing and why the information is important. Whether it is asking for support, requesting action or just informing, use messages to make sure your audience understands your communication objective.

*When preparing for a communication event, leverage SCOPE.* You may not always have prepared messages at the ready. In this situation, you can quickly form messages by identifying a **Strategy, Challenges, Opportunities, Professionalism and Education**.

Start with the overall strategy, such as the government's response to a situation. Then acknowledge the nature of any challenge as best you understand it. Identify opportunities the situation presents, whether a stronger working relationship with other agencies or valuable lessons learned. Care should be taken here to strike the appropriate tone so that an interviewee doesn't come across as trying to spin tragedy into a good thing. Refer to the professionalism of those who are responding to the crisis and how they are trained and educated to deal effectively with complex issues—"this is what we do." Even with little notice, this model is a quick method to meet the immediate communication needs of the situation.



**Deliver messages quickly**  
by identifying a **Strategy, Challenges,**  
**Opportunities, Professionalism & Education**

Washington National Guard photo by Army Spc. Matthew Sissel



## Don't Just Answer...Respond

Responding to, rather than answering, questions means providing relevant data, plus a message to provide context. Answers alone don't express the significance of information. Messages without data—or that don't match the data—are rightly derided as 'spin.'

Consider an interview topic as simple as new base construction. You can imagine the effect if the interviewee simply provided data. "The new Child Development Center will cost about \$6 million." Nothing communicates less effectively than raw data provided without context. Consider the difference: "The new Child Development Center will cost about \$6 million and provide our parents with closer, more cost-effective child-care options." Rather than leave an audience with sticker shock, the second approach gives rationale for the data. Not everyone will agree that the cost is worth it, but there is a basis for informed comparison.

This same method can be used in complex situations: "We have identified three units to deploy as part of the upcoming rotation of forces operating in..." Combine this with: "Our Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines will provide mentorship and training to our international partners to increase their security capabilities and that of surrounding nations."

Put another way, you are building a partnership by responding. The answers are what the media need for their story. The messages are what you want to convey to your audience. By providing an answer and a message, you have met the needs of both parties.

***Personalize your messages.*** If you forget a message you've memorized, you may get confused or nervous. Instead, prepare three to five localized messages to convey the perspective of the issue. Practice key phrases to develop comfort and confidence.

***Anticipate tough questions and prepare.*** List the most difficult questions you might be asked regarding the interview topic. Think about how you will transition from answering these questions into a key point you want to make.

***Practice your responses.*** You must be prepared to express your major points in concise statements. By organizing your thoughts, it is more likely your position will be understood by the reporter. Don't read your answers during the interview. Be prepared to respond without prompting from note cards. Use the Response Development Worksheets in the back of this guide as a tool to help organize your thoughts. Practice with your public affairs team until you're comfortable, and ask for honest feedback on your efforts.



## 4 EXECUTION

# Communication Engagement



You have your data points. You know your messages. You've rehearsed responses with your public affairs team and done a final check in the mirror, looking for anything out of place. What now?

*Establish interview expectations to facilitate a productive discussion.* Your Public Affairs Office will coordinate interview expectations as part of setting up an engagement. It's good practice to reiterate expectations as part of the ground rules at the beginning of an interview. Be very clear about what you will or will not talk about, and remember Public Affairs can take questions outside of your area of expertise for future coordination. You have no control over the questions you are asked, but you have 100 percent control over how you respond.

*Tell the truth—always.* The truth may hurt, but lies are deadly. Give a direct answer when asked a direct question, even if the answer is, "I don't know," or "I'm sorry, I can't answer that question." In cases where you have information you can't provide, give a reason if possible: "I'm sorry, but I'm sure you understand we don't discuss all the specific capabilities of a given weapon system." You will come across as honest and forthright.

**Ensure your audience receives the important information.** An interview is not a passive affair where the subject merely responds to questions. Rather, it's a dialogue requiring the active participation of both parties. Even an experienced, professional reporter may come into an interview without a full or accurate understanding of the real issues at hand. When this happens, it will become apparent in the course of an interview. If you feel an interview is heading off course, there are several techniques you can use:

**Hook.** The reporter may not understand or know the entire story, whereas you likely have months or even years of experience. A hook grabs the reporter's (and the audience's) attention right from the start.

- "First, the focus needs to be ..."
- "I need the public to understand ..."

**Bridge.** Keep your communication objective in the forefront. Bridges can help you respond to a reporter's question and then transition to additional points the public needs to understand. Bridges may be implied, but most can be identified by the use of a conjunction:

- Response: "No, that information's not available yet," (bridge) "but I can tell you ..."
- Response: "That question is outside my lane, so let me refer you to the judge advocate." (bridge) "Now, let me explain ..."

**Flag.** Help the audience identify the key point(s) by emphasizing them with your tone of voice, facial expressions or physical gestures.

- "There are three new programs (vocal emphasis) we've started this year to enhance flight safety." (said while also holding up three fingers)

These techniques will help you drive the interview towards the information you need your audience to know, but don't forget to answer the reporter's original question. Similar to providing messages without data, using these techniques without answering the actual question will appear evasive.



***Remember to be your professional self.*** Showing your human side goes a long way toward establishing a connection. It's challenging enough to communicate effectively, without the added pressure of trying to imitate someone whose personality may be vastly different from yours. You do want to adjust to the situation—your particular sense of humor might be out of place at a crash scene, for instance. On the other hand, there is no need to robotically recite responses.

***Assert your expertise.*** There's a reason you are the one being interviewed. Your background, knowledge and experiences led to your selection as the spokesperson. Don't hesitate to draw on personal anecdotes that illustrate what you have to say. "Been there, done that," is a great credibility builder.

***Consider "off the record" situations carefully.*** There is always a risk that information you share with the media will be directly attributed. Again, coordinate with your Public Affairs Office well ahead of time to discuss interview boundaries.

***Say what needs saying, and then stop.*** Be aware of the reporter who stays silent, encouraging you to ramble or dilute your original message. It's human nature to want to fill those conversation lulls—don't!



***Stay in your lane, and answer questions appropriately.*** Speak to what you know and what you do; don't address issues beyond your area or level of responsibilities. If necessary, offer to connect the reporter with additional subject matter experts if there are related issues they need to explore. Your public affairs team can follow up on such arrangements.

***Get your message across.*** Come to an interview prepared with messages and find opportunities to insert them; always fully respond to the reporter's questions. Pre-planned messages triggered by a question will result in the delivery of accurate, concise and understandable information.

***Correct the record.*** If the interviewer has inaccurate information, or asserts an incorrect conclusion, respectfully correct it. Failure to do so can be interpreted later as acceptance or worse, an endorsement.

***It's ok to pause before responding to a question.*** Dead time is seldom aired on the news, and silences won't be quoted in print. Even if your interview is live, a short pause will help you make a thoughtful response. Most reporters are concerned with honesty, accuracy, getting the story first, and they'll appreciate you thinking through your response.



U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Michael Russell



***Avoid the cliché, “no comment.”*** There are two reasons for this. First, you would appear evasive, uncooperative or as if you are hiding something. If the request is for information that can’t be released, say so and explain why (classification, privacy, etc.). Second, you don’t want to give up an opportunity to respond with a message.

***Don’t get defensive.*** When dealing with mistakes, misconduct or accidents, questions will often be pointed and in a negative tone. There can be a tendency to take this personally—don’t. Remember the information you need your audience to understand and stick to your messages.

***Don’t repeat negative phrasing in a response:***

Wrong: Question: “Why did leadership fail to...?”  
Response: “We didn’t fail to...”

Right: Question: “Why did leadership fail to...?”  
Response: “At the time, we may not have had all the information, but...”

**Avoid jargon.** Military acronyms and slang may not be easily understood by those who don't work with the military. Even communities within the military sometimes confuse terms. Spell things out, and explain concepts as you would to a civilian family member or friend.

**"Anything else you'd like to add?"** This is a common question that reporters typically ask at the end of any interview. The temptation is to say "no," thus ending the encounter. Instead, use the opportunity to recap the messages that support your communication objective. In a print interview, this may help the reporter tie together what was a wide-ranging discussion. In a recorded television interview, this gives you another chance to craft the perfect sound bite, encapsulating the key message. Having already discussed the issue at length with a reporter, you will be warmed up, and your second attempt may come across better than your earlier statements.

**Follow through.** If you promised to find additional information or arrange for another interviewee, coordinate with your public affairs team to be sure your unit delivers.



**Follow-up with reporters**  
to provide additional information if needed

U.S. Coast Guard photo by Rear Adm. Stephen Metruck

## 5 RESOURCES

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# Resources for Success

In addition to specific Public Affairs Guidance that might be issued on a subject, there are a number of sources you can turn to for reference. Your public affairs team often can glean additional context and key messaging from senior leader statements, quotes appearing in daily news coverage, or policy publications.

Also, we can provide you and your Public Affairs Office with lesson plans, presentations, regulations or even an open forum to discuss a communication objective or plan with external resources. Visit the website, call or e-mail us for additional information or to provide feedback on this guide: <http://www.airuniversity.af.mil/afcslc>, DSN 493-8518, Commercial (334) 953-8518, [communicate@us.af.mil](mailto:communicate@us.af.mil).

Remember to approach any interview with a defined communication objective. After you've identified your objective, gathered information and resources, or when an idea comes to you on the spot, use the following Response Development Worksheets to list facts and draft 3-5 supporting messages.



U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Nathan Allen

## *Response Development Worksheet*

Objective:

Audience:

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):



## *Response Development Worksheet*

Objective:

Audience:

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):





## *Response Development Worksheet*

Objective:

Audience:

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):



## *Response Development Worksheet*

Objective:

Audience:

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):

Answer (data):

Message (context):



# Quick Reference

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**Why** communicate?

**Who** needs to know?

**What** does your audience need to know or understand?

**Where** does your audience get their information?

**When** do you need to inform your audience?

## Answer + Message = Response

Combine facts with messages that provide context and clarity to your audience

### SCOPE

- Share the **Strategy**.
- Acknowledge **Challenges**.
- Identify **Opportunities** presented.
- Express the **Professionalism** of your people.
- Highlight the **Education** and training of those involved.

**Hook:** Focus the audience on your communication objective.

*"First, the focus needs to be ... "*

*"I need the public to understand ... "*

**Bridge:** Respond to the question & transition to additional points.

*"No, that information is not available yet, but I can tell you..."*

**Flag:** Emphasize key points with verbal or physical cues.

*"There are three programs we've started to enhance ..."* (vocal emphasis/holding up three fingers)

## Interview Guidelines

- Establish interview expectations
- Be your professional self
- Tell the truth—always
- Don't go off the record
- Know and stay in your lane
- Say what needs saying, then stop
- Assert your expertise
- Get your message across
- Avoid jargon
- Pause before responding
- Correct the record
- Don't get defensive
- Don't repeat negative phrasing
- Avoid the cliché, "no comment"
- When asked if you'd like to add anything else, recap your main points
- Follow through after the interview, and provide additional information if needed

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Please visit our website for additional resources.