

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR MEDIA RELATIONS UNIT

Article

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Getting the Most from Your Media Relations Unit

Law enforcement has an image problem. We are seen as heavy-handed, donut-munching, without concern, cold hearted, power hungry, stupid, and above the law. These myths are perpetuated in everything from television shows, newscasts, print media, billboards, and the Internet, to our everyday actions.

This image problem is not something that we should take lightly. All of our best community policing efforts could be improved ten times over if our image were better. Imagine if law enforcement were held in the same high esteem as the fire service. Imagine public support for equipment procurement, support for new programs, support when criminals make accusations of misconduct, or support when force is used to make an arrest or when an officer has to resort to deadly force to protect the community. We do have that potential. But because law enforcement almost never contacts the community in anything less than negative circumstances, we will have to work harder at getting there.

Ever since the Rodney King incident, we have been trying to repair our image. However, our attempts to reach out to the community have been in Community Based Policing programs. Since the King incident, there has been a new urgency to enlist one of these programs to try to regain the trust destroyed in that evening's work and to restore our tarnished image. Compounding the issue is the perception by the public that we are alike and the actions of one or a scant few speak to the entire profession.

The California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training in 1998 conducted a survey. Of 199 law enforcement agencies contacted, 94% responded that California law enforcement in general, and local agencies specifically, have an image

problem in certain specific areas.¹ However, 80% of Chiefs surveyed felt that the image of their agency was above average or excellent. Tasks identified as being those most likely to be associated with image problems were: citations, arrests, vehicle stops, and pursuits. These are all activities that we perform daily. The opportunities for us to cause damage to our image are incredible.

Of the list of external causes of image problems, four were rated as more often actual causes than others. They are;

- Public misunderstanding of the role of law enforcement,
- Misleading TV programs and movies,
- Biased news media portrayal, and
- Insufficient positive news media portrayal.

“Public Misunderstanding” was significantly more often rated to be a cause of image problems than any other cause except “Misleading TV Programs and Movies.” All of these are completely addressable and in fact must be addressed by law enforcement in a more aggressive manner. The problem of image is one which demands to be moved into the forefront of organizations and given the importance it commands.

In an article in Law and Order magazine, John Hoffman, a former police administrator, writes how we have created the opportunity to fail miserably in our community based policing efforts.² Frustration from the community mounts as the theft of a \$30,000.00 automobile results in a civilian report car, while the theft of beer from the local 7-11 receives the full attention of patrol officers. It’s compounded again when a drive to the front desk of the police station finds yet another civilian employee to address your needs.

What does it take to talk to a policeman? The appearance that the police are not sensitive to the community and have little concern for your problems is perpetuated.

Hoffman's research showed that the average Joe wants to have dinner, help his kids with homework, watch some TV, and leave the crime fighting to the police.

Unfortunately, the "average Joe" is the target of all of our best community policing efforts and the least likely to participate in community meetings, neighborhood watch, town hall discussions, or citizen academies. Additionally, this "Joe" has received all of his education about the police and law enforcement in general from what he has seen on TV or read in the newspaper. It is this frailty we must capitalize upon to reach this "average Joe" and in the process, improve our image with the public. It is through the proper management and use of the media that we can greatly enhance our public image and hence, our effectiveness. While there are continued successes in the implementation of community policing programs, we have another avenue for repairing our image. That is through the aggressive use of police media relations units.

Many organizations have designated a Press Information Officer/Media Relations Unit. Quite correctly, these agencies have done this through the knowledge that by reacting properly during a crisis, an organization can actually gain credibility, and in the process enhance their image with the public.³ The mere implementation of a Press Information Officer designation to a member of your department can indeed manage information flow. On occasion, when armed with proper training, the addition of a press relations person can serve to enhance your image when dealing with a crisis. We must utilize the media to market our departments not just during crisis, but constantly. In effect, we should be managing ourselves the same as a business dealing with customer

service. Law enforcement, however, has not pursued this avenue aggressively. For survival in the twenty-first century, we must.

While the role of the facilitator of information flow is an important one, the role for the next generation of police PIO's will need to include training and education in the public relations arena. They need to be the public relations specialists and marketing agents necessary for community support and understanding in the twenty first century. Additionally, there will be a demonstrated need for these positions to be full time and not filled necessarily by a sworn officer. Some police agencies in California have already employed civilian personnel in a full time media relations capacity. In some cases, the civilian's entire background has been in public relations and marketing. Excellent! The key to getting the most from your media relations unit is to make the program more than an information conduit. The importance of expanding the role of the PIO to that of a marketer and public relations front man is becoming an absolute necessity.

It is common knowledge that people continue to learn about the larger world beyond their experience mainly through television news.⁴ In fact, local news programs on television can be found running in the morning, afternoon, evening, prime time, and late night. The dominance of local news has important consequences for law enforcement and communities. It is through the exploitation of this emphasis that law enforcement can greatly enhance their image with the public they serve. Unfortunately this TV perspective is also characterized by its frequent exaggeration of drama, conflict, and violence. Every effort is made to appeal to the public's appetite for blood and guts. Indeed the appetite for the sensational is the driving force behind the business of selling

newspapers. Every broadcaster of news is well aware that if local news is going to be economically successful, it must emphasize violent crime.⁵

In the March 26, 2002 edition of the San Gabriel Valley Examiner a story appears on page one of a hit and run arrest. There are no injuries in the accident, but there is a photo of officers standing over a seated handcuffed suspect. The photo was, in this case, the blood and guts, one of the nastier and more unpleasant tasks with which police officers are charged. On page ten, there was another article. This one told of two small children's lives that were saved through the quick actions and effective CPR performed by police officers from the same agency. The public reacts to the officers doing their job on page one, taking away freedom, charging individuals with crime, the negative side of our job. Fewer will pause to read of heroic actions taken also as part of the job, the saving of a life – a positive. Our image as the authoritarian restrictor of freedom is maintained and indeed reinforced. Through this function as gatekeeper, the media can control our image with the public. It is this control with which the media can drive our public relations destiny that we must aggressively attempt to harness and utilize to our benefit.

Media units are used as primarily an information conduit. They pass along information on investigations and incidents to the media, fostering a relationship in the process. The agencies, which employ a part time (i.e., detective or patrol personnel assigned as media relations persons also), are not fully utilizing the media to their advantage and may in fact, be hindering relations instead of fostering them.

On one hand, press relations personnel do consolidate and control the information flow which can be beneficial to detectives on sensitive cases. They are often the only ones authorized to comment. This benefit to the police has been a hindrance to the media

in those agencies which have a part time PIO. Often the duties are peripheral to their primary job which makes them unavailable to the media. Availability is critical to the media in fostering a relationship. The media operates on deadlines and the lack of availability is often perceived as a lack of sensitivity to their needs and a lack of cooperation. Therefore it is necessary that the media relations unit or the PIO be a full time position or at least available 24 hours a day. They must not just carry a pager, but actually be available.

As important, is that the media relations unit has as a primary duty, the responsibility of marketing its department within the community. Actively and daily members of the unit should seek ways to promote the law enforcement profession in general and the department in particular. The use of the internet appears to be quite necessary in ones public relations campaign offering unlimited potential for the dissemination of your message. However the Internet also provides the forum for those wishing to distribute negative public relations messages. The monitoring of the Internet should be an important component of the marketing strategy of your department. Rumors can be generated and negative publicity and false accusations can be proliferated via the Internet. Careful monitoring allows a rapid controlled response and the opportunity to address negative accusations on an equal plane. In a study done at The Institute for Public Relations in 2001, public relations professionals were asked to predict the future of PR and the Internet. A clear indicator emerged, “There will be less reliance on the news media to disseminate information. Companies will need to have credible websites backed up by the integrity of the organization.”⁶ Law Enforcement can learn from

outside industry. We would be well served to enhance our image by making the development of a credible, professional website a priority.

Using imagination and the principles of community oriented policing to draw from all available resources to tackle the issue of police image must be the charge of the media relations units of the future. Officers should be educated on how they also can impact image in their communities in everyday contacts; viewing citizens as customers, taking time to insure quality service has been provided, providing explanations for specific actions in all their field contacts are just a few. Other activities which can impact police image are:

- The creation of a source where the media can be informed about policies and procedures of law enforcement. A “Media Academy”.
- Frequent meetings with local media and department PIO’s.
- Keep your department website updated, informative, and technologically current.
- Solicit donated use of bus benches, billboards, and cable air time.
- Urge all officers to forward human interest stories to the PIO of their department.
- Have your PIO as a regular speaker at your Citizens Academy about their role and how information is sometimes not accurate.
- Consider weekly/monthly television shows on your local cable network.

Remember that these productions are a reflection of your department. Information must be accurate, timely, and informative.

- Consider a weekly column in the local newspaper discussing new laws and their application in the community. Other “need to know” information could also be presented here.

We can impact how law enforcement is perceived by the public each and every day through our individual actions. We can also impact the masses through the aggressive use of the media - the primary duty of the media relations unit of the future. “If law enforcement doesn’t care about its image, it is doomed to whatever image it has”. For further information go to www.calpoliceimage.org.

Endnotes

1. California Law Enforcement Image Coalition, *Image Survey Summary Report*. January, 1998, pg. 6.
2. Jeff Hoffman, "How to Make Citizens Hate Community Policing" *Law and Order Magazine*, April, 2000.
3. "No Crisis of Confidence for Those Prepared for the Worst", *LA Times*, 2001.
4. Shanto Iyengar, "Media Effects - Paradigms for the Analysis of Local Television News". Sept, 1998.
5. IBID.
6. Donald K. Wright, "The Magic Communication Machine". 2001, pg 27.

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1. This is PR, the Realities of Public Relations; Strategy and Tactics, Doug Newsome, Judy Turk, and Dean Kruckeburg, (2000)
2. Effective Public Relations , Scott M. Cutlip, Allen H. Center and Glen R. Broom, 8th ed, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall (2000)
3. Media Survival for Law Enforcement Officers, From Press Release to Live On Scene Interviews, Gary Nitchman, (2002)
4. COPPS Now and Beyond , Crime and Violence Prevention Center, State of California Attorney Generals Office, July 1999