

## Mastering a News Conference



This guide is part of a 2-day News Media Relations Training Classes presented in 40 cities around the US every year. Classes are conducted by Emmy Award Winning Broadcaster, author and News Veteran Russell Ruffin.

Ruffin has spent a career as an on-camera reporter for NBC and Fox News. For more than 10 years Ruffin has conducted this class for Law Enforcement professionals involved in crisis news management. He has kept his training current by going to the scene of some of the nation's major breaking news events such the Ferguson, Missouri protests, the Baltimore riots, as well as mass casualty shootings in Las Vegas and San Bernardino, as well as on college and high school campuses.

This class is presented on-location to Law Enforcement Officers, Firefighters and other First Responders. During the training, everyone goes before a live TV camera for mock news conferences and interviews. Some of the breaking news scenarios include everything from day to day events to terrorist attacks and school shootings.

If you would like to see video examples of some of our training, along with testimonials from those who have attended, please click the link below:

[News Media Relations Training](#)

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# Mastering a News Conference



A News briefing can include anything from answering reporter inquiries by phone, to submitting to a one-on-one news interview, to holding a full-fledged news conference. In all cases preparation is the key to holding a successful news briefing.

## Bullet Points/Talking Points

Once you go down the list of the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How of the event, your bullet points will begin to fall into place. Make a note of any other important information you feel the public needs to know. For example, if your officers did an amazing job evacuating or rescuing people, make a point of including that in your list. The time, date and location of an event will be relatively easy to determine and relay during your briefing. The next thing you should do is anticipate the questions and start formulating and practicing your responses.

### Bullet/Talking Points Include:

*What happened?*

*How did it happen?*

*Did anyone get hurt?*

*Who did it involve/affect?*

*Who, if anyone, was arrested?*

*How did your agency handle it?*

Now you have the basics to write out your bullet points and a release. Sometimes during a breaking news event you don't have time to create a formal news release. If that's the case, at least write out a short factsheet with pertinent information. More details on effective news releases are available in the "News Releases" section.

If one or more reporters meets with you for an interview or news conference, be sure to give them that written news release or fact sheet before the questioning begins. The reporter's may have a misunderstanding of the event, and your news release or fact sheet will help keep them on track.

### Before We Get Started

Come out a few minutes before the start time of your news conference and give reporters a 5 or 10 minute warning. This will give the media an opportunity to set their audio levels and make camera adjustments. State and spell out your name and tell them your title; that will keep them from interrupting your briefing by asking you to identify yourself. Though not always practical, it's a good idea to have a news release prepared to distribute prior to the start of the briefing. Your news release will provide reporters with specific information, so they can have an understanding of the subject matter. A good news release will convey what you feel is the most important information and will have a direct influence on how reporters phrase their questions and produce their stories.

## Set the Ground Rules



Setting ground rules conveys to reporters that you are the one running the show; you are in control. Explain that you will make an opening statement and then answer questions. Instruct them to raise their hands to be recognized before asking questions. This will insure that your news conference is conducted in an orderly fashion.



## Start On Time

If you schedule your news conference to start at 10 a.m., be sure you start at exactly 10 a.m. Nothing is more annoying to a reporter than sitting around and waiting for a news conference that starts late.

Another reason you don't want to keep the media waiting is because the longer they stay inside your facility, the greater the likelihood they will learn something you may not be ready to release. While reporters are sitting around waiting for you to begin, they may strike up a conversation with someone else at your agency who may provide them with too much information

Reporters will also start talking to each other, some will even compare notes. With all this pre-news conference chatter, they may start feeding off of each other and come up with some damaging information that will make for some pointed questions. If your news conference will be covering a sensitive issue or case, don't have anyone with your agency mingling or chatting with the media; this is not a social event. Only personnel specifically assigned to the case or to your media relations department should attend.

## Opening Statement



Always open your news conference with a statement that fully conveys your message. Your opening statement should be powerful, yet short enough to adequately communicate your message with a minimum of elaboration and follow-up questions. Failing to provide an opening statement is an indication that you don't know what is important, so you are leaving that up to the reporters.

Once you have completed your opening remarks you should offer to take questions. If you answer every off-the-wall question asked at your news conference, you run the risk of having your briefing become so wide-ranging, that your message will become too diluted. Try to keep your news conference on-point. If someone asks a question that seems to be too far off the subject, do not refuse to answer or become irritated, this will only emphasize that you are uncomfortable with the subject. Instead, use a transitional phrase to bridge back to one of your talking points. Example: *"I understand your concern, but I think it's important to realize..."*, and then pivot back to your message.

## Watch Those Tricky Questions

*"Don't answer the question you were asked. Answer the question you wish you were asked," Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, 1961-68.*

During your meeting with the media, if you stay on-point, you will have a much better chance of having your message received and understood. Often you will become distracted by seemingly unnecessary or irrelevant questions. It's relatively easy to deal with negative questions you don't like; just pretend you are answering a question that was worded more positively. That way your response has a more positive tone, rather than a negative one.



## The Secret to Keeping Cool Under Fire



It's every reporter's job to ask questions, sometimes tough questions. You may consider it a distraction, inconvenience or sometimes an outright attack, when the questions become aggressive. But you never want to tell-off or get too testy with a reporter. When you become angry with a reporter, the television audience at home may feel you are angry at them (the viewer). While you may have distain for

the reporter asking you the questions, the viewers at home don't always see the person to whom your anger is directed, nor do they always hear the questions that made you angry. Because of that, the viewer may not know why you became angry or hostile. Showing anger or antagonism to certain questions may make the TV audience feel that you are overly sensitive about answering. When you are being interviewed in a one-on-one setting such as a morning news program, the television audience may identify more with the celebrity questioner than you. Remember, when you are on TV, you are a guest in someone's home.

### *That's No Reporter, That's My Grandmother*

How do you keep your cool under rapid fire questioning? Just think of the reporters as your grandmother or your favorite aunt. If you picture someone with whom you have affection, your body language and your expressions are more likely to project honesty and openness. If you feel contempt and anger toward your questioner, you are more likely to convey an image of smugness, defiance and indifference.



No matter what your own grandmother asks you, you aren't going to respond to her by saying: *"Grandma that's a stupid question and I'm not going to answer you."* Rather, you are going to come up with a more tactful response, *"Grandma, I understand your concern, but the important thing to remember is..."*, then you would proceed to make your point without angering Grandma.

## Don't Get Annoyed by Dumb Questions



Even after you've covered what you feel are the facts of a story, the reporter may continue with a series of questions. Often they will ask you off-the-wall questions that you don't feel are relevant. Many times those off-the-wall questions are asked because the reporter may not have a true understanding of the event.

Don't get upset with them for asking what you might consider dumb questions, because it's giving you an opportunity to correct or clarify misinformation.

Don't worry about the reporters catching you off-guard or asking you something you can't answer; if you don't have an answer just say, *"I don't have that information,"* then transition back to your talking points.

## Objectivity Not Speculation

You want to project an image of trust and objectivity. Don't speculate or respond to hypothetical questions because you don't know in what context they are going to be used. If someone asks you to respond to a hypothetical situation, just say, *"I don't get involved in hypothetical situations, but if you have a specific question I would be happy to address it."*

## Answer in Self-Contained Statements

Do not answer with a simple, "Yes" or "No." Answer in complete sentences, it reduces the possibility of your answer being misunderstood or used out of context. Remember, not every reporter in the room can hear all the questions being asked; they may not understand the meaning of your answer or they may think you are answering a different question. Your answer should be able to stand on its own and not require the viewer or reader to hear the question, in order for it to make sense.

## **NO COMMENT!!**

You should never answer a question with “no comment,” because it makes people feel you are hiding something or that someone is keeping you from talking. Instead of answering with “no comment,” just explain why you cannot comment. Often, for public safety reasons or to protect sensitive information in a case, you cannot, nor should you be expected to answer every question or provide every detail. When you are asked such a question, do not answer with a negative, but rather with a positive. For example: “*We will be providing you with more facts about this case later, but right now for the safety of some of those involved and to protect the integrity of the case we will be releasing more details as our investigation progresses.*”

Often when a person says “*no comment*” what they are really saying is they don’t have enough information to make a comment because anything they say would be pure speculation. In that case instead of saying “*no comment*,” say, “*I wouldn’t want to speculate.*”

### **How Long Does a News Conference Last?**

A typical news conference lasts about 20 minutes. Many well intentioned PIOs are very ineffective with the media because they let their news conferences drag on far too long after they have made their points; they try to answer every question that reporters throw at them. If the Q&A goes too long, you can reach a point of diminishing returns and your main points could get lost in the volumes of facts.

If reporters seem to want to continue questioning you after you’ve covered your main points, respond with very short answers. It’s always those long drawn out responses that seem to get you into trouble. Think of yourself as a witness in a trial. Don’t volunteer too much information.

While you don’t want to appear to be trying to dodge what you consider inconsequential questions and issues, you don’t want to have the whole purpose of your briefing become sidetracked by questions that move you away from your key points. That’s why you want to end your news conference as soon as possible, once you have effectively covered your talking points and provided the media with the information it needs. Any other questions that you don’t consider essential to tell your story will become a distraction.

## Ending Your News Conference

Before you conclude your news conference, you want to make sure that everyone is on the same page and fully understands your message, which is why it's important to clearly state your message in the written news release you passed out at the beginning of your news conference. Your written news release will also serve as a good reference source as reporters are back at their offices composing their stories.

Tell the media when your next briefing will be held or that you will hold another briefing if and when more information becomes available. This conveys to reporters and the public that you were not only in control of this news conference, but you are in control of the next one as well.



Close the news conference on a proactive note and reiterate your opening message. If you have a “call to action” message be sure to include that in your close. End by telling reporters, *“If you have additional questions before our next briefing you can email me and I will do my best to get that information for you.”* You do not want to offer to individually respond to every email inquiry, instead,

you want to use their email inquiries to help you prepare for the kind of questions you will be facing at the next briefing.

Most PIOs would ask, why in the world would you make such an offer? The answer is simple; if reporters are emailing you their questions, you will have a heads up on how they are preparing their stories and/or what they plan to ask you at the next briefing. In effect, you are conditioning the media to send you their questions in advance.

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## How Many Should Participate in a News Conference? The Fewer the Better



Having too many people involved in a news conference can dilute and even misdirect your message, causing you to lose control of the direction and purpose of the briefing. A joint news conference with too many participants gives too many different people the opportunity to inadvertently divert the goal of the news conference. It's easier to keep the news conference on track with fewer people answering questions.

In the Public Safety sector, joint news conferences are typically successful because each participating agency knows and understands its own specific areas of responsibility and expertise. If there has been an incident involving over-lapping agencies, it is usually the PIO for the lead agency who coordinates any joint news conference. The PIO should confer with each participant before the briefing to clarify what specific information should be covered.

A disturbance or other incident that may have started off inside a Courthouse, but spread out into the streets, would likely involve both the County Sheriff's Office and the City Police Department. If the Sheriff's Office is the lead agency, the PIO for the Sheriff would have the responsibility for coordinating any news briefings, as well as composing and distributing the printed news releases. If a joint news conference is in order, the PIOs for the two agencies should confer with each other to make sure everyone's goal is the same.

## When Does the Boss Hold a News Conference?



While the Public Information Officer may be the public face for his/her organization, there will be occasions when only the head of the agency will do. Such occasions might include, but not be limited to a mass casualty event, wide-spread civil unrest, a line of duty death or a major policy change. Above, Dallas Police Chief David Brown, appropriately addresses the media and public following the tragic murder of 5 officers.

We conduct LIVE on-location 2-day News Media Relations and On-Camera Training classes at law enforcement and fire academies and agencies in 40 cities every year. During our LIVE training, we put you in front of the camera and let you hold mock news interviews and news conferences. Please check our website for a class near you. If you don't find a city close-by, give us a call or an email and we will schedule one.

If you have an Idea or Suggestion for us we value your thoughts, tips and opinions. Please send them to us by email at: [Russ@Ruffin.TV](mailto:Russ@Ruffin.TV)

# Communicating Effectively with Media



## Discover the 3 Key Mistakes Police Agencies Make in Dealing with Media How to Make Sure Your Message Gets Reported



### Experienced Veteran Reporters/Instructors

Instructors **Russell Ruffin** and **Penny Carter** - Award Winning TV News Veterans who authored two books on Media Relations, have traveled the country from **Baltimore** to **Ferguson** to **San Bernardino** for some of the nation's major Breaking News events to determine what can be learned to help avoid and manage a news media crisis.

### On-Camera Training

Simulated Breaking News Events: From the Routine to the Extreme

LIVE On-Camera Coaching with Free Video of Your Performances

While this is an Advanced class, it is designed so that those with limited experience can benefit by following along in our workbook and proceeding at their own level. Take home our free exclusive Media Relations Guide



### LESSONS LEARNED FROM REAL WORLD EVENTS

- Develop Effective Talking Points
- Get Ahead of a Crisis Quickly
- Control the Narrative of Your Story
- Keep Your Message On-Track with Transitional Bridges
- Handle Ambush Interviews and Investigative Reporters
- Write More Effective News Releases
- Create & Distribute Your Own Sound Bites & Interviews
- Go LIVE on Social Media

To schedule a class call:

Penny Carter - Training Coordinator  
Cherokee Productions, Inc.  
865 Northridge Rd.,  
Highlands Ranch, CO 80126  
Phone: 303-470-0716

Email: [Info@PublicSafetyMediaTraining.com](mailto:Info@PublicSafetyMediaTraining.com)

## Hold a 2-Day Seminar at Your Facility

### Option 1: “Host” a Seminar

#### **As a “Host”, Your Responsibilities Will Include:**

- Advertising and promoting the seminar via mailings, faxes, emails, teletypes, notices, postings.
- Providing a facility seating 30 with an LCD projector and podium.
- Providing refreshments for the class
- Providing a list of nearby hotels.

#### **As a “Host” you will receive free training for up to 6 attendees**

We handle the registrations and invoicing. The host agency gets 2 free slots in exchange for providing a training room and advertising the class to other surrounding agencies. If the host provides refreshments, a 3<sup>rd</sup> free slot is provided.

When registrations reach 15 the host agency receives an additional free slot.

When registrations reach 20 the host agency receives an additional free slot.

When registrations reach 25 the host agency receives an additional free slot for a total of up to 6 free slots.

We pay our own hotel/travel related expenses. Your agency pays nothing. The host agency must assist in actively recruiting a minimum of 10 paid attendees before the class can be held.

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### Option 2: “Exclusive Training” - \$4,900

With “Exclusive Training”, you pay one fee of \$4,900 and you can have up to 25 people attend the class (That’s only \$196 per person for 2 days).

This option is helpful for agencies that need to train multiple employees from police, fire, emergency management, city and county offices, mayor’s offices, hospitals, administrators and supervisors.

Use can use this option to generate revenue, by charging participants from outside agencies. We will even custom-make your flyer.

\*This option is available if we have no other competing classes in the region.

To schedule a class call:  
Penny Carter, Training Coordinator  
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865 E. Northridge Rd.  
Highlands Ranch, CO 80126  
Phone 303-470-0716 Email: [Info@PublicSafetyMediaTraining.com](mailto:Info@PublicSafetyMediaTraining.com)