

MANAGING MEDIA AND

By Tommy Carnline



In today's instant news society, with 24-hour news coverage, social media and camera phones, the law enforcement public information officer (PIO) has to work diligently to stay ahead of a media backlash. An incident that at the onset may seem routine could easily spiral out of control and leave the agency appearing incompetent and unprofessional. For many, perception is reality, and those few minutes spent in front of a camera may project an incorrect reality. This can be most problematic during a critical incident, especially a SWAT call out. Having a PIO who has experience in tactical operations and is kept in the loop can be very beneficial to the team, the agency and the media.

In 2012, I was the newly appointed PIO for our agency. I thought I would have several months to settle in before anything happened beyond daily briefings on burglaries and narcotics arrests. Little did I know that within 90 days, I would be faced with an officer-involved shooting that also dealt with our SWAT team.

I have learned to refer to my media contacts as “media partners.” As anyone reading this article knows, a partner is someone you work with and with whom you share a common goal. Merriam-Webster defines a partner as “one that shares, a partaker,” and “one associated with another especially in an action.” Law enforcement has a job to do, as does the media, but there is a very fine distinction between the two.

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TACTICAL OPERATIONS



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In my first few weeks, I met with all of the media contacts in our area. We are a smaller media market, with only two television stations and one newspaper. I knew most of them from my years of employment at the sheriff's office, but not as an actual PIO. My usual question for them was, "What do you need from me?" From all of them, the answer was simple: accessibility and honesty. My sheriff was already very accessible and I have continued that standard. Being honest is a given; it is what we are all taught in our first PIO class — never lie. You may not be able to tell the reporter a lot, but tell him or her what you can, keeping the safety of the team, the operation and the public in the forefront.

One evening in early October 2012, our team received a call out for a barricaded subject. The subject was armed and

had already fired shots at family members and responding deputies with no injuries sustained. I was alerted by the shift handling the call to monitor the radio and knew it would only

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be a matter of time before the media started calling. Within 10 minutes I received my first call.

I confirmed the details of the incident through the SWAT commander so we could provide the media a safe staging area. Having been a member of our team as the communications and logistics officer from 1993 until 2008, I was keenly aware of the steps that were being taken to resolve the situation and gave updates to the media without hindering the operation.

Negotiations had begun and were ongoing for several hours. We allowed the media to film, from the public roadway, the SWAT truck being deployed to the incident. The reporters were satisfied with what they had and knew their 10 p.m. broadcast deadline was approaching fast. They left the scene to prepare for their broadcast.

Here is where the relationship with the media comes into play: On the 10 p.m. newscast, the anchor wanted to broadcast, "SWAT had surrounded the residence and were in negotiations with the gunman." I knew from my prior experience that, if the subject had access to television or the Internet, this could inflame the situation to a point of confrontation. As I spoke to the reporter and was very clear in our assessment of the situation, she was convinced to revise the statement to, "SWAT and negotiators were on scene attempting to resolve the situation peacefully." No truer words were ever spoken. Unfortunately, the situation was not resolved peacefully, culminating in the shooting of the suspect as he exited the residence, brandishing his weapon at the team.

Our sheriff was at the forefront the very next day giving the press conference, answering questions and explaining the actions our team had to take. The media reported it and within one day, it was on to another story.

The learning points I took away from this incident are as follows:

- Cultivate a relationship built on trust and mutual understanding with your media before you are thrown into a major incident. National media come and go. Local media are part of your community.
- Always follow up with the outcome of the incident and be very clear when doing so to avoid any misconceptions of the operation.
- And, most importantly, be honest. Never lie. Lying will destroy any trust you have cultivated and will undermine any further working relationship. They may not like the answer, but it will be truthful.

In a tactical operation, incorporating the PIO in the information loop will be a benefit to the team and the agency and will enhance the information being provided to the

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media. If the PIO has been part of the team in the past, his or her experience will be instrumental in conveying the correct information. The media will also view it as an advantage because any follow-up questions may be answered with ease.

If PIOs have no tactical law enforcement experience, it is incumbent upon the team to educate them. The PIO should have a firm understanding of the tactics and capabilities of the team and understand the terminology used in tactical operations. Either way, the team will have confidence that their actions are being represented correctly to the media without having to deal with the media directly and possibly having something lost in translation. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Photo courtesy of Ed Buice, NCIS Public Affairs Officer.