

Unit Introduction

It is 5 p.m. on a quiet Friday. Your staff has already departed for the weekend. You have your bag slung over your shoulder and your car keys in hand ready to walk out the door when the ring of the telephone shatters the quiet. You say to yourself, "Who could be calling this late on a Friday?" Wanting to do the right thing you answer the phone and quickly realize the caller is a reporter from the local daily newspaper who is seeking information for a story he is working on concerning a unit in your organization.

In this lesson we will discuss some tips, techniques and steps you can use to effectively respond to media queries and promote the best interests of your organization at the same time.

Intermediate Training Objective (ITO)

Given a public affairs scenario, respond in writing to a media query about a scenario in accordance with Department of Defense and service policies. Upon completion of this unit of instruction, the student will be able to:

- Describe the essential elements of information that should be gleaned from an initial media request or query
- Describe the potential methods of responding to or supporting media requests or queries
- Explain the steps involved in developing a written response to query (RTQ) from taking the initial request to providing the final response
- Prepare a Response to Query form that includes all essential elements of information about a given request (accomplished during the in-resident phase)
- Develop command messages for incorporation into a Response to Query (accomplished during the in-resident phase)
- Develop written response to a media query about a given scenario that includes command messages and information releasable in accordance with Department of Defense and service policies and regulations (accomplished during the in-resident phase)

Unit Overview

To meet the objectives we will examine the following areas:

- Media query
- Command and community notification
- Research
- Evaluate and develop a response plan
- Draft statement, Q&R (Response to Query format)
- Command messages (talking points)
- Staffing and coordination
- Response
- Practical application (accomplished during the in-resident phase)

This unit is meant to supplement other lessons dealing with the media leg of the public affairs triad and should give you a more in-depth understanding of the process of handling media queries.

Overview of the Media Query

While each media query will be unique, all queries have many of the same characteristics. For example:

- Some might end with a simple determination that you are not the appropriate organization to handle the request
- Some might be handled by providing basic information that has been previously approved for release
- Some might result in a simple oral or written response to the reporter's questions
- Some might culminate with an interview with your commander

As you speak with the reporter, remember to listen carefully so that you clearly understand what is being requested. It's also important to learn as much as possible about the reporter. This could be very helpful when developing your response.

Regardless of the nature of the query, your goal is to help the reporter meet his/her objective.

When the Phone Rings...Get Off on the Right Foot

It's always important to get off on the right foot when answering the phone. Here are some common sense tips to keep in mind when taking that media query.

- Always be polite and honest and communicate your desire to be helpful. By the same token:
- Do not automatically commit to assisting or refusing to assist the reporter until you have a complete understanding of what the reporter needs. This also includes finding out what the reporter already knows.
- During your discussion with the reporter you should get a sense for the angle the reporter is likely to take on the story.
- Once you feel you have a good understanding of what the reporter is looking for, you need to make a determination of the urgency of the request. Does the query require immediate attention? Is the story going to run with or without your input? Do you have time to coordinate your response?



Get the Basic Information

Many commands have a standard news media query form to assist you when working a media query. If this is not the case where you are, you can develop your own form that will ensure you get the information you need to take, track, coordinate and respond to a media query. If you decide to develop your own form, here are some ideas of what to include:

- Date and time of the media query
- Reporter's name and organization
- Reporter's contact information (phone, . Fax, e-mail)
- Deadline
- Subject
- Background
- Specific question(s) or request
- Desired response (phone interview, written response, visit, etc.)
- Tracking number – If your command has frequent interaction with media, a media query log will help track and file media queries and responses
- PAO point of contact information
- Staffing information

Click on this link to see a [sample media query form](#).

Questions to For the Reporter

- What is the story? Typically you will be able to get a good feel for the story by the nature of the the reporter's question(s). However, if the questions are vague or it seems like the reporter is on a fishing expedition, don't hesitate to ask the reporter to be more specific. The last thing you want to do is respond to the wrong question.
- What is your focus or approach? Here again you will probably be able to figure this out by the nature of the reporter's questions. If you have difficulty figuring out where the reporter wants to go with the story, start asking your own questions until you have a clear indication.
- Have you or will you be speaking to others? It is very conceivable that by the time the reporter contacts you, he/she has already obtained information from a number of other sources and is contacting you for confirmation of the facts or another quote. While reporters are not obliged to reveal their sources, they will often times share the information they have gained and ask you to comment on it.
- How much do you know (about the issue, subject, command, etc.)? By asking the reporter to explain what he/she believes they know about a particular issue or story you will be able to get a feel for the extent of their knowledge on the subject, where they obtained their information, the accuracy of the information, etc. Once armed with this information you will be in a much better position to begin formulating your response.
- When will the story be published/aired? This is important to know so that you can provide a heads up to those who may have an interest in the outcome of the story. Additionally, if there are any changes or updates in the information you may have time to provide the updated information or changes to the reporter before the story is published or aired.

Negotiate the Response

While you are speaking with the reporter and analyzing how to handle the request, you should also ask yourself the following questions:

- How does the principal of "maximum disclosure with minimum delay" affect your response?
- Do you need to notify anyone about the query or get clearance to respond?
- Do you need time to prepare your response? How much time?
- Do you need to staff your response? With whom?
- Do you need to have the reporter fax or e-mail the questions to you?
- If the reporter requests an interview, what is the agenda or boundaries for the potential interview?
- Do you have a Subject Matter Expert (SME) who can address the reporter's questions?

After answering these questions in your mind, how do you approach the response if you can't do the interview because you are not the appropriate person or organization to respond? The best thing is to be honest with the reporter and explain why and, if you can, suggest other alternatives. You want to be seen as trying to be helpful.

Command and Community Notification

Once you get off the phone with the reporter you need to determine who else in your organization needs to know about the query. Probably the first person to advise is your boss/commander. This person may have some insight into the issue the reporter is asking about and may be able to assist you in developing your response. Depending on the issue, others you should consider notifying include: the staff judge advocate, security, personnel, other units, commands and higher headquarters.

If the story the reporter is working on has an impact in the local community it would be wise to consult with your commander and recommend that the mayor or other political and civic leaders be given a heads up on the story.

Evaluate and Develop a Response Plan

After further reflection on the reporter's question(s) you need to make a determination as to whether or not you should respond. Does the subject matter of the query clearly fall within your area of responsibility?

If so, then proceed with the development of your response while keeping the guidelines of security, accuracy, propriety and policy (SAPP) in mind.

If not, try to determine who or what organization would be a more appropriate source to respond to the query.

Command and PA Community Notification

Who needs to know about the query? Always staff the request, even if you've determined in the evaluation step that your command is not the appropriate command to respond, or that the subject is inappropriate for you to develop a response. Furthermore, in staffing your request, always keep in mind that due our extremely dynamic communication environment, the release of information may change and, therefore, the request may come back to your command as having the appropriate release authority.

Make sure you keep your boss in the loop. When it comes to staffing, ensure you consider such staff functions as: security, legal, human resources, etc. What about giving a heads up to other commands, units or higher headquarters? Don't forget to consider the base, regional or theater of operations PAO.

Staffing your request helps facilitate the information fundamental, "Provide Consistent Information at all Levels" (JP 3-61).

Research



Now that you have a firm understanding of what information the reporter is looking for, you can begin gathering the facts from those who have the information or are the subject matter experts. At this stage in the process you, in essence, become a reporter and ask the appropriate questions to obtain the information needed to respond to the media query.

Because of the nature of the query, reassure those with whom you are seeking information that you are indeed on their side, but the bottom line is, you need the truth regarding the issue.

Another important aspect of the research phase is to check for existing Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) on the issue being worked. If PAG exists, it may help you in developing your response and provide other necessary guidance. You should

also review your service's "guidelines for release" to determine what information is or is not releasable. You may also find it helpful to consult with other PAOs. You never know when someone else has already dealt with the very same or a similar issue.

How Should You Respond?

Often times the very nature of the query will dictate how you respond. Your response may be a simple "yes" or "no" during your phone conversation with the reporter or it may be a full-blown interview with the senior commander of your organization. If the reporter is only looking for simple facts, just answer the questions. However, if there is an issue triggering the story, take the opportunity to communicate your command's message.

(Note to students: The focus of the remainder of this lesson will cover "written responses." The steps for evaluating the feasibility, planning and preparation for responding to a request for an interview will be covered in a separate lesson.)



Develop a Response Plan

Now that you've conducted some research on the subject, how should you respond? What kind of response is most appropriate, taking into account the level of depth and scope of the request. Does it merit arrangement of a separate interview, or can you simply respond with a detailed written response?

Arrange an Interview:

Phoner. Phoners with SMEs or even knowledgeable PAOs are appropriate for fact-finding inquiries, radio requests or short-fused queries.

Live talk-back. Live talk-back requests will satisfy the TV media need for "live." They are also highly effective when going "ugly early" ... as they are generally used in breaking news situations. They are also valuable when your SME can't get to the station or the station doesn't have enough reporters to send you one. These will be covered in a later lesson.

Subject Matter Expert. SME interviews are for those media requests that require an in-depth interview with senior-ranking or technical experts. They generally provide the opportunity of a more intimate form of communication and can be especially useful when utilized for a particularly sensitive subject matter, demonstrating a sincere level of attention and concern to a particular media request or topic. How to properly prepare a SME will be addressed in a later lesson.

Develop a Written Response

Draft your statement, Qs & Rs (questions and responses). Taking into account both the research you have already conducted and your response plan, now's the time (finally!) where you begin to draft your RTQ.

If you don't have them already, get the questions in writing if you plan to respond in writing. This will ensure you have the complete and accurate list of questions.

Consider using an overarching statement to position your response. If the reporter is only looking for simple facts, just answer the questions and call it a day. However, if there is an issue triggering the story – and more often than not, there is – use the opportunity to establish the command's position through your overall statement. Don't be driven by the questions, rather, ensure the message you want to convey is included in your statement.

Develop responses to each of the reporter's questions and remember to incorporate command messages (answer + command message = response). Fold your command messages into each response; the command message, plus the information that answers the question, equals your response. If you cannot answer the question, use the opportunity to explain why and bridge to your command message.

Draft a Statement and Question and Response (Q&R)

If the media query is somewhat complex or detailed, you may want to ask the reporter to fax or e-mail the questions to you. This technique can help reduce misunderstandings between you and the reporter and generally forces the reporter to focus his/her questions, which in turn may assist you in responding more accurately to the correct questions.

When developing your response consider using an overarching statement to give context to your response. While you should try and answer the questions, you should also ensure the command messages you want to convey are included in your response.

Staffing and Coordination

Regardless of the time crunch you are working under you must ensure that any response is thoroughly staffed and coordinated. Obviously, you would want to coordinate with the people who provided you information. You should also consider coordination with your legal office and other affected organizations or commanders. Proper coordination will help ensure you are providing the correct response to the reporter's questions. It's a lot easier to get your response right the first time than to try to correct inaccurate information later.

Response

If you have provided a response to the reporter via fax or e-mail, you should follow up with the reporter to confirm that he/she has received and understands your response. During this call you should also determine if the reporter is satisfied with your response and if there are any follow up questions.

Follow up on your response

Unit Summary

While each media query will be different, how you take the query, research, write, coordinate and respond is basically the same for any query. The procedures and tips outlined in this lesson provide you the necessary background to successfully respond to media queries.

Without much effort and a good attitude, it is possible to turn lemons into lemonade by being proactive in how you approach your response to a media query. With a good attitude and a little effort you have the opportunity to spread the word about your organization, its people and mission to the American public. By following the steps and techniques outlined in this lesson you will be able to successfully field, research, write, coordinate and respond to virtually any media query.