

Unit Introduction



This unit will address the subject of news conferences and provide you some tools, tips and techniques for conducting a news conference.

Hardly a day goes by when you turn on CNN, MSNBC or Fox News and don't see some organization or government body conducting a news conference. On the surface, news conferences appear to be rather straightforward and matter-of-fact. What you do not see is the extensive efforts needed to prepare the spokesperson, the logistical set up and requirements and a myriad of other details required to conduct a successful news conference.

While this unit is not specifically testable, you will have to demonstrate your proficiency in conducting a news conference during the Field Practical Exercise. More importantly, what you learn in this lesson will help prepare you for the real world when you may be called upon to prepare for and conduct a news conference for your commander. Take advantage of what this lesson has to offer and you will be well on your way to conducting a successful and productive news conference.

Intermediate Training Objective (ITO)

Given a military-related scenario, coordinate a military news conference in accordance with Department of Defense and service policies and regulations. Upon completion of this unit of instruction, the student will be able to:

- Prepare relevant Public Affairs Guidance for a news conference
- Prepare a media kit for a news conference
- Prepare a military spokesperson for a news conference
- Facilitate a news conference in the role of public affairs officer
- Conduct a news conference in the role of news conference briefer
- Debrief a news conference briefer following a news conference
- Conduct an after action assessment of a news conference

Unit Overview

In this unit we will:

- Define a news conference
- Identify some advantages of a news conference
- Discuss news conference preparation
- Discuss the anatomy of a news conference

What is a News Conference?

In its most simplistic form a news conference is an oral presentation designed to provide news and information in a specific forum to the news media.

Thus far in this course you have learned about news releases, one-on-one print and television interviews, responses to query, etc. as a means of providing information to the media. Now you can add news conferences to your tool kit as another means of releasing news and information to the media. You are already aware of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the tools already addressed, so let us take a look at the advantages and disadvantages of releasing information through a news conference.



Is a News Conference the Best Way to get your Message Out?



The situation or issue often helps you decide whether or not a news conference is the best way to disseminate your information. In most cases a mid-level change of command would not warrant a news conference.

However, the stationing of a new piece of high-tech, war-fighting equipment at your installation might very well be a candidate for a news conference. Each situation or issue should be evaluated on its own merits, but ultimately it's up to you to make a recommendation to your boss on what you believe is the best course of action.

In terms of speed and efficiency for releasing information you should consider the following pecking order:

1. Response to query
2. News release/backgrounder/fact sheet
3. One-on-one interviews (print or broadcast)
4. News conference

Advantages of a News Conference



Up to this point in this course you have written news releases, studied one-on-one print and television interviews, developed responses to query, etc. as a means of providing news and information to the media. Each of these means of disseminating information has its own advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation. Some of the advantages of releasing news and information via a news conference are:

- Focus media attention – A news conference tends to focus media attention on whatever your subject matter may be. (This assumes you have a newsworthy story to start with.)
- Saves time – Because you can handle a large number of media simultaneously, you can also cut down on numerous requests for individual interviews thus freeing up your spokesperson to perform other important duties.
- Uniformity of message – A news conference helps to ensure a consistent message and helps preserve the idea of speaking with one voice. Controlling the message content becomes more difficult when you have more than one spokesperson.
- Simultaneous release of information – A news conference provides you the opportunity to get your story out to all the media at the same time. This reduces the likelihood of being accused of showing favoritism to a single media or reporter.
- Explain complex issues – Because a news conference includes a certain amount of two-way communication, complex issues can be explained in greater detail to all those who attend your conference.

Disadvantages of a News Conference

While a news conference offers some important advantages in terms of a venue for getting your message out through the media, there are a number of disadvantages you should consider before making a decision to conduct a news conference.

If you assume a non-crisis situation, planning, organizing and conducting a news conference is a very labor-intensive undertaking. Before blindly recommending a news conference ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I have the time and the manpower necessary to plan, organize and conduct a news conference?
- Does the story or event truly warrant a news conference?
- What are the logistical considerations for conducting a news conference?
- Do I have access to all the resources required for a news conference?
- Is there an appropriate subject matter expert available and willing to participate in the news conference?
- Can I achieve the same impact or result through the use of another means of releasing the information?

Disadvantages of a News Conference



If you believe your story is of such importance and you can generate sufficient staff and leadership support for a news conference, by all means go for it. If you cannot, then it is incumbent upon you to develop an alternative approach to telling your story.

News Conference - Mini Checklist

- What is/are your message(s)?
- Identify and coach your subject matter expert
- Determine date, time and location of news conference
- Prepare media kits
- Prepare news conference media advisory
- Conduct a telephone follow-up on media advisory
- Do you need to invite special guests?
- What are the protocol considerations?
- Develop and coordinate Qs & As
- Conduct a murder board
- Are media escorts needed?
- Do media escorts need to be trained?
- Is signage required?
- Are there any security considerations?
- Set up and man a media sign-in table
- Is media registration/accreditation required?
- What visual aids or equipment will be required?
- What are the power and telephone requirements?
- Will food or beverage be needed?
- Is a media work room needed?
- Is a sound system needed?

This checklist is by no means complete, but rather a starting point from which to build a more complete and detailed checklist that fits your particular situation or event. After all, the issue or situation you are dealing with will often drive other logistical and preparation considerations. The key to any successful news conference is to think through what you want to accomplish and plan accordingly.

Anatomy of a News Conference



There are a number of ways to choreograph the actual news conference. One approach could be for you, the public affairs officer, to conduct it entirely by yourself. Yet another approach is for the PAO to serve as a facilitator and have a subject matter expert field questions from the media. For the purposes of this lesson and the field training exercise we will discuss the latter while keeping in mind that if you do go solo the steps are basically the same.

Public Affairs Officer and Subject Matter Expert Roles

PAO Duties and Responsibilities – Introduction, Control and Closing

Introduction:

- Welcome those media representatives present and thank them for attending
- Introduce yourself (spell your name) and provide your title
Introduce the SME (spell his/her name) and briefly mention his/her credentials
- Explain the purpose of the news conference

Control - A PAO Responsibility

Control of a news conference is often the responsibility of the PAO. The PAO must ensure that everyone knows the ground rules and how the news conference will be conducted. The following is a basic checklist of some points to consider when briefing the media prior to a news conference:

- Explain news conference ground rules
- All statements will be on the record and can be attributed to the subject matter expert
- Establish a time limit for the news conference, e.g. 10 minutes
- Each reporter will be allowed one question and one follow up (this is to give all reporters a chance to ask a question)
- Advise reporters that you too will be recording the news conference

Select reporters for questions

Advise reporters that, when they are asking a question, state their names and affiliations (this assists in providing follow-up information to reporters after the news conference)

- Advise reporters to turn off their cell phones and pagers
- Control the pace and flow of the news conference
- Ensure ground rules are followed
- Take notes for follow-ups
- Give heads up for final one or two questions
- Introduce subject matter expert (introduction must clearly establish the subject matter expert as a highly qualified person to discuss the issue at hand.)



Ending the News Conference

As the news conference nears the preestablished time limit, it is up to the PAO to advise the media of this fact. This is done by informing the media that there is time for only one or two more questions. The specific number of questions is a judgment call on the part of the PAO and is dependent on the amount of time remaining.

Once the SME has answered the last question and departed the platform the PAO again takes over. The PAO's role at this point is to:

- Address reporter(s) needs for assistance or follow-up information
- Provide follow-up instructions to the reporters (if needed)
- Thank media for coming
- Conclude news conference



Subject Matter Expert Duties and Responsibilities

It's the PAO's responsibility to thoroughly brief the SME as to what his or her responsibilities are and coach that person on some of the tips and techniques that can be used to help ensure a successful news conference. These include:

- Open with clear and concise summary news lead
- Clear explanation of event/incident (include key points and other anticipated areas of concern)
- Express condolences or sympathy (if appropriate)
- Provide information and command messages accurately, thoroughly and credibly
- Show competency, concern and control
- Open up "floor" for questioning
- Keep responses brief (be sure to provide information plus command message(s))
- Bridge to command messages whenever possible
- Clarify vague questions before providing an answer
- Never lie or speculate
- Do not lose your cool or use sarcasm
- Stay in your lane
- Stick with the subject area
- Refer or take questions if needed
- If you cannot answer the question state why
- Do not over or underestimate the reporters' knowledge



Use of visual aids



The use of visual aids at a news conference can be very helpful in communicating your story. PowerPoint, audio and video clips, images, maps, charts, props, special equipment, etc. can all add power and credibility to your news conference, but make sure they add to and not detract from your message.

Unit Summary

For many of you, organizing and conducting a news conference will not be all that common an occurrence, but should you be placed in such a situation, your boss will expect you to know the basics of what is required to hold a successful news conference. Hopefully, if you have a story deserving of a news conference you have the luxury of having enough time to properly plan and prepare for a news conference. On the other hand, a crisis situation may dictate that you conduct a news conference within a matter of a few short hours after an accident or incident. Using the information in this lesson and doing some contingency planning now can assist you in conducting a successful news conference.

