Introduction to public affairs

Throughout most of the last century, the military has managed to keep up with ever-changing communication technologies. Service members in the public affairs field have seen many changes in the ways their offices complete their missions. Getting information to fellow service members or to the public through various media was once done by typewritten stories via regular mail or facsimiles.

Now there are more communication channels – cell phones, digital photo and video images and portable laptop computers are all on the battlefield giving service members and the public live coverage of events.

This is an exciting era of communication for public affairs. Now more than ever there is a great need for public affairs specialists to deploy and help facilitate the media – on and off the battlefield.

In this lesson you will be given the tools to accomplish the public affairs mission.

You will not only learn what these tools are but how to apply them in gaining public support and putting a face to the names of the service members serving this country.
Four reasons public affairs exist

There are many different benefits of having public affairs within our ranks. But there must be a basis from which all public affairs actions come. In this lesson, we will focus on the four basic reasons for having public affairs.

1. Evaluate public opinion toward the Department of Defense and the armed forces. The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, or OASD(PA), evaluates public opinion by tracking national surveys. Further down the public affairs chain of command, we develop our own local sources to determine how the American public feels about the military or our installation.

2. Evaluate the effectiveness of policies and actions of the Department of Defense on issues that generate public opinion. From OASD(PA) to a private reviewing stories from local news outlets, it is our job to monitor the general population’s opinion of our military.

3. Make recommendations to defense officials and commanders that lead to better public understanding and acceptance as it affects public opinion. This is one of our key roles as a commander’s public affairs staff.

4. Keep the military and public informed. We primarily provide information to people about our military. This is our operational function. Our mission is to help the commander communicate and build relationships both inside and outside the unit to develop understanding, acceptance and support. As taxpayers, the public has a right to know how its tax money is being spent.
Basic functions of public affairs

Military public affairs is organized around three functional areas:

**Public or External Information**

Educates the American and international publics through the mass media. It is also called media relations.

**Community Relations**

Educates the American and international publics through face-to-face contact. An example of this function is an installation open house.

**Internal Information**

Informs those working for or associated with the military. The unit publication is an example of this function.

a. We are primarily concerned about communicating with service members and their families, including our Reserve and National Guard members.

b. Our internal information program must work in order to have successful public or community relations programs. This is because those in our internal public are our best spokespeople.
Approaches to Public Affairs

There are two general approaches or types of public affairs programs: proactive and reactive.

**The proactive approach** centers around planning ahead. This is the preferred approach because it is systematic and organized. A good example is preparing for the annual air show. Many details and much preparation go into planning this event, and the planning and preparation begins soon after the last show has ended. Another example is when an accident occurs on post and individuals are injured and/or an expensive piece of equipment is damaged. Releasing this information to the media within minutes and being straightforward and truthful is better than having the media find out from another source and accuse the installation of a cover-up.

**The reactive approach** deals with a surprise situation, which often is bad news. However, you can plan for the unexpected and make your action in a crisis situation less hit-and-miss by having an accident/incident folder with data about the installation, equipment lists and important points of contact. These points of contact throughout your installation will serve you well when trying to facilitate the media’s needs during a crisis situation.
The four-step public affairs process

Whether you’re proactive or reactive in public affairs, you need to look ahead to be effective. Planning is key to a well-oiled public affairs shop and key to developing good programs or projects. PA offices are tasked with projects during the year, so let’s take a common-sense look at how we should approach any task or project.

1. Researching
   - Research is the starting point for developing any project. Resist the tendency to skip this step because without it you have no baseline from which to compare results.
   - During the researching step, determine how your unit’s goals and objectives can be met by a project or task.
   - Next, determine the source of the problem or the nature of the opportunity.
   - Lastly, identify and target a specific audience. This will ensure the message reaches the right group.

2. Planning
   - Take your research and develop a plan to meet your unit’s goals and objectives for your project or task. This may include making benchmarks, such as increasing attendance at community meetings by 10 percent next quarter.
   - Now, mentally or physically, if possible, walk through every step of the plan to determine what personnel and equipment you will need and who can supply them. Put every step in writing so you can track the project.
   - Meet with project participants to make sure they understand their roles.

3. Implementing
   - This is the time to put your researching and planning to the test. When carrying out your plan, resist the urge to make changes during the implementation stage because it usually will create more problems than it will solve. However, you must be flexible when necessary.

4. Evaluating
   - As with researching, do not skip this step. During the planning stage, develop an evaluation plan.
   - Evaluating will start during the implementation phase and will continue with a final analysis after the project is completed or at preset times for an ongoing opportunity.
   - Results of the evaluation should be recorded, so they can be used as research for the next project of this type.
Service public affairs missions and interoperability

We have looked at how a PA shop is organized and to plan a program. Now let’s take brief look at each of the services public affairs organizations.

**Air Force**

The highest Air Force public affairs authority is the secretary of the Air Force/Office of Public Affairs. Public affairs offices are found at major commands, which conduct security and policy review, and resource management; numbered air forces; and wings or bases.

**Coast Guard**

The Coast Guard is under the Department of Homeland Security. The Chief, Public Affairs Staff, reports to the commandant of the Coast Guard through the vice commandant. Public affairs personnel are assigned to Headquarters Coast Guard, two areas, nine districts and the Coast Guard Academy. In the Coast Guard, commanding officers are responsible for conducting public affairs programs at their units.

**Army**

The Chief of Public Affairs is the chief executive for the Army public affairs program and is responsible to the Secretary of the Army. The Army uses deployable units and embedded assets to accomplish its public affairs missions. Types of deployable units are public affairs operations centers, mobile public affairs detachments, broadcast operations detachments and public affairs detachments. Embedded assets work at unified commands, theater armies, theater army area commands, corps, divisions and separate brigades or cavalry regiments.

**Marines**

The Marine Corps Division of Public Affairs works with the Navy’s Information Office. The Marine Corps has public affairs offices at Fleet Marine Forces/Pacific and Atlantic, and base-level and unit-level. Public affairs NCOs are assigned to recruiting districts and stations to perform public affairs missions in support of recruiting.

**Navy**

The Chief of Information is the Navy’s public affairs authority. The Navy has fleet and shore public affairs offices.
Conclusion

As you now know, this course is not just teaching you how to write for the installation newspaper. Becoming a public affairs specialist is one of the most rewarding and interesting career fields. You all are lucky to be a part of this exciting occupational specialty.

As you continue through your public affairs careers after this course and two weeks at DINFOS, you will begin to build upon the basic foundation of public affairs.
References

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