Responding to Media Queries

It is 4:55 p.m. on a quiet Friday afternoon. 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. Then 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 seeking information for a story concerning a unit in your organization.

Journalists will tell you that news often happens when it is least expected. The same holds true for PAOs. As a PAO, you need to know what to do when that phone rings and a reporter is on the other end with lots of questions. Fostering good relations with the press is a big part of the PAO’s job. How well you respond to a press query goes a long way toward building that relationship.

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.

Photo courtesy of forthoodpresscenter.com
Defining a 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 or subject matter expert, also referred to as the SME.

Regardless of the nature of the query, all queries should be handled with the same approach. Your goal is to help the reporter meet his/her objective.

- As you speak with the reporter, remember to listen carefully so that you clearly understand what is being requested.
- It’s also important to get all the important information about the request from the reporter. This could be very helpful when developing your response.
- Take action immediately. Regardless of the reporter’s deadline, the sooner you can provide him or her with the requested information, the better.

Photo courtesy of 4.bp.blogspot.com
Defining a Media Query (continued)

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. That said, don’t automatically commit to assisting or refusing to assist the reporter until you have a complete understanding of what he or she needs.

- During your discussion with the reporter, you should get a sense of what the reporter already knows and the angle he or she is likely to take on the story. Make sure you understand the issue as well. Once you feel you have a good understanding of what the reporter is looking for, 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?

If you have a standard query form, use it to ensure you get the information you need to work, track, coordinate and respond to the query.

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 call
- Reporter’s name and organization
- Reporter’s contact information (phone, fax, email)
- Deadline
- Subject
- Background paragraph
- Specific question(s) or request
- Tracking number
  - If your command has frequent interaction with media, a media query log will help track and file media queries and responses
  - Many times, there can be more than one query on any given press release or event

- PAO point of contact information
- Staffing information
- Desired response (phone interview, written response, in-person interview, etc.)

Sample Query Form

A soldier answers a media query during training at DINFOS. During the phone conversation you should be conversational and professional and do not promise anything you cannot deliver. If you follow the best practices provided in this class you will do well with real world media.
Defining a Media Query (continued)

What is the story? Typically you will be able to get a good feel for the story by the nature of 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? 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 or 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 or 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.

Can I get your questions in writing? Keep in mind, depending on where the reporter may be contacting you from, he or she might not have this luxury.

Now, you have a basic understanding of what the media query is and how to handle it. Now, what are you going to do with it?
Evaluate

Should you respond? When asking yourself this question, assess whether or not you have the ability, competency and authority to respond. While you are speaking with the reporter and analyzing how to handle the request, you should also ask yourself (not the reporter) 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? In general, the answer will be yes. But during the initial contact you may determine that you already have the approved, prepared information to satisfy the reporter’s request, in which case staffing the response may not be necessary (heeding the DOD principle of maximum disclosure, minimum delay).
- Do you need to have the reporter fax or email the questions to you? Requests that require longer, more detailed responses, or requests of a “hot-button” topic generally will necessitate having the questions faxed or emailed, verbatim.
- If an interview ends up being necessary, do you have a subject matter expert who can address the reporter’s questions?
- Discuss agenda or boundaries for potential interviews.

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. Your job is to be helpful.

It may feel like you are going out of your way for someone who put a wrench in your Friday night plans. So why are you doing it? Well, it’s because fostering good relations with the media is a big part of your job as a public affairs officer, and how well you respond to a reporter’s request will go a long way toward building a good relationship with the media.

Photo courtesy of www.145aw.ang.af.mil
Evaluate (continued)

After you put down the phone, you need to take a minute to evaluate the request and determine its feasibility. Should you respond? Most of the time, you will be able to make this determination right off the bat. Otherwise, you will have to execute your staffing step in order to determine whether you are the appropriate authority to speak to the subject. To determine the inquiry’s feasibility, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the subject matter appropriate?
   If the answer is “yes,” then continue with the evaluation.
   If the answer is “no,” then let the reporter know the subject is not appropriate and why (for example, a request for something out of your command’s lane or purview).

2. Are you the appropriate command to respond?
   If the answer is “yes,” then you should continue on with the staffing process.
   If the answer is “no,” let the reporter know that you are not the appropriate command to respond to the request and refer them to the right source, along with the appropriate phone number, email or any other contact information you may have for that person.

Now, let’s talk a little more about staffing your request.
Command and PA Community Notification

Who needs to know about the query? Keep in mind that because of our extremely dynamic communication environment, the release authority may change, and a request you did not have the authority to discuss may end up back at your command. Here are some considerations for staffing an RTQ:

1. Either formally or informally, tell your boss (senior PAO, chief of staff, commander).

2. If you find you’ll need help from a subject matter expert to effectively respond to the query, identify and notify this person as soon as possible.

3. Depending on the issue, others you should consider notifying include the staff judge advocate, security, personnel, other units, commands, higher headquarters, and, if necessary, the base PAO, region PAO and/or theater of operations PAO.

4. Do your colleagues a favor and inform other commands, units or higher headquarters, as necessary (installation/base/post PAO, regional PAO, theater of operations PAO). Consult other PAOs. You never know when someone else has already dealt with the very same or similar issue.

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 the mayor or other political and civic leaders be given a heads-up on the story. Remember, staffing your request helps facilitate the information fundamental -- *Provide consistent information at all levels.*

*Photo courtesy of a1.g.akamai.net*
The time you have to complete needed research for a response to query is often dictated by the reporter’s deadline. Sometimes, you can even respond directly to the reporter. For example, subjects that already have public affairs guidance (PAG) or talking points developed. Nevertheless, you need to expeditiously gather all the information you can to maintain good relations with the reporter. Responding in a timely fashion will tell the reporter his or her inquiry is important to you and will strengthen your future professional correspondence.

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 essentially become a reporter and ask the appropriate questions to obtain the information needed to respond to the media query.

Speak to any appropriate subject matter experts. Most of the time, the SMEs will be members of your command, but they can also be outside the normal staffing chain.

Search for existing PAG. The topic may already have been addressed at other commands, and coordinated answers may be available for you to use or build from.

You should also review your service’s guidelines for release to determine what information is or is not releasable.

As with everything you do in public affairs, consider security, accuracy, propriety and policy in your response.

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.
We have discussed steps to take in researching answers to media queries. Now, let’s move on to developing a response plan. (NOTE: The remainder of this lesson focuses on preparing a written response to query.)

During the resident phase of this course, you will be expected to provide instructors with a message development plan during the SME-preparation exercise. A message development plan, or MDP, is an internal source document used to develop guidance on an issue or event in your command. It is also used for responding to queries and to train others within and outside the public affairs office on responding to calls from the media. A message development plan can be used as the basis for public affairs guidance, or is sometimes built upon public affairs guidance that may already exist.

Some elements of the message development plan can consist of, but are not limited to:

- **Subject** – the issue the plan addresses.
- **Background** – the contextual information meant to provide a broader understanding of the issue.
- **Public statement** – a brief statement for public release, summarizing the issue and the command’s position. Depending on the subject, 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.
- **Key messages** – three or more are good. Fewer may not sufficiently cover the issue; more messages may be excessive. Messages are dependent on the complexity of the issue. For the purposes of this course, three is an acceptable number of messages.
- **Questions** – Think of at least 15 questions the media might ask. The list should address five questions you know you will get, five questions you hope to get and five questions you hope you never get. You may sometimes hear about this question development portion of the message development plan as the 5X5X5. Taking into account both the research you’ve already conducted and your determined appropriate response plan, now’s the time when you finally begin to draft your RTQ.

- **Develop answers to each of the reporter’s questions, incorporating messages to make each response an effective response** (answer, or talking points + command message = effective response.) Fold your command messages into each response. That message, plus the information that answers the question, equals your response. If you cannot answer the question, explain why you cannot answer the question, and bridge to an appropriate, relevant command message.

This is an effective product and process to use when preparing for performance-based exercises during the course. Students should use applicable sources to compile a message development plan in preparation for interviews during the course. It is a great habit to begin that will help you when preparing yourself or others for interviews at your command.
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.

So, now that you’ve developed a draft RTQ, it’s time once again to ensure proper staffing is complete before sending it out into the great abyss for all the world to see. Here are a few questions you need to ask yourself to determine the proper staffing.

- Does this response require a legal chop? Sensitive matters or anything dealing with an investigation will most likely require a scrub by military lawyers.
- Did your SME check your work? Having a SME check your facts provides a safety net for accuracy.
- Do you have input from other agencies or commands, as required?
- Is the RTQ coordinated? Don’t be the junior-most command with a secret! Protect yourself by ensuring your immediate superior knows what you are sending to the media. And don’t forget to inform the boss, too. The last thing you want is for him or her to pick up the daily paper the next morning, only to be surprised by the information that was provided by the public affairs office. Coordination up and down the chain of command is crucial.
Response

Now that you’ve conducted research on the subject and have properly staffed your response, how should you proceed? The depth and scope of the request will determine what kind of response is most appropriate; such as a one-on-one interview with the base commander or a simple detailed written response.

If a written response is all that is required, use your message development plan to compile your response (via fax, phone, email, or hand-delivery). Remember, don’t provide your staffing documents to the reporter – only your answers.

Follow up via the phone with the reporter to make sure he received your response, especially if it was sent via fax or email. Ask the reporter if you have satisfied his request and if your answers are clear. Ask if the reporter has any additional questions and when you can expect the story to run or air. Then, log your RTQ as complete in your PA office records and capture the end product from the reporters publication when it’s available.

Once you’ve completed staffing and logging your RTQ, there’s still one more step to complete the process. Ensure that you capture the end product when it becomes available. Collect the article or as-aired segment where a member of your command was quoted or information you provided was articulated through the media.
Instructions: From the information in this lesson, you should be able to answer the following questions. Check your answers on the following page.

Q: At a minimum, to whom should we report media queries?
Q: What are the steps to researching an issue as you develop your response?
Q: Why do we use a tracking number on a query form?
Q: What approach should you have to handling all media requests?
Q: What should you verify after providing the response?
Conclusion

You will respond to the media regularly nearly every day as a PAO at some of the busier commands. Remember that you will get calls when you are not expecting them, but if you know how to properly research and prepare and staff the response to a query, the better life will be for you and your command.

How well you respond to these initial media queries will have a direct impact on how much the media respects you as a PAO and how they deal with you professionally.
References and Additional Information


McLoughlin. (ETM); Navy Public Affairs Tactics Manual (2008) (NPATM)

JP 3-16 (2005) Public Affairs