

SUCCESSFUL NEWS CONFERENCE TIPS

During a major news event, your city will want to be able to disseminate information in a quick, uniform manner. One way to do this is by holding regular news conferences/briefings to keep reporters – and through them, the public – apprised of the situation. Not every event or development merits a news conference. But when circumstances suggest that a news conference is appropriate, there are a number of factors to keep in mind to stage a successful new conference.

You may wish to hold news conferences at certain points of the day, or you could choose to conduct them as needed. Either way, you need to make sure you're ready. Here are some tips for conducting a successful news conference:

LOCATION

In a crisis, the media likely will gather where the event is "occurring." This might be City Hall, or it could be a remote location. Either way, it provides you with a good potential place to communicate your message to a large segment of the media and beyond. Be sure there is enough room for a news conference and there are no noisy distractions (such as heavy machinery from debris removal, or periodic trains from nearby tracks). When in doubt, hold the news conference at a central location where you normally hold media events. But if reporters are naturally gathered at a remote location, don't ask them to leave the scene in order to convene at a place more convenient to you.

TIME/FREQUENCY

Keep in mind the importance of releasing information in the initial phase of a crisis, establishing the city as the source of information during the event. That's why you might choose to hold regular news conferences to provide reporters with updates about the situation. That's especially true early on, while the facts are still being sorted out and information is still very fluid.

Schedule news conferences for early in the morning and afternoon. That will help ensure that your message gets played during midday and early evening newscasts, as well as any other coverage throughout the day. Depending on the nature of the event, you might choose to hold an evening news conference to brief reporters on the first day of the event. The frequency of news conferences will diminish the longer the event continues and as more information becomes widely known.

MESSAGE

Decide the focus of your news conference. What is the general theme of the information you plan on releasing? Limit your message to no more than three key points; anything more will risk diluting your main message. Prepare talking points for your spokesperson and anyone else who might speak. Anticipate possible questions from the media, especially difficult queries. Go over answers with your spokespersons and allow them to practice their responses. In addition to preparing your message, be sure to collect any supplemental materials that you might want to hand out during the news conference.

THE NEWS CONFERENCE

Keep a sign-up list of reporters attending the news conference. Not all reporters will want to sign it, but the list will allow you to know who was at the event so you can follow up with them as necessary. The reporter's information also could be important if you believe a story was unfair or inaccurate and you

need to contact the reporter later. Before the news conference starts, provide reporters with a list of names and titles (including correct spelling) of those taking part in the news conference so the reporters are clear about identities of the participants. You could also provide reporters with a quick synopsis of how the news conference will be conducted. For instance, you may let them know whether there will be a short statement and if follow-up questions will be allowed. If the matter is very sensitive, or you don't have additional information, explain that your spokesperson will be making a statement and will not be answering questions. Record the event so you have a transcript of what was said. This will help in the event there is ever a question about a statement given at the news conference, or if a reporter missed the news conference and is looking for a quote from the event.

CONFERENCE CONCLUSION

A member of your crisis team who is not participating directly may have an important role to play: cutting off questioning and ending the news conference. When it appears that all appropriate questions have been answered and there would be no further benefit to the city by continuing, this team member should step forward and loudly state, "Thank you." This will signal to the speakers that it's time to stop responding to reporters' questions and instead leave the room.

When the news conference ends, be sure you have distributed any supporting materials and tell reporters when there will be another update, if one is necessary. Be sure to follow through with any promises made to provide a reporter with additional information.

A CHECKLIST FOR NEWS CONFERENCES

These general guidelines will help you set up and conduct any news conference, and can be readily adapted to meet your needs during a crisis:

- Not every event warrants a news conference. You need to select a communications strategy that will take into consideration such factors as:
 - a. Timing: When is the event happening? Now, or in the near future?
 - b. Significance: How many people will the news affect? Will it impact a large number of people?
 - c. Proximity: Is the affected person or group available for the event/interview? The news conference should provide an immediate opportunity for high-value comments for reporters.
 - d. Human interest: Will this story be of interest to the media?
- Choose a location with an interesting and appropriate visual backdrop. Remember that good visuals will make a significant difference, especially for video media. For logistical reasons, it is also vitally important that the news conference be scheduled for a location that is accessible to the media and other attendees. Don't use an out-of-the-way location, unless it is a **KEY ELEMENT** of the story. Be mindful of reporter deadlines. Avoid Mondays and Fridays if possible. Don't schedule an event after 2 p.m., and ideally not after 1 p.m., if you are hoping for news package coverage by 5 p.m. newscasts. Based on the nature of the event, of course, news conferences may need to be scheduled on Saturdays and/or Sundays.

- Logistics
 - a. Be able to satisfy technical requirements, including parking for satellite vehicles
 - b. Ensure the availability of stage, podium and audio/visual equipment as necessary
 - c. Make sure electricity is available
 - d. Also attempt to have a Wi-Fi signal available
 - e. Provide a raised platform for TV cameras and co-located mult box
 - f. Arrange for media vehicle parking, power supply, proximity to event

- Media Relations
 - a. Develop a full media list, including reporters who have a known interest in the subject
 - b. Notify the media about the new conference as early as possible, leaving as much time as possible before the event

- Media Materials
 - a. News release: Who, what, when, where and why; boilerplate info
 - b. Media kit and fact sheet
 - c. FAQs
 - d. Bios and photos
 - e. Copies of graphs and charts
 - f. Post all media kit materials to a central online location (city website or other)

- Conducting the News Conference
 - a. Assign staff to direct media to the briefing room, hand out press kits and background information if available
 - b. Log the names and affiliations of media representatives (primarily for purpose of providing follow-up)
 - c. Video/audio record news conference
 - d. City spokesperson opens the news conference, identifies speakers, establishes procedures
 - e. Monitor the questions and answers closely for potential follow-up
 - f. Prepare conference notes and report