



Communications 101

JULY 2023



Why This Was Created

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission created this booklet to guide election officials across America on public relations. Although its application will differ among offices, we wanted to explain best practices that will help your team successfully communicate with the public, and plan for any challenges that may arise throughout your work. Our team knows you will find the content both informative and useful.



Why Do We Need PR?

Any election official who wants to inform the public must consider a public relations (PR) strategy.

- Skillful PR can turn poor messages that generate little attention into compelling ones that attract a sizable audience.
- Whether it involves content creation, traditional media appearances, social media engagement, or crisis management, successful PR will help you update and educate your key audience.
- In today's climate, PR is particularly useful in clarifying misconceptions about elections.
- Managing and preparing for any development requires election officials to pursue continuous PR efforts, rather than one-off attempts.

PR Quotes

“Public relations are a key component of any operation in this day of instant communications and rightly inquisitive citizens.” – Alvin Adams

“Never waste a good crisis.” – Winston Churchill

*“Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing.”
– Benjamin Franklin*



PR Tactics

Election officials can use numerous PR deliverables to their advantage.

- **Press releases** announce important developments to the public and can ensure noteworthy updates gain recognition. These official and authoritative documents emphasize facts and detailed information.
- In contrast, **public statements** play a more responsive role by officially commenting on external events while or after they occur. They may be briefer in length and reflect the personal tone of an individual spokesperson or official.
- Using **media advisories**, electoral officials can invite reporters and journalists to different public events. These include press conferences, in addition to town halls and forums.

No matter the document, electoral officials should consider several **PR best practices** when crafting content:

- Plain language works better than technical jargon and overwriting. Choose direct wording and phrasing that clearly communicates your message without confusion.
- Consider your specific objective, audience, and tactics when creating content or making public appearances.
- Stay on message and keep it consistent.

Why Planning is Critical

Proactive versus reactive engagement:

- The best way to **engage** with the public is **proactively**. While unforeseeable developments can always occur, non-crisis situations work optimally when PR teams can plan every publication, event, and social media post before they are needed. Driving a message forward on your timeline, rather than reacting, allows the most flexibility, influence, and chance of success.
- **Reactive engagement** ensues when a PR team fails to foresee and plan for potential courses of action and avoidable developments. This forces one to play “catch-up” after the public has started obtaining information and forming opinions. Preventing these situations is better than trying to escape them.

Event calendars offer a user-friendly way to plan media engagement around events and important milestones. These documents will ensure your team knows each major date in your PR campaign and what they require.



Social Media:

- Producing a steady stream of content can help establish your election office as a trusted resource. Given the significant competition in today's media landscape, making regular posts on different platforms serves a vital purpose.
- Along with highlighting your own content, election officials can use social media to highlight important news stories and events that relate to your work. This lets you curate a dynamic timeline to inform the public.
- Blog posts can push content that reporters and journalists may not find newsworthy. These can play the role of a digital op-ed while delivering the message directly to readers.

Social Media Prep Example: PA State Department

The PA State Department was able to anticipate the needs of voters and drafted a tweet ahead of time scheduled it to post after the election – helping to provide accurate information when the voters and the media needed it:

- Thank you for your patience while bipartisan county election officials make sure your vote is accurately and securely counted. #TrustedInfo2020 #votesPA

Crisis Management:

- Crises are inevitable in any work environment. No matter how much foresight and proactive measures you pursue, a major unforeseen issue will catch your team off-guard, requiring a careful and well-organized response.
- One can most successfully manage a crisis by having a communications plan already in-place.
- No one knows your office's decision-making limits or risk tolerance better than your team. Keep them in mind when planning for crises.
- **Scenario planning** is the process of identifying potential situations that your organization may face and planning how you could respond. We do this because:
 - It helps decision makers manage risk.
 - It is used as a strategic planning tool.
 - It allows organizations to move quickly when faced with a situation.
 - It allows organizations to invest in decisions today that could help better prepare for or reduce the risks of certain scenarios in the future.
 - A scenario plan should lay out numerous situations facing your organization and a plan for how to manage them.



There are two types of crises:

Emerging Crisis (Type 1)

- The crisis could evolve in several different ways.
- Your organization needs to prepare for the potential twists and turns a narrative may take.
- These are often based on privileged information.

Approaching an Emerging Crisis

1. Gather as much information as possible on the current situation and establish the facts.
2. Identify the voices/players in the situation.
3. Establish and summarize your sole source of the truth/version of history.
4. Determine what communication channels you and potential critics use.
5. Brainstorm scenarios based on those facts and voices.
6. Write a mini communications plan for each situation with your channels/platforms in mind.

Future Crisis (Type 2)

- No current crisis exists.
- But the subject/issue is contentious and could evolve into a crisis.
- Your organization needs to prepare for all the ways it could be criticized.

Approaching a Future Crisis

1. Gather as much information as possible on all external factors that could shape your organization's reputation: i.e., critics, policy changes, and public concerns.
2. Create a large list of each aspect that could go wrong, using the most relevant **drivers of reputation** risks as a guide:
 - **Operations/Consumer** – product or machine recall/fault; data breach; supplier issue; provider issue; public responsiveness.
 - **Cultural** – differences in ethical expectations.
 - **Political/Legal** – regulatory change; legal action; inquiry; political opposition.
 - **Executive** – illegal behavior; unethical behavior; poor governance; personal life.
 - **Environment** – natural disaster; terrorist attack; third party data breach; physical attack.
3. Develop scenarios.
4. Create mini communications plan for each risk.
5. Incorporate templates where appropriate.



Example of Good Crisis Management: Bay County in 2018 During Hurricane Michael

- As Hurricane Michael disrupted hundreds of thousands of lives, washed out roads, blew down buildings and knocked several counties off the electrical and communications grid, election workers in Florida were ready – having multiple plans in place, “so that everyone has a chance to vote and be counted.”
- Staffers made themselves available to voters and the media to talk through all of the plans and options available to ensure that an election could occur.
- The staff was transparent about the issues and made it clear that they had prepared for every possible scenario.

Example of Poor Crisis Management: United Airlines Forces Off a Passenger

- In 2017, United Airlines security dragged a passenger off a plane after he refused to give up his seat. Afterward, information leaked that United was claiming the occupied seats for airline staff.
- When videos of staff dragging the bloody passenger emerged, United’s leadership responded dismissively, neither calling out their employees’ actions nor claiming corporate responsibility.
- Although company policy justified claiming passenger’s seats for crew, public opinion went negative and United’s stock price tanked.
- United recovered, but their poor crisis response unnecessarily hurt their public image and brand.

Remember:

- Deal in facts.
- Keep scenarios broad.
- Remember who is receiving the plan on your team.
- Support messaging with credible proof.
- Make voices/players as realistic as possible.
- Make tactics as specific as possible.



What Makes News?

Using the right messaging.

- Identify the overarching key message (one point) you want to communicate.
- Pinpoint your organization's objective when crafting a message, whether it is to persuade, inform, reassure, etc. This drives your approach.
- Understand the motivations and sentiment of your target audience.
- Frame your message in the context of the receiver.
- How you convey a message (format, style, tone) can make as big a difference as what (facts and details) you communicate.
- Support all arguments with proof – your word alone is not enough.

Finding the right spokesperson to deliver your messages.

- It is crucial to choose a spokesperson who is credible, trustworthy, and informed. Public agencies and offices designate specific individuals to communicate with the press, especially for press conferences.
- Certain stories may benefit from a different spokesperson, especially if you privately deliver it to journalists for publication.

What is *newsworthy* and not only new?

- While some stories have inherent newsworthiness and deserve media attention, others are just new and less important. Newsworthy stories serve a public need and should not fade away immediately after release.

Examples:

Newsworthy: your state legislature expands absentee ballot access.

Just new: a ninety-three-year-old town resident has never missed an election.



Finding the Right Journalist

Find reporters with a relevant focus and make connections.

- It is critical to choose outlets that will be particularly receptive to the story you are pitching. Select outlets with large enough audiences to ensure your message reaches as many people as possible while best fitting its subject matter.
- Pick journalists who have previously written about your topic or whose specialty aligns with your story. Fit matters most. It will ensure that someone who understands your story can communicate it to the public most effectively.
- Building connections with reporters offers a major benefit for pitching future stories. Professional relationships provide a familiarity and trust that make the process more efficient and mutually fruitful. When new stories emerge, you will have an immediate go-to contact. Now is the best time to begin making connections.

Focus not on one type of media, but a mix, when available.

- Engaging with numerous traditional media sources (Ex: television, print, and radio) will enable your message to reach the widest possible audience.
- While your key overarching point(s) should remain constant, how you deliver the message should shift based on each medium's format and parameters. Use these differences to your advantage.

Consider multilingual outlets.

- Publishing articles or holding interviews in multiple languages allows you to best inform the public in all its diversity. While your state, city, or locality's unique composition will justify outreach in certain languages over others, consider as many audiences as possible.



Rules for Engaging with the Media

After you identify the right journalist to pitch your newsworthy story to, you must interact with them according to professional industry expectations and procedures.

You may have heard the terms **“on-the-record”** and **“off-the-record”** before. It is important to know the difference:

- **“On-the-record”** refers to information or conversations journalists can include in their articles.
- **“Off-the-record”** describes information or conversations which you do not permit journalists to feature in their articles.

Furthermore, **“on-background”** may also sound familiar to you.

- While reporters can mention **“on-background”** information in their work, they cannot quote or cite you as their source. Typically, information sourced through on-background conversations get verified through another source.

Understanding these distinctions will help prepare you for productive conversations and working relationships with journalists. Nevertheless, it benefits you to take responsibility by suggesting parameters with journalists ahead of time. If you forget to specify beforehand, then journalists do not have to abide by your request. With preparation and clear intentions, you can ensure your interactions proceed as expected.

Importance of Consistent Branding and Messaging

Creative collateral:

- This refers to any deliverable materials – physical or digital – that mention or advertise your organization/office. These include press releases with letterheads, postcards to voters, official website content, and many others.
- Successful PR efforts should invest in different creative collateral to establish branding and grow your reputation. Which options you emphasize will depend on your aims and resources. Nonetheless, they each represent important tools in your toolkit.

Using homogenous themes in branding and messaging – colors, fonts, logos, etc.

- All visual elements should reflect a uniform look, scheme, and style applicable to any medium or platform. These shape your image as much as message sentiment does. Implement design choices consistently and across-the-board.
- Streamline your logo so it can seamlessly appear on physical materials and online platforms.

Example: Graphics from Help America Vote Day recruitment toolkit (on EAC website)



Tailoring Messages to Your Community

While implementing consistent branding and messaging will ensure you reflect effective national practices, you can maximize the effectiveness of your messages by targeting them toward your unique community.

Example: Help America Vote Day 2022

On HAVA Day (August 16), election offices across America circulated EAC talking points, website addresses, and social media graphics. However, they also tailored this content to their audience, therefore localizing national events to highlight their direct impacts.

Overall, you can generate a greater impact by pushing homogenous messages out onto social media while molding it to fit your community's needs.

- Ex: Philadelphia City Commissioners and the Los Angeles Registrar used EAC's graphics from the previous page as inspiration for their own localized versions.



Exploring Avenues Beyond Traditional Media for PR and Marketing

- While traditional media (print, radio, television) forms the backbone of public relations, your office can further position and amplify its messages by utilizing new media.
- New media tools such as social networks and website advertisements enable focused audience outreach or targeting.
- Diversifying your online presence can not only reach new people with unique content, but also broaden your offline content's potential audience.
- Beyond new (digital) media, additional avenues can include creative offline events or initiatives.

Example: EAC Clearinghouse (“Clearie”) Awards

- Every year, the U.S. EAC gives awards for exemplar electoral practices and high-performing election officials.
- The 2021 Clearie Award categories included Outstanding Innovations in Elections, Improving Accessibility for Voters with Disabilities, and Outstanding Use of HAVA Grants in Election Modernization, among others.
- This initiative enables EAC to engage with citizens and electoral stakeholders across America.

Example: “I Voted” Sticker Design Contest

- In New York state, Ulster County's election commission sponsors a yearly contest soliciting “I voted” sticker designs from residents.
- Initiatives such as this can promote an office's image by giving people across age ranges a reason to get involved.

Running Events

Events provide great opportunities to engage with the public and media, whether they take place online or in-person. Consider these tips to make your event a successful one.

Online events:

- Send invitations/advisories to journalists through email, phone, and/or various digital platforms, and deliver reminders ahead of the event.
- Stream from a room where no-one will disturb you.



- Make sure your surroundings and on-screen background look professional.
- Wear clothes that will not distract from your message, discussion, or presentation.
- Double or triple-check your cameras and microphones before speaking or accepting attendees.
- Keep your camera on so guests will do so in turn (and remember: if your camera is on, everyone can see you, so act professionally).
- Select a specific team member to monitor and let in attendees from the digital waiting room.
- Designate someone to assist guests or your team with any technical issues (this can range from difficulties seeing or hearing participants to ensuring your call does not run over time), control attendee capabilities during question and answer (Q&A) sessions, and distribute web links, when appropriate.
- When taking questions or talking with attendees, wait a second before responding to prevent speaking over one another due to time delays.
- Maintain an attendance sheet or distribute a survey to gather attendees' feedback and/or collect email addresses for future event invitations.

In-person events:

- Send media advisories to reporters/attendee invites before the event and deliver email or phone call reminders as well.
- Pre-assemble any written or digital materials reporters may need, including press kits, advisories, or speaking scripts, and send them out at a proper time.
- Ensure the presentation area contains sufficient seating, standing room, and accessibility measures, along with a sound and video system, if necessary.
- Establish plans to record video or audio from the event, if possible.
- Specify each team member's physical event posting and duties.
- Organize potential location tours for journalists.
- Develop a precise yet flexible schedule to guide the event's proceedings.
- Set aside time to take and answer questions. Your team may benefit from mapping out answers before the event, particularly if you anticipate tough questions may arise.



How to Use Data

- Data and statistics offer a compelling tool to generate substantive media coverage in today's landscape.
- Reports, surveys, and studies exemplify the types of sources you can pull from when crafting public relations content.
- Given public electoral data's abundance, where you obtain and how you highlight this information will determine your effectiveness in meeting your goals.

Example: Rutgers-EAC Accessibility Study

- In July 2022, EAC continued its partnership with Rutgers University to study some of the challenges and solutions that handicap able, eligible voters faced during the 2020 Election.
- Through written pitches to journalists, one-page documents ("one-pagers") and social media posts, among other content, our communications/PR team highlighted key data points to draw attention and readers to the study.
 - EAC's pitch documents converted statistics into high-level takeaways such as *"people with disabilities are less likely than those without disabilities to use computers or related devices and less likely to have access to a printer."*
 - We accompanied text-based social media posts with graphics detailing the EAC-Rutgers study's findings. Ex: *"Only 86% of people with disabilities use some form of computing device, compared to 95% of people without disabilities. Broken down by device, this substantial disability gap exists for desktop computers, laptop or notebook computers, smartphones, and wearable internet-connected devices."*
- Always select data points with your audience in mind. When chosen purposefully, statistics can uplift your content and persuasiveness.

Budgeting

- Any useful PR budget should allocate funds for traditional and new media tools. However, the precise mix will depend on your office's funds, size, responsibilities, and objectives.
- Since the most popular social networking platforms are free to use, your team can run successful PR operations without purchasing advanced digital media programs. If you wish to pursue more ambitious initiatives or boost important stories, then in-website purchases can broaden your capabilities for a price.
- Your team is the most valuable PR resource worth budgeting. No matter how much one spends on media tools, smart and reliable colleagues make the difference between success and failure.



Conclusion and Takeaways

What to Remember:

- Skillful PR makes the difference between successfully and unsuccessfully informing citizens.
- Use plain language and keep it consistent.
- Planning is key – engage proactively and not reactively.
- Aim to prevent crises, yet also plan for every scenario.
- Identify newsworthy stories, use the right messaging, and select the right spokesperson.
- Find the best fitting journalists and outlets.
- Establish terms of discussion before talking with a journalist.
- Ensure consistent branding and messaging.
- Localize and tailor national messages to your community.
- Incorporate digital media into your work.
- Thoroughly prepare for and stay attentive during events.
- Purposely select data with your audience in mind.
- Craft a PR budget that reflects your capabilities and objectives.

You know your team, its risk tolerance, and limits best – keep them in mind when using this content in your work.



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