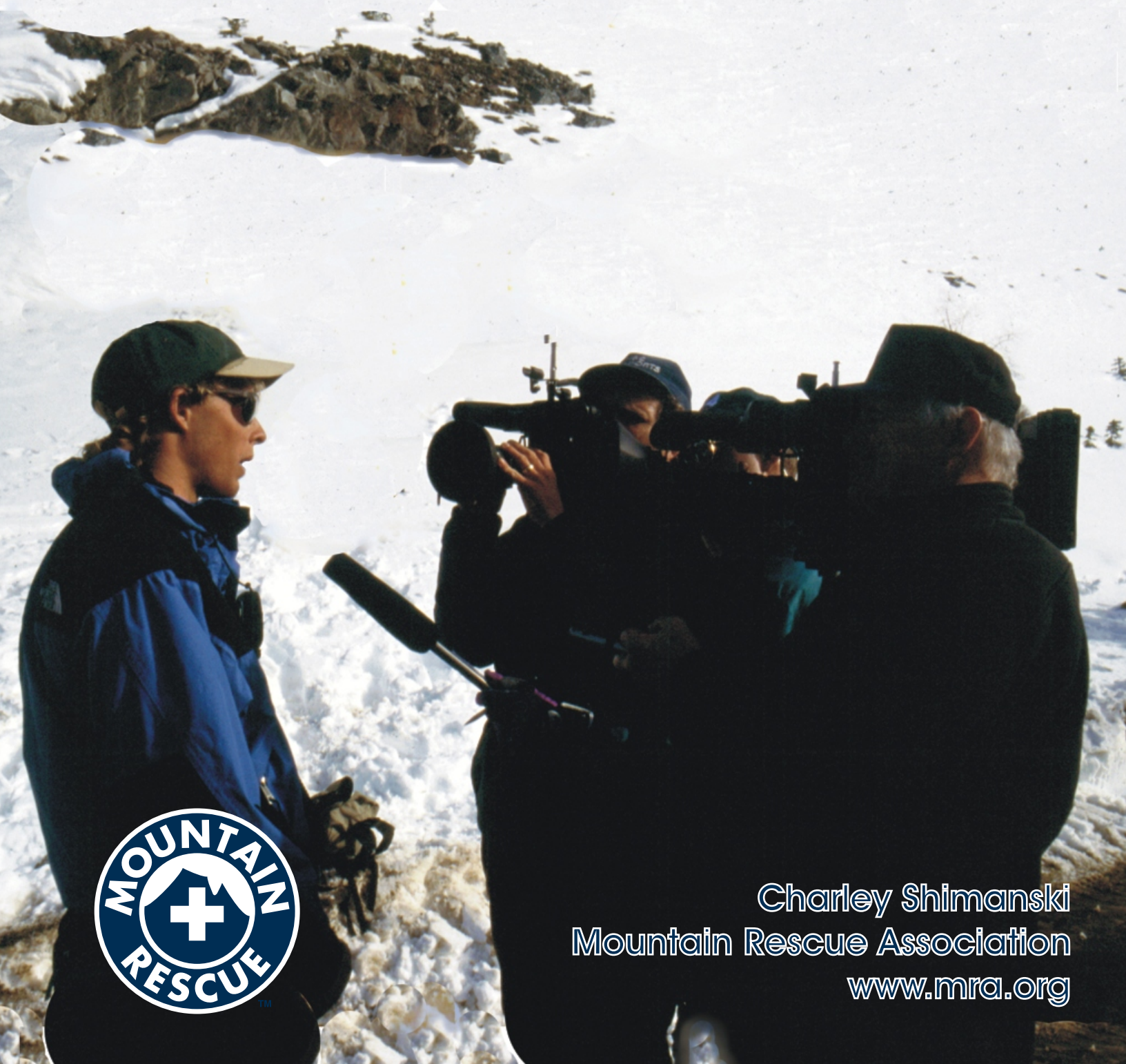


Working with the Media in Search and Rescue



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COVER PHOTO: A rescuer responds to media inquiries after a fatal avalanche accident. Photo by Charley Shimanski

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Objective

The Mountain Rescue Association (MRA), a volunteer organization dedicated to saving lives through rescue and mountain safety education, has developed this program to assist search and rescue (SAR) organizations in their media relations.

This material is designed for search and rescue professionals and/or organizations that frequently deal with the media. This program should be of greatest value to the rescuer with many years of experience, as these SAR professionals make the most qualified media specialists.

At the conclusion of this program, readers should be able to:

- Understand the role and qualifications of a Public Information Officer;
- Identify several key ways to communicate information to the media, and,
- Understand essential elements of media relations during an incident.

About the Author

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The author of several of the Mountain Rescue Association's training manuals, Charley has consulted rescuers, mountain guides and climbers throughout the world, from Israel to China, from Kilimanjaro to Aconcagua.

As a primary spokesperson for numerous rescue- and mountain-related organizations, Charley has appeared on *NBC Nightly News*, *CBS This Morning*, *CNN*, *Discovery Channel*, and *History Channel*. He has been quoted in print media including *People* magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, *Men's Journal*, and *Good Housekeeping* and in many newspapers including *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

Introduction

As more and more backcountry recreationalists find themselves in need of search and rescue, there exists a growing need for the search and rescue organizations themselves to learn how to be responsible and effective in dealing with the media.

Most emergency services organizations have identified one or more individuals within their organizations who assume the responsibility of communicating with the media, and representing the organization in that manner.

Media relations are essential in search and rescue operations. Developing strong relationships with representatives of the media is often the job of the “Public Information Officer (PIO),” and for this reason, much of this training is focused on the role of the PIO.

Part 1 – General Overview of Working with the Media

The News Media – An ever-changing Playing Field

The world of local, national, and international media has an ever-expanding number of players, both online and on the networks. The number of specialized media is also increasing. The news is now 24/7, and as a result, Search and Rescue (SAR) teams must be prepared to respond to this growing need for information.

The use of communications satellites and other emerging media technology means

that a local story can become global in a minute. Live interviews held outside a satellite truck can appear on the national network news in a matter of seconds.

In some venues, there is a constant blending of news, commentaries, and entertainment. This may explain why news media sources are so quick to respond to rescue emergencies. While they may not be the most newsworthy events of the day, these rescues make for interesting news, particularly if there are good visual images to present.

What is a Public Information Officer?

A Public Information Officer (“PIO”) is a representative of an official organization. This person serves as a central source of information for release by the department and responds to requests for information by the news media and the community`



A Public Information Officer serves as a central source of information.

Photo: Stowe Mountain Rescue

In search and rescue operations, the PIO might be a representative of any number of organizations, including:

1. The local law enforcement entity (frequently the county sheriff or state police);

2. The local search and rescue organization; or,
3. The regional or state search and rescue organization.

In any SAR incident, the PIO serves a number of important roles¹:

1. Assisting news personnel in covering incidents;
2. Assisting the news media on an on-call basis;
3. Preparing and distributing news releases;
4. Arranging for, and assisting at, news conferences;
5. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information about victims and incidents;
6. Assisting in crisis situations within the agency
7. Coordinating the release of authorized information concerning agency operations

As you can see from the list above, the primary purpose of the PIO is to provide a central source of information to the media. At the same time, the PIO serves another equally important role of keeping others in positions of authority and leadership from having to deal with the media while performing their duties.

It is the role of the PIO to answer the most common questions, those of “who, what, when, where, why, how, how come?” The PIO then goes on to describe what the various agencies are doing about the situation.

Because sharing information with the media can be a difficult job, SAR organizations should be certain to provide necessary and appropriate training for all individuals that might serve in the capacity of PIO.

Why is a PIO Important?

The public demands, and indeed deserves, to be made aware of the circumstances and events associated with a SAR incident. This is best accomplished through the media, which has direct and often immediate access to the public.

Furthermore, proper public information at a SAR incident will enable the SAR authority to provide preventive SAR education to the public.

Over the years, some SAR organizations have tried to avoid dealing with the media. Some have been known to say, “The media NEVER gets it right.” In fact, by avoiding the media, a SAR entity can rest assured that the media will not get it right. Only by dealing directly with the media can we assure that the story is as close to accurate as possible.



**A good Public Information Officer has great respect for the media.
Photo: Charley Shimanski**

Needless to say, any member of a SAR team who has little or not respect for the media should not be used as a PIO.

Who Makes a Good PIO?

First and foremost, a PIO needs to be very knowledgeable in the field of SAR operations. For this reason, PIO's should be chosen from among the veterans of a SAR organization. Some people are natural teachers, and the role of PIO is somewhat a teaching role. Still, the best teachers are those who are very well trained in the topic.

In addition to experience, a PIO needs to have the proper balance of humility and self-confidence. When the media or public see an egocentric rescuer in front of the camera, then the focus becomes the PIO and his/her agency, not the message.

A good PIO has great respect for the media. Power comes through knowledge – knowledge that is shared, not knowledge that is kept. The more respect a PIO has for the media, the better s/he will be at communicating the important messages to them.

When choosing a PIO, any organization should ask who it wants to be the spokesperson for the group. Often, the most well respected individuals in the organization will be good candidates for PIO. This is because the respect those individuals have gained over time is most often based on the combination of their personality, knowledge and expertise.

Purposefully choose your PIO. Take your time, and choose someone who is polished, professional, humble, and knowledgeable.

General Guidelines

It is true that “bad news travels faster than good news.” Since most SAR incidents involve some bad news for the victims, the media is often quick to respond to our calls.

While a SAR team's PIO should be prepared at any time to respond to media calls regarding an incident, an experienced PIO will know the moment a SAR call is dispatched whether it will attract media attention.

There is no such thing as a “media circus.” The media professionals are there to do their job, and it becomes the PIO's responsibility/opportunity to help them do their job. A PIO should maintain an attitude of helpfulness at all times. His/her perspective should always be, “I'm here to help you, and to make sure I get you the information I have.”

Some level of excitement and adrenaline should always be present, so the PIO maintains focus. A lazy or disinterested PIO makes a bad PIO.

Some Myths and Legends

While most media professionals are just that – professional – they can also be prone to mistakes... just like us. For that reason, it helps to consider some myths about the media:

1. What they report is 100% accurate;
2. What they report has absolutely no bias attached to it;
3. What they report is the most important news;
4. They are more honest than the rest of society;
5. They want to report only the facts; and,
6. Any comment made “off the record” will remain off the record.

Once you understand that these are truly myths, you will be on the road to becoming an effective PIO.

Part 2 - Means of Communications

There are a number of ways that PIO's can communicate with the media. These include:

1. On scene interviews;
2. Press releases;
3. Press conferences;
4. Periodic updates;
5. Media Fact Sheets; and,
6. Staged media events.

Each of these distinctly different methods of communicating with the media is detailed below.

On-Scene Interviews

Typically, a SAR team's PIO will be interviewed at the Command Post of a SAR incident. This is the most common means of communicating with the media, as the media will often respond to the scene. For those media professionals that cannot make it to the scene of the incident, many will telephone the team's PIO for further information.

If you are doing a live interview with television personalities on the anchor desk, be prepared to be given an earpiece. Prior to going on the air, make sure you know who is talking to you in your earpiece. If you do not know, ask "Who am I hearing in my earpiece?"

Any time you do a live interview next to an on-camera reporter with a microphone, stay perfectly still until the interviewer leaves the frame. Often, the interviewer will "throw" the story back to the anchor desk, and while you think the interview is completed, the anchor is often asking a follow-up question of the interviewer.

There are a number of key things a PIO should consider when doing an interview. They include:

Dress appropriately

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. A SAR professional serving as a PIO should dress the part. While professional business attire could be used, the more appropriate attire might be the team's SAR uniform or something with an equally "official" look.

Wear one or more identifiers

Along with the SAR "uniform," PIO's should wear any other identifier. This may include a PIO vest, or a special hat.



This National Park Service rescuer put on his NPS uniform for a press briefing following his participation in a rescue of several climbers high on Mt. Rainier - even though he'd performed the rescue in winter climbing clothing. Photo: NBC Nightly News

Ask yourself, “Am I the right person to be doing this interview?”

Who should be giving the news that is needed? If the news is that a lost person has been found, then the SAR PIO might be the right person for the job. If the news is about the numerous agencies that are participating in a large-scale rescue effort (e.g. plane crash), then the best spokesperson might be the head of the law enforcement group (e.g. County Sheriff).

Predetermine the questions and theme

As a PIO, you are within your rights to ask the interviewer a few questions about the interview before it occurs. For example:

- “What would you like to ask me?”
- “What is it that you want to write?”

Identify yourself, spell your name

When the interview begins, be sure to identify yourself, your title, and whom you represent. Be sure to spell your first and last names

“Keep it Simple Stupid”

When it comes to media questions, the best answer to is a simple answer. There is no need for complicated responses. If there has been an avalanche, you are best to describe where it was, and when it happened. Unless asked, don’t bother to explain snow science, and how “the lubricating layer was probably faceted crystals from the storm events of three weeks ago,” except perhaps in the follow up stories the next day when the media are looking for more in-depth material.

Speak in complete sentences

When it comes to taped television and/or radio interviews, remember to speak in

complete sentences. Avoid “yes” or “no” responses.

Look at the Interviewer, NOT the Camera

Unless you are making an appeal directly to the public (e.g. “We need YOUR help in solving this issue.”) it is best that you look at the interviewer, and NOT directly into the camera.



It is best that you look at the interviewer, and NOT directly into the camera. Photo: Denver WB2 NEWS,

Try to repeat the question in the answer to that question

Keep in mind that if you are doing a taped interview, the person asking the question is normally “off camera.” This means that the question will not be used in the story. If you are asked “What is the lost person wearing?” you should not answer by saying “blue jeans and a red T-shirt with black stripes.” Instead, respond to that same question by saying “Our lost subject is wearing blue jeans and a red T-shirt with black stripes.”

Have a message, and be prepared to deliver it

Media interviews provide more than an opportunity to answer the questions of the

media. They also provide a SAR team with the opportunity to communicate a message. If the incident is a search for a lost hiker, then the message might be all about having the ten essentials and/or what to do if you become lost. If the incident is a rescue of an avalanche victim, then the message might be about never traveling in the backcountry without an avalanche transceiver, probe pole and shovel.

Be enthusiastic – it makes you believable

Never let anyone know you're having a bad day. Love your job, and let it show. Still, don't look too happy if the news you are reporting is that an accident victim was killed in the accident.

An effective PIO has only one job – PIO

A rescuer who just came out of the field on a rescue could make a good interview, but is often a lousy PIO. A PIO should be restricted to that job only. This will increase your PIO's effectiveness, and provide ample time for him or her to perform the research that is necessary for the job.

Have your "PIO kit" in the vehicle

A good PIO is prepared at all times for the next incident. For this reason, PIO's should prepare a "PIO Kit." Your PIO kit should include

1. Your media contact information;
2. The clothes you normally wear for interviews;
3. A notepad or two;
4. Any Media Fact Sheets that your organization has developed; and,
5. A toothbrush, comb, etc.

Speak at an average 8th grade level

In order to reach the broadest audience possible, you should speak at an 8th grade

level. Avoid using big words, or complicated phrases. Also avoid using acronyms, as they are not all universally known. If a lost person activated a PLB, then call it a "Personal Locator Beacon," not a PLB.

Established PIO's establish concrete relationships of trust

Whether by building relationships over many years, or many missions, a good PIO will establish strong working relationships with the media.

At the same time, a PIO should remember that while the media can be friendly to you, they are not your friends.

Be prepared for "Is there anything I did not ask you?"

A good interviewer will finish the interview by asking, "Is there anything I did not ask you?" or, "Is there anything you'd like to add?" At this time, ask yourself whether you have yet delivered the message you wanted to deliver.

Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know"

One of the wisest things a PIO can say is "I don't know the answer to that, but I'll get the information and let you know" or, "I don't have any information on that right now."

Some other pointers about interviews include:

1. If you are concerned about the topic of the interview, you can ask for written questions in advance;
2. You can also ask an interviewer to revise or re-ask the question. Finally, call them on it if they ask a leading question; and,
3. Feel free to walk away – you are in control.

Written Press Releases

On some occasions, a SAR team will choose to communicate with the media by sending out a press release. Some of the essential elements of a press release are listed below:

1 – Template

If you send out press releases often, then consider developing a basic template in your word processor. Include the basic important information on the template itself, which will save you time and effort with each subsequent release.

2 – Date Line

The “dateline” indicates when the Press Release was created, and on which date the information can be released, e.g. “For immediate release, April 19, 2004”

3 – Headline

A headline draws attention to the press release, and makes the nature of the release very clear.

4 – Contact Person and title

Listing the person of authority who is the contact person keeps the media from shopping for someone to talk to. Make sure this is the person with the most information, and the authority to share that information. Have a system in place so people know how to get in touch with that PIO (this may or may not be a cell phone).

5 – Lead-in

Don’t bury the lead – lead with it. Put the most important news and information right up front.

6 – Body

Try to answer all the important elements within the release... who, what, where, when, how, and how come? If possible,

include any information on prevention of similar incidents here as well.

7 – Conclusion

Offer a conclusion, and tell about where further information will come from, or how the public can seek further information if they want it (e.g. your agency’s web site).

8 – Other Agency contacts

Here you can list contact information for any other agencies that were involved in the incident. This can include law enforcement officials, other SAR teams, etc.



An effective press release includes a number of essential elements.

Distributing Press Releases

You should have and frequently update a media list of faxes and email addresses so you can broadly distribute your Press Releases. Press releases help to build a relationship between the PIO and the media – and you can use them to call in a “marker” on that later (I need 6 column inches on “What to do if you get lost?”)

Immediate Action Press Releases

You might choose to send out an Immediate Action Press Release for a number of reasons, including

1. Someone criticizes your rescue effort;
2. A rescuer is injured or killed during a training or rescue effort;

These press releases differ from ordinary press releases because you are providing information to educate the public on an issue that required your immediate action. You are answering the question “What are you doing about it?” In this case, you are attempting to put yourself out there in front of the media, and show that you are proactive.

Be the first with the good and bad news. This will help with your credibility. If you keep it secret, then it gains a life of its own. Honesty is the best policy.

Confirm the action immediately – yes there was this incident, and here’s what we’re doing about it. Confirm who, what, when, where, how.

Press Conferences

Another form of communication is the Press Conference. This can take place at the incident itself, or can take place in the days following a SAR incident.

How big an event do you need to have a press conference? What’s your level of standard to determine this? If you want something out quickly, a Press Conference may be one way to accomplish this.

Organizing the media is not like herding kittens. If you are involved in a crisis, you know the media will be hounding you anyways, so why not plan a press conference and bring them all together at one time? That way you can collect them in one place, and keep them from searching for answers elsewhere.

A press conference will ultimately minimize your effort, as you get everyone together at the same time. Tell them all the same

information at one time, and you’ll save yourself a lot of time.

1 – Plan it for a time when you know the media will come

Most TV stations spend the first hour of their day planning the stories they will cover. Make sure they know about your press conference early, but don’t start so early that they cannot attend.

Some might call and say they cannot make it, but want to come 30 minutes earlier. In this case, they are trying to get the story ahead of everyone else.

2 – Decide on the frequency

If your press conferences are taking place DURING an extended incident response, then increase the frequency depending on the urgency of the story.

3 – Choose a strategic location

In the case of a larger SAR operation, choose a location that will not disrupt the operation itself. Prepare for satellite trucks, which need lots of room. Choose a place that is comfortable for you, but also allows them to get information.

WHERE you do your press conference can have a lot to do with how it is handled. If you are having a press conference AFTER a search, and you hope to explain why SAR workers generally do not charge for their rescues, then have the conference at a place where you can reinforce that the rescuers are all volunteers – in front of the rescue headquarters, in front of the rescue truck, etc.

4 – Who will speak?

Choose who will do the speaking; ideally a level of authority commensurate with magnitude of incident.

Have only one person do the talking in each interview so that the answers are consistent.

Assign responsibilities. If an avalanche closed the highway, then the State Department of Transportation might be there to speak about why road is closed, while the representative of the SAR team will describe what the SAR response is.

5 – What will they speak about?

Create an outline, and have the facts right there in front of you. Make a list.

6 – Design an escape route

If the press conference deals with any sensitive issues, then choose a “back door” through which the representatives can retreat to privacy. When you leave the room, walk through the back doors, rather than through the media and into the hallway where they could follow you.

7 – Room setup

YOU set up the room, to physically define boundaries. For example, do you want to put tables in front, podium behind tables, cameras in front, and people behind that?

8 – Visual displays

If you have them, use them. Images of lost subjects, maps of the search area (including locations of SAR teams), and diagrams of the avalanche area – all can provide interesting visuals for their cameras.

9 – Rules are fair game

By establishing rules up front, you will establish and reinforce who’s in charge.

For example:

1. We’ll start at 3:00 p.m. sharp
2. We will/will not take questions,
3. You can/cannot interview rescuers
4. You must submit questions in writing (will piss them off)

10 – Have an assistant

For a larger incident, a PIO should have an assistant or “coach.” This is someone who is with you; who reminds you to do certain things (e.g. “Stop chewing gum,” “Go get something to eat,” “Be more happy,” “Be prepared for them to ask you about X.”)

Behind every news event, there is a person behind the PIO who makes the PIO look good.

11 – Archive information

If you can, get copies of the news and reports. This will help you determine what misinformation has been reported. Don’t be afraid to take a video of the press conference yourself.

12 – Wear an identifier

Wear something that shows you work for the organization – name tag, emblem, uniform, hat (although hats can leave a shadow on the eyes – if you can wear something else, wear it.)

13 – Test the sound and lights beforehand

You do not want to be the reason for a delay in a press conference. Test out your systems well in advance.

14 – Start on time

ALWAYS start on time. Again, this establishes your credibility and that you are in charge.

15 – Opening a press conference

Listed below are a number of essential things to consider when holding the press conference.

Leave your cell phone elsewhere, or turn it off.

There is nothing more distracting – to both you AND the media – than a cell phone

going off in the middle of a Press Conference.

Open with a “Thank you”

Open the press conference by thanking people for coming.

Acknowledge agencies involved

If there are several people/agencies in front of the cameras, then be sure to identify each of them by name and title. State their names clearly and SPELL THEM. Announce at that time if they will take questions afterwards.

Lead with an introduction

Start by telling the participants what will happen at the conference - the reason for the conference, and what will be discussed. “I am here to talk about the following things pertaining to the incident.” This sets a purpose for the press conference, and establishes boundaries about what will be discussed.

You should begin a press conference by reading a prepared statement. This statement will reinforce what the topic is, and what will be discussed. Answer the questions of who, what, where, when, why, how, how come? The same information from your initial press release should be read from a written statement at the outset of the press conference. Hand out copies of that written statement as well, but not until the press conference is over. Post it in a web site as well, but as an adobe acrobat file so nobody can alter it.

Provide and explain visuals

Press conferences do not need to be limited to “talking heads.” Be creative and use visuals if necessary. Describe what materials you have. Make sure you have copies of those materials for the media.

Close with boundaries

“I will take questions for the next 10 minutes.” This tells people they need to be judicious when choosing their questions. Look at your watch as you say, “I’ll take questions for the next ten minutes.” As soon as the time is up, end the conference. Ignore the questions they then continue to ask you. Leave by the “escape route” at that time.

Let them know when the next conference or information release will be.

This gives you greater control, and reduces the chance that they will go hunting for other information.

Create an email list of those present.

This enables you to provide updates and closure. Make sure you have continual contact, and keep that list for future reference. If you use email to send something out, save ALL emails so you have a record of what you said.

16 - End the press conference when YOU want to

Keep in mind that YOU can end the press conference when YOU are ready to end it.

17 - Debrief with all participants after each press conference

Finally, you should debrief with all the agencies that participated in the Press Conference. Compare notes on what you said and correct each other if something wrong was said.

Periodic Updates

For SAR incidents that extend for several days, a PIO might choose to send periodic updates to the media that have responded to the incident in the earlier days.

Think about What Will Be In the Background

If you schedule periodic updates, consider what will be in the background of your interview... perhaps your command center or rescue truck.



Consider what is in the background of your press update. Photo: Fox31 News, Denver

Media Fact Sheets

Finally, a SAR team might have proactively created “Media Fact Sheets” well in advance of an incident. These can include background information on topics pertaining to frequent SAR calls. For example, a SAR team that frequently responds to backcountry avalanches might have a fact sheet that describes such things as:

1. Why and how avalanches occur;
2. How many people are killed each year in avalanches;
3. How to avoid avalanches; and,
4. How to survive avalanches;

Staged Media Events

Don't be afraid to proactively invite the media to a team training. This is great P.R. and can help with future efforts, including fund raising and/or new member solicitation

Part 3 – Additional PIO Essentials

“Off the Record”

There is no such thing as “off the record.” If you truly want to be off the record, then don’t say it.

There are exceptions, however. For example, one reason to go “off the record” is to keep a reporter from following a story that is not there. If a reporter inquires about something that has no basis in fact, then let him/her know that.

Friends and Family

Occasionally, friends and family members of search and rescue subjects will show up at the Command Post. While it can be important that these persons are allowed access to the rescue leadership, that communication should be left to the Sheriff’s office “victim’s advocate,” or the rescue leadership. It is not the job of the PIO to take calls from friends and family.

Still, it is not out of the question for the PIO to spend time with friends or family in order to communicate on their behalf anything they might want communicated to the media and/or public.

At the Command Post

The PIO should take an active role in helping to establish different staging areas at the Command Post. For example, the rescue teams should have the rescuer staging and “rest area” placed out of the line of sight of cameras. Even if rescuers are resting after a 36-hour assignment, images of rescuers lying on the ground sleeping can give the wrong impression.

It is hard to plan when there is chaos all around you. Once at the Command Post, there may be chaos. For this reason, the PIO should stage the media somewhat away from the Command Post, but still within range so that the media can capture images of the Command Post and the activities around it. In addition, press conferences should be held away from the Command Post.

High-Profile Incidents

For high visibility SAR incidents, you should choose someone who can speak for the highest level of authority – e.g. the biggest dog in the pack. This might be the sheriff, or perhaps the head of the regional or State SAR authority. In any case, it should be someone with credibility, with a title, with years of background. Make sure media understand who that person is, and why s/he is credible.

In these incidents, it is important that the PIO create a calm with the media so they know who is in charge. Establishing a well-defined media area is important. It is equally important that the PIO establish what the boundaries are. This will help the PIO establish a rapport with the media.

In these incidents, it is important that the PIO is constantly accessible. Otherwise, the media will search out, and find, the information elsewhere.

Take Care of Yourself

Finally, a PIO needs to take care of him/herself:

1. Find stress relievers
2. Wash your face, brush your teeth
3. Change clothes
4. Exercise
5. Sleep

During extended breaks on incidents that go on and on:

1. Go to a movie
2. Do something with friends
3. Have family time.

Low-Profile Incidents

In the event of low-profile incidents, choose someone who has less experience, and let him or her handle this case only. This is a great opportunity for PIO's to train others in order to develop deputy PIO's.

Mutual Needs of Your Agency and the Media

You and the media each have needs. While some needs are different, PIO's and the media do have many mutual needsⁱⁱ. They include the items listed on the following pages:

1 - Accurate information

As much as you depend on accurate information from the Incident Command team, the media depends on accurate information from you. If you give out partial or incorrect information, there will be media distrust later.

2 - Timely reporting

A good PIO will ask his/her media colleagues, "What's your timetable? What's your deadline?" One method that makes sense is to deal first with the media who are planning on live broadcasts, then taped interviews, then written newspapers and magazines.

If the news agencies are planning on live feeds, you can consider scheduling a live press conference.

3 – Identify community hazards

Use this as an opportunity to educate the public on backcountry hazards. Often you can do this proactively with a "Media Fact Sheet," as mentioned above.

4 - Updated information

Clearly, the media professionals are relying on timely information. If possible, you should establish hourly updates – and be there at the appointed times. If you are working with media who are sending reports back by satellite or microwave, be sure to ask them what their deadlines are for making the next news report.



A good PIO will make new information available as quickly as possible. Photo: KCNC News 4 Denver

A PIO should continually seek out new information to keep the media apprised of new and updated information. If there is little in the way of "new" information, then provide the media with an associated element that is new... for example, let them accompany a search team into the field for 15 minutes, so they can get images of searchers at work.

5 - Appearance of alliance

If multiple agencies are responding to an event, there may be some disagreement as to who does what and why. There must be a consensus on the plan, and it must be presented to the media as such.

6 - Closure to the incident

When an incident is over, the PIO should consider a final press release or press conference, describing how the incident ended, and adding any other pertinent information (such as the agencies involved, etc.)



Consider a final press briefing or press conference at the end of the incident. Photo: Charley Shimanski

Crisis Plan Elements

The job of the PIO is to be a central source of information for the media during a crisis or incident. Several keys to success are listed below:

Know your purpose in the crisis

Why am I here? Is this my job as PIO? Am I the right person to provide this service, or is there anybody more suitable than I to do this job.

Plan your objectives, create a task list

What do you need to do to get your objectives accomplished? Many of these things can be assembled well in advance of the incident. Typically, a PIO will need:

1. Media numbers in his/her cell phone
2. Laptop in his/her car
3. A "PIO Kit" including clothes in the car
4. A credit card
5. A task list, based on experience as a PIO

Once en route to the incident, a PIO may choose to:

1. Call the County Sheriff or law enforcement official
2. Find out which other PIO's are coming, and develop a hierarchy of who will be the spokesperson(s)
3. Start to get information to pass to media

You cannot plan for something, but you can prepare for it... A Media Fact Sheet is one example proactively of preparing for the job of PIO.

Initial procedures

Know that when you get there, you need to find out what the responsibilities are. For example, who is the Incident Commander? Who is the Logistics Officer? Where will the helicopter staging area be?

It is as much the PIO's job to dig for the information as it is to get that information out to the media.

Crisis response

Knowing what the level of response actually is in an incident includes knowing the number of people involved, and what resources are planned for. It is essential that the PIO know each and every agency involved in the response, and the total number of personnel involved.

Post crisis events

These are the things that happen after the incident that the PIO still needs to take care of. This might include follow-up on the names of the subjects, on the hospital to which they were taken, etc.

Maintenance of information

Be sure that you have a plan to consistently keep the information flowing. From the onset of an incident to the conclusion, the PIO must constantly be providing information.

Part 4 - When an Incident Occurs - Key Action Elements

When any incident requiring a SAR response occurs, the PIO machine needs to get cranked up. At this time, the following must occur.

1 – Designate a Crisis Center/Command Post and activate it

The Incident Commander will designate a location for the Command Center. The PIO should respond to that Command Center at first, and quickly determine a location to stage the media.

2 – Designate a spokesperson

At the same time, the Incident Commander will designate a PIO for the incident. It is essential that this occur early in the response to the incident.



The Incident Commander should assign a Public Information Officer very early in the response to the incident. Photo courtesy Bill Barwick.

3 – Develop an “Incident Fact Sheet” and history

People will ask questions about this, so answer them in advance. Give them everything you can on this type of incident

4 – Contact and confirm key team players

Who are they? Identify them well in advance of the incident, and have that list available (Sheriff, EMS head, SAR team, etc.)

5 – Confirm Communications Strategy

How will you get the information out, and whom will you send it to? Group them by categories: TV, radio, print media etc.

For your Media Fact Sheet information, post it permanently on your web page, and direct media to that web page.

6 - Open the Media Center

For smaller events, the media center may be as simple as the PIO’s personal vehicle.

For larger incidents, a full-fledged Media Center may be necessary. In that case, the PIO may want to have a laptop, scanner, printer, etc. – and an Information Technology person available to handle this, if possible. If you open it, they will come.

7 - Set team/group media guidelines

Get your media group ready. This would include representatives of the various SAR agencies, as well as the law enforcement official.

1. Identify key persons to work with the media (including representatives and assistants);
2. Define and agree on boundaries;
3. Define a briefing schedule (get the media team together prior to the press conference);

4. Review and agree on the interview policy – that may mean always having a minimum of two people to be interviewed;
5. Compile background facts and histories on interview participants – give them a biography on the talking heads that are at the interview;
6. Determine safety and security issues – do not do this near the public;
7. Determine if a casualty policy is needed. While this is usually not a SAR issue, since we usually have only one or two deceased. The ICS program defines mass casualty. If you need a mass casualty policy, figure this out before press conference so you can tell media where people can find information about family members; and,
8. Follow the guidelines you have set to build team trust – do not deviate from your plan.

8 - Anticipate media questions

This way, you will have the answers. You can answer them in advance.

9 – Notify your key audience

Send out a release that you're going to have a press conference.

10 – Brief officials, VIP's, PIO's and staff

County Sheriff, EMS, other agencies involved, everyone who might have a say in this. They need to know.

11 – Conduct site tours

Let media get to the site, if possible. If you need some “news” take them around and let them film some things, such as

1. A search team going into the field (let them follow for 15 minutes);
2. The helibase; and/or,
3. The swiftwater dive team as they prepare to go into the water.

In some circumstances, you will want to send a limited number of media to the location. In these cases, create a media pool – including one pool photographer, one videographer with a unilateral camera.

12 – Coordinate media pool tours/reports

Make sure the media understands that they are part of a pool, and will be held responsible for their actions.

13 – Review and document crisis coverage

Critique your work with the media, make sure you did it right. Get copies of photos, and videos. For this, you may need to get a “Clip Service” that will perform this function for you – albeit at a cost.

PIO's Responsibility

The PIO's responsibilities need to be defined by the agencies involved.

1 – Define the agencies involved

First, the PIO should clearly define what agencies will be involved in the event.

2 – Define roles and responsibilities

Learn in advance what the roles of the agencies are (e.g. fire dept., EMS services, neighboring SAR teams, etc.). Build a consortium of others who can help you out in your job.

3 – Understand each others' policies

Knowing this will help you know how to describe the agencies involved. For example, during a swiftwater rescue or recovery effort, ground SAR professionals will normally work on the banks of the river

while the swiftwater rescue team will work in the water itself.

4 – Unified press release or individual press release

In any incident with multiple agencies, you will probably want a unified press release, rather than a series of releases from each agency.

5 – Play by the rules defined / be the leader

If you know the boundaries, don't push them. If sheriff says we're not going to release the child's name, then don't release the child's name. Know what you can talk about and what you cannot talk about. This is often determined by the law enforcement official or the SAR team leadership – not by the PIO.

6 – Define the roles to the media

Once you've done the above, define to the media exactly who is involved in PIO efforts. Let them know who the resource is.

7 – Follow your PIO plan

Whatever you planned to do that day... do it. If you fluctuate from that plan, you may no longer be the leader.

Public Information vs. Public Relations

While "public information" is what a PIO is REQUIRED to provide, "public relations" is the service a PIO performs. The success of any PIO is based as much on HOW they provide information, as it is on WHAT information they provide.

What's your policy? What will you talk about, what will you not talk about? For example, most SAR teams will not release the name of injured subjects without first

getting permission from the law enforcement officials.

What you can and cannot release

What you CAN release

Although what you release should often be cleared by your law enforcement agency, you generally can release portions or all of the following information:

1. Date and time of the incident;
2. Location of the incident;
3. Number of persons involved;
4. Agencies in charge of the incident response; and
5. Agencies responding to the incident



A PIO must know what he/she can and cannot release. Photo: Carol VanDyke.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) applies to most federal governmental agencies, and requires that the agency must make most of their internal documentation available to the public. This includes agencies such as the National Park Service, United States Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management. In the case of a SAR mission taking place in these jurisdictions, the PIO should defer FOIA-related questions to these agencies themselves.

What you CANNOT release

Greater attention should be paid to what you should NOT release to the media. In particular, there may be some local, state and/or federal laws that pertain to what information can be shared with the media. These are mostly related to the person's medical information and (HIPPA regulations). While you can state that medical professionals are caring for a rescue subject, you are largely prohibited from disclosing what the injuries were.

Also, in the case of fatal accidents, or near-fatal accidents, extreme caution must be taken to not disclose the name of the subject, pending notification of friends and family.

Mother's Rules

Kim Andree of the Eagle County Sheriff's Office in Eagle, Colorado has developed a list of "Mother's Rules" based on watching people do interviews poorly.

1 – Stand up straight

Persons with good posture are most pleasant to look at, which leads to a more effective interview.

2 – Smile until it hurts

Unless a PIO is reporting bad news (e.g. death of a rescue subject), it is important to smile and appear to be happy.

3 – Check your teeth – brush them

Yes, really! You don't want to have broccoli in your teeth, and you especially don't want an interview cut short because you have bad breath.

4 – Don't play with your hair

There is nothing worse than watching an interviewer with any nervous behavior. If you know that you have a nervous tendency,

then clasp your hands together in front of you.

5 – Keep your hands out of your pockets

You do not want keys, change, or other items in your pockets jingling away. If your hands are in your pockets, you will want to play with what's in your pockets.

6 – Don't pick your nose or your teeth

This sounds obvious, but it is not.

7 – Check all zippers, buttons and closures

Oops – this could be an embarrassing mistake.

8 – Stop fidgeting

Again, if you gave a nervous tendency, then clasp your hands in front of you.

The Ten Commandments

Kim Andree has also suggested the following "Ten Commandments:"

1. Always tell the truth
2. Know your message, what you are trying to communicate
3. Treat everyone like they are important. Do not play favorites
4. Be the first and best source of good and bad information and news
5. Return all calls promptly – if you can. Ask for the deadline. Provide answers – or direction to the source – the same day.
6. Use plain English
7. Give the same, complete information to everyone.
8. Stay on the record – always
9. Know the reporter and their news organization

10. Respect – do not fear – reporters.
Remember that, just like us, they too are people trying to do a tough job.

The Good the Bad and the Ugly

We all make mistakes. If you make a mistake as a PIO, you should:

1. Alert your supervisor to a mistake;
2. Alert the media to a mistake; and,
3. Do damage control.
 - Consider a live interview with correction – make your corrections with the same audience (e.g. on the same television channel, or in the same newspaper)
 - Follow up with a written correction

Conclusion

With so much interest in search and rescue operations, it is imperative that SAR organizations have a capable representative that can communicate important information to the public by way of the media. It is hoped that these training materials assist SAR organizations in developing an effective PIO program.

Acknowledgements

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ⁱ Model Policy; IACP National Law Enforcement Policy Center (1992)

ⁱⁱ Kim Andree; Colorado Office of Emergency Management Basic Public Information Officer class; March, 2004



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