

MEDIA GUIDE

BIOSOLIDS MEDIA TRAINING

UPDATED NOVEMBER 2003

Presenters

Mark Jockers, Clean Water Services

Joan Saroka, BES, City of Portland

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Preparing for an Interview
 - Getting Started
 - Developing Key Messages
2. Managing the Interview
 - Style
 - Knowing the Media
3. Successful Interview Check List
4. Summary of Successful Interview Tips

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

Getting Started

1. When a reporter initially calls make sure you understand exactly what the reporter wants to know. Ask the reporter questions until you are clear. Let the reporter know that you need to do some research, then you will get back to them. Then promptly get back to them. Don't speak until you're prepared!
2. Ask yourself, "Is my organization the appropriate source of information, or is this within another organization's purview"? If it is yours, proceed. If not, contact the other organization to alert them, then get back to the reporter and direct them to the appropriate place.
3. Gather the appropriate people in your organization and determine the facts. What do you know for sure?
4. Determine what you don't know and how you will find out.
5. Set specific goals for the interview. Ask, "What result would we like to see from this coverage?"
6. Identify your key audiences and the actions you'd like to see from them as a result of the coverage.
7. Develop the 2-3 key messages/themes that sum up your viewpoint.
8. Don't allow the media to be the only source of news to the people that are important to you. Determine who else also needs to be informed directly, and how.
9. Practice answering the questions you know the reporter will ask and other potential questions.
10. Get back to the reporter, making every possible effort to honor their deadline. If you can't respond before the deadline, let them know why and when you will be able to respond.

Developing Key Messages

There is no way you can tell everything you know about Biosolids in a normal short news interview. The reporter has an objective for the interview....and so should you. Develop two or three key messages and then structure your answer around one of those messages. Key messages should be positive, honest, stated with the listening (or viewing) public in mind (remember – they are the folks you are talking to) and package your answers as benefit statements.

Key messages and themes

There are really three sets of key messages you can have prepared well in advance of an interview.

1. Agency messages – a broad set of messages that reflect the goals of your municipality and the community reasons for a biosolids program. A few to consider are:
 - a. We're in the business of protecting public health and the environment.
 - b. We're committed to meeting environmental needs of the community
 - c. Providing cost effective public service.
2. Department messages – a set of messages that deal with wastewater treatment and how that activity creates biosolids. A few to consider are:
 - a. We provide sewer service and wastewater treatment for the community to protect the environment and public health.
 - b. We involve citizens in the decision making on wastewater projects so the service meets the needs and values of the community.
 - c. We provide cost effective sewer/wastewater services.

Biosolids Key Messages

Biosolids messages – a set of broad messages about biosolids that you can refer to at anytime in an interview. A few to consider are:

- a. Biosolids are created from a natural process.
- b. Biosolids are carefully regulated under strict DEQ and EPA guidelines.

- c. Biosolids are treated to destroy harmful pathogens and reduce odors.
- d. Industries that have an impact on biosolids are strictly monitored and regulated by local, state and federal pretreatment requirement.
- e. Biosolids have played a crucial role in the clean up of the nation's rivers and streams.
- f. Land application of biosolids improves and maintains productive soils by returning valuable nutrients to the earth.
- g. Land application of biosolids is a cost-effective, sustainable alternative to the application of chemical fertilizers.

Biosolids messages may vary with type of community. THINK ABOUT WHO WILL BE HEARING THE MESSAGE and what their major concerns are. Develop the key messages to meet the needs and expectations of the audience. (If the interview is being prompted by concerns of a “gentleman farmer”- newly developed neighborhoods in a traditionally rural area – think about what types of things that person will need to hear to feel more comfortable with this long term program to apply biosolids to the neighboring farmland.)

You do not have to develop your messages alone. Feel free to contact others in your agency, other biosolids professionals or communications professionals in your community or through ACWA.

Urban/suburban messages

Biosolids are created from a natural wastewater treatment process. The wastewater process has tight regulatory controls to insure safety. The material has comparable odors to other natural soils amendments. Biosolids are applied in ways to protect our waterways.

Rural messages

The treated material is tested for use on crops. Biosolids are applied properly to match the needs of the crops. Monitoring soils and groundwater is done on a regular basis. Biosolids are a cost-effective method for improving soil conditions and stimulating plant growth.

Counteract the YUCK factor

- Acknowledge that people (and the interviewer) think biosolids are “yucky” because of their origins.
- Show it – have a bag of it so people can see it, touch it or smell it.
- Provide tours of the facility where it is made or where it has been land applied.
- Always refer to it as “treated” material. (underlying message that something has been done to make it clean)
- It’s a product that is used and will continue to be used in the future.

Risk Communication Messages

A few things to remember:

Any controversy regarding the safety of biosolids in a community is more about the values and interests of individuals in the community and NOT about the actual science.

If people in a community consider biosolids as a hazard they are concerned about the risk it poses to their health, family and property.

If people are outraged about biosolids it is likely because:

- the presence of biosolids in their community is not voluntary (they were not asked if the land application was alright with them),
- it is a material they are unfamiliar with,
- they have heard “negative stories” about the material
- they don’t trust you (they don’t know you),
- you or your agency have been unresponsive to their concerns and questions.

It is the outrage issues (not the risk issues) that will hurt your agency reputation in the community.

Outrage about biosolids is about process rather than substance and it is about how you are perceived.

Anticipating and responding to grievances, complaints and questions is much more important than relying on informational materials such as brochures and newsletters.

1. Don't ignore a complaint or a request for information.
2. Don't try to bury people with information and data about "how safe" biosolids are. (People don't like to be told they are wrong – especially if they are already mad about something.)
3. Don't try to discredit them. (Especially if you have already tried to ignore them or bury them in information). They will likely find a very credible ally to help them.
4. If you do 1, 2, and 3 above - you will likely end up spending money to fix a problem that really would not have been a problem to begin with if you have been open to the complaint and/or request for information.

Remember, when you have a real problem or "hazard" with your biosolids program you fix it.

If you have "outrage" about your biosolids program you need to mitigate it also.

Messages

Go for the middle ground. In a fight between "terribly dangerous" (claims by those upset with you) and "perfectly safe" (you and your agency), the winner will be "terribly dangerous". Don't try to give yourself an A+. Leave lots of room for people to make suggestions on what you could do better.

If there have been problems (or complaints) about your program, admit that and let them know the improvements you have made. It is up to your stakeholders, (not you) to decide when past problems may be set aside.

Provide information and acknowledge any current problems with the program. If you omit, distort or try to "spin" your message it can damage your credibility as much as telling outright lies. Build your credibility by acknowledging problems before you solve them or even before you know if you will be able to solve them.

Discuss your achievements with humility. Attributing your good program to your own natural goodness will trigger skepticism. Admit your good work is due to community input and regulatory requirements. If people understand you are following some rules (that you weren't responsible for setting) they will be more likely to believe you.

Share control and be accountable. People (when outraged enough) will want to strip you of control of your program. They will think, if you don't control it they will have more influence over it. Look for ways to talk about the control being shared by others who are keeping you honest and can certify your good performance.

Techniques

- Be responsive to all requests. Don't deny the problem (or allegations) and don't circle the wagons. Be willing to listen to the concerns and help find the answers.
- One-on-one conversations and tours to create a climate of understanding and trust.
- Be open to a monitoring program that stakeholders feel good about. (You may end up spending more on changes to your program if you don't deal with the "outrage" up front.
- Actions speak louder than words. First do good things and then talk about them.
- Be willing to discuss all aspects of your operation – nothing should be off limits.
- Keep communicating. Continue talking and educating. Don't get defensive. Listen very hard.
- Truth + Time = Trust.
- Keep stakeholders and the media informed.

Importance of “Third-Party” Sources

A basic tenant of journalism is to interview multiple, often conflicting sources in an attempt to tell both sides of a story. This is especially true when reporting a story involving controversy or conflict.

Reporters will know the opponents of your project, but they don't always know where to get other sources of information. You can help direct reporters to these other informed sources who can provide another angle to the story. These “third-party” sources may not delivery your exact message, but they can provide a level of creditability that your organization may not have if you are the primary subject of the story. Third-party sources are often used to help put the story in perspective. These sources can help explain how the issue fits into a regional, statewide, or national perspective. Some valuable third-party sources that can be helpful in explaining biosolids application include:

- **Industry Associations:** ACWA, NBMA, PNCWA and WEF
- **OSU Extension Service and other university/research sources**
- **Oregon Department of Health Services**
- **Farmers**
- **Local or county health officials**
- **Regulatory agencies**
- **Environmental organizations**

Developing and working with third-party sources

With the exception of our industry association partners and regulators, you cannot expect third-party sources to be instantly familiar with the status your programs. Developing a relationship and working with these sources in advance of a media story is invaluable.

- Add these sources to your mailing list
- Develop and share an executive summary of your biosolids management plan with the sources
- Meet with the sources annually to update them on your program and answer any questions they may have
- Provide the sources with a basic media kit on your organization and biosolids management program
- Conduct tours of your biosolids application sites

When the media calls

Once you have determined the reporter's objective, you can assess which third-party sources might be of greatest value. Some steps to keep in mind:

- Be helpful. Offer to provide the reporter with other sources of information. Give the reporter the specific name and phone number of the source.
- Immediately contact the third-party sources, alert them of the story and provide the sources with an update on your program.
- After the story has run, contact the third-party sources—even if they were not quoted—and assess the story. Answers any questions that were raised.

MANAGING THE INTERVIEW

Style

Journalists use an “inverted pyramid” style of writing and broadcasting. That style states the Most Important Facts First (MIFF). What follows with each subsequent paragraph is less important. As listeners and viewers we have come to expect that the first fact is the most important. The facts stated are remembered the best and most often those reported. So, make your main points first and then support them as necessary.

Reporters and editors are always working against deadlines. Often if they are late, they will only review the first responses on the tape or look at the first few pages of notes.

Control the environment

If you start an interview with “what do you want to talk about?”, the reporter has control. On the other hand, if you start an interview with a conversational discussion of your key messages, you have control.

By leading with your key messages you have given the reporter information to ask you questions about. You have also defined the areas you are willing talk about and started your brain thinking about the major points.

A successful media interview and subsequent “good press” is as much or more your responsibility as it is the reporter. If you are defensive or obstinate, it is the natural instinct of the reporter to assume you are hiding something. If you ramble when answering, you make it harder for the reporter to easily find the quote they can use to make their story clear and easy to understand.

Location

Where you are interviewed is an important part of the communications message. Don’t automatically assume that you have to meet in your office. If there is time, encourage the reporter to meet you in a working location (at the biosolids area of the treatment plant, at an area when the biosolids are

being applied). Location visuals help enhance and give credibility to your message.

Do make sure the location is “checked out”. Taking a reporter someplace that is embarrassing or classified can throw off the entire interview.

If you do need to meet in your office, select a spot that has some charts, maps or visuals that depict an active working environment. If possible have samples of the material on hand.

Body Language

Several studies have shown that more than half of our oral communications are non-verbal, or what we call “body language”. Our feelings and attitudes are almost all transmitted non-verbally. Reporters often make value judgments about integrity, intent, sincerity and honesty from our non-verbal cues and the tone of our voice. A few tips to keep in mind:

- Speak up, articulate and vary your delivery pace and inflection. Think of a monotone voice as a version of slouching. Too loud is domineering; too soft is submissive.
- Open hands and open gestures denote confidence, candor and openness. Crossed arms and legs send messages of closure and feet on the desk or hands clasped behind the head are domineering versions of closed body language.
- Sit erect in your seat and lean slightly forward to indicate openness and attention to what the reporter has to say.
- Make sure you are sitting on a chair that does not swivel or lean back. You will tend to “squirrel around” during the interview and look wiggly to the viewing audience if you are in a movable chair.

Knowing the Media

Working with Reporters

Reporters are trying to do a good job at their work just like you! Reporters often cover stories on all sorts of subjects, so rarely will they know your business as well as you do. They want you to be a good interview because that actually makes their job easier.

Your attitude can be very important. If you go into an interview with a negative attitude – “what’s this reporter going to do to me”, the reporter will sense it and respond the way they are trained – “why is this person scared? or what are they trying to hide?”.

It is your job to tell about your program. Do it pleasantly, positively and professionally. Reporters do respect candor, competence and confidence. The reporter’s view of you can affect the tone of the story.

Reporters are not your personal friends. There is no such thing as off-the-record. Every word you say to a reporter can be included in the story.

Different Types of Media

News departments in each type of media have their own unique characteristics. Understanding the differences can help you handle the interview and interview process.

	Print	TV	Radio
Deadlines	1-2 day deadlines	a.m. or early p.m. deadlines	Immediate -often phone interviews
Immediacy	slow	fast	fastest
Info needs	details	Pictures/talking heads	Sound bite
Depth of interview	In-depth	Headline with pictures	Very short :45 seconds
Graphics	Yes	Yes	No – sound effects are good
Reporter experience	Beat	Generalists	Very general & usually new

General Tips

Newspaper reporters generally have more time to work on a story. A general fact sheet (a one pager) about your program can help them keep the basic facts straight.

Television reporters don’t have a lot of time. Stating your key message up front is helpful to them when they go back to edit the tape for the sound bite. Visuals are very important for them. Don’t fight with a picture – it always

wins. (An angry group of people at public meeting can't be denied or dismissed. Acknowledge the "YUCK" factor where appropriate and then move on the top key messages.)

Radio reporters often do their work by phone. Key messages that are very, very short work best. Try to get your key messages down to a set of interesting sound bites.

Return media calls immediately to find out:

1. What's the topic? (Are you the right person to be interviewed)
2. What's the type of media and their deadline?
3. Do they need background information?
4. Tell them you will call them back. (Never start talking immediately)

What reporters dislike the most.

1. People who fail to return their phone calls.
2. People who lie or mislead them.
3. People who don't understand their deadlines/needs.
4. Being "sold" a story that has no news value.
5. People who don't explain things in common English.

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

There are three possible answers to every question.

- I know the answer and it is.....
- I don't know the answer, but I will try to get it for you.
- I know the answer, but I cannot tell you. (The reason why you can't tell better be really good – union negotiations, personnel issue, etc. – something that you have legal backing for.)

State the important fact first.

- Make your key points first, then elaborate. Repeat them often.
- Under tight time deadlines, reporters will often go with the quote they want, missing your real point. If your key points are first and repeated often they will be the quickest ones for the reporter to find in their notes or on the tape.
- Be concise, with 20-30 second answers.

Questions to avoid.

- Avoid either/or questions. (Is it a problem for ground water or is it a problem to have dairy cows eat the grass that grows here?)
- Avoid hypothetical (what if) questions. (What if this is a future health hazard.)
- Avoid third party questions.(Joe told me this material was bad. Is it?)
- Avoid yes or no answers. Provide your key message that is most closely related to the questions. Remember, a tape or notes can be edited to the Yes or No portion of the answer only. They don't have to use any amplification you may have provided.
- Don't give credence to a statement by remaining silent.

Tell the truth, even if it hurts.

- Never reply with “NO COMMENT”. If you'd rather not answer say so and explain why.
- Don't hide bad news. To do that is often worse than the story itself.
- If you don't know, don't bluff or make up an answer. Say you don't know.

Simply if complicated.

- Speak from the reader/viewer/listener's point of view.

- Editors tend to choose what can be explained simply.
- Remember, the reporter’s words usually will not show up in the interview. Yours will.
- Speak in a conversational tone.

Do not go off the record.

- Reporters want things they can quote – on the record.
- Rule: If you don’t want a statement quoted. Don’t make it.
- Stick to your points, don’t raise “red herrings”.

Keep your cool.

- Get comfortable and remain composed. Remember, the reporter always gets the last word.
- Answer at your own pace, but be concise.
- If the reporter asks rapid fire (multiple questions), choose the easiest.
- You have information the reporter wants.
- Relax, be yourself.
- Assume no one knows your business – no acronyms or jargon.

Know your audience.

- You are talking the public – not the reporter.
- Apply the “SO WHAT?” test.
 - So what does it mean for the public?
 - So what difference does it make?
- Before you speak, make sure your interest is the public interest.
- Put yourself in the reporter’s shoes. If there is a difference of opinion, that is news.

After the Interview

- Offer the reporters the opportunity to call you with additional questions, clarification or if they need more information.
- Don’t ask to see the story before it is published or aired.
- Internally review the story when published or aired. Critique your performance or ask others to. Learn from your mistakes.
- If there are inaccuracies or mistakes in the story talk with co-workers, and communications staff on the best way to respond. Generally, resist the urge to call the reporter to critique the story.

SUMMARY OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW TIPS

1. Ask if you are you the appropriate spokesperson?
2. What is the reporter's deadline? Know the media (radio, tv, print)
3. Establish your key messages or themes.
4. Be prepared.
5. Choose the length, time and location of the interview.
6. Listen carefully to every question.
7. Think before you speak – state the most important facts first.
8. Answer the question in the positive.
9. If you don't know the answer.... Don't fake it!
10. Provide written information (news releases, factsheets, etc.) to reinforce messages.
11. Re-introduce key messages often.
12. Avoid either-or questions.
13. Avoid "what if" hypothetical questions.
14. Avoid answering third party questions.
15. Answer the question then stop talking.
16. If given a laundry list of questions – pick the easiest.
17. Look for (and avoid) hidden agendas in the questions.
18. There is no such thing as "OFF THE RECORD".
19. Don't ever say "NO COMMENT".
20. The interview isn't over until the reporter leaves.
21. Do not accept as fact what the reporter says.
22. Don't let the reporter put words in your mouth. Don't repeat phrases to deny them.
23. Present all information and answers keeping in mind you were talking ultimately to the public – not the reporter.