

A hand is shown holding a white megaphone with a red base. The megaphone is angled upwards and to the right. Inside the large, black-rimmed horn of the megaphone, the words "SPREADING THE NEWS!" are written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The text is slightly tilted to follow the curve of the horn. The background is a plain, light gray.

**SPREADING  
THE  
NEWS!**

# How to Manage Your Message — and the Media

The media landscape is changing. With the emergence of the 24-hour news cycle, newspapers, large and small, are folding, downsizing, and going digital themselves. While this shift is troubling to some, others see it as an opportunity to tell their story their way.

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

**T**ommy Ryan had just been hired as manager of Worcester Township, Montgomery County, and was already being put to the test.

It was 2015, and 73 property owners were facing a massive bill — \$20,000 to \$30,000 each — to connect to a new public sewer line being installed in their neighborhood.

“It was a huge cost,” Ryan says, admitting that the situation could have turned ugly with crowded and contentious township meetings and front-page news stories.

It didn’t, though. Why? Because Ryan gave the residents what they wanted: information.

Every week, the manager wrote a short memo to residents. He shared details about the project’s progress and outlined financing options. Ryan also included his cell phone number for complaints and questions.

“I personally walked the neighbor-

hood and put it in their mailboxes,” Ryan says. “By the end of the project, we must have sent out 35 to 40 memos. People could connect with the township on a personal level, and they appreciated that.”

Consistent, honest, and straightforward communication — even when there was nothing new to report — helped Worcester Township keep a lid on controversy, residents happy, and rumors under control.

Public relations experts call this “managing the message.” It’s an effective and proactive approach that helps to put township officials in the driver’s seat when communicating with the public and the press.

“When you get in front of the story, it lets residents and the media know that you, the officials, are on top of things,” says Lowell Briggs, mass communications coordinator at York College.

PR strategist Mandy Arnold agrees, stressing that townships should not shy away from sharing information.



“Township officials have to look at communication as a requirement because the public expects it,” says Arnold, president and CEO of Gavin, a boutique branding and communications agency in York. “If you’re not putting the facts out there, then someone else will come along and do it for you.”

Why would you want that?

## No media? No problem

Let’s face it, in a relatively short time — say, 20 or 30 years — the way we communicate everything from lost pets to emergency road closings has changed.

A lot.

Welcome to the 24-hour news cycle, a never-ending wave of information that’s primarily pushed out through social media, which in 2018 surpassed print newspapers as the leading source for news in the United States, the Pew Research Center reports.

As a result, newspapers, large and small, have folded, downsized their

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staffs, or gone digital themselves. While this shift is troubling to some, others see it as an opportunity.

“Legacy media is declining,” Teddy Goff, co-founder of Precision Strategies, has said, “but with the social media explosion, suddenly you can reach more people with a tweet or a Facebook post than a well-placed story in the local paper.”

“Communities have unsurpassed opportunities to get their information out,” says Jack Sherzer, a former reporter and editor who now owns Message Prose in Harrisburg.

And that’s an empowering thing for townships, which under the traditional print news model of yesteryear may have struggled to get their stories told or felt they didn’t have an avenue to refute incorrect information.

Now, with the prevalence of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Nextdoor, text messaging, websites, and print and digital newsletters, township officials can create and distribute

their own stories and messages about local events and issues.

In Worcester Township, Tommy Ryan not only posts daily updates on the community’s website but also emails a quick-read newsletter to 3,000 subscribers every Friday afternoon at 4. A few days before township meetings, he provides the public, press, and bloggers with packets that include summaries of issues that will be addressed. Ryan even writes news releases to help busy reporters meet the demand for a steady stream of fresh content. News sites, he says, rarely edit the information he provides.

“Yes, this does make more work for us, but we believe in doing what’s needed to get our message out there,” he says. “We try to be the best, most reliable source of information in our township.”

Ryan has a background in communications so sharing information comes naturally to him. He says, however, that a lack of expertise, time, or resources should not be an excuse for officials to put messaging on the back burner.

“Find someone who can help...maybe it’s a board member, a staff member, or a volunteer who has a background in communications and can help you push out information a few hours a week,” he says. “Start small and simple.”

Message Prose’s Jack Sherzer says that small public relations firms are another option for townships. These local professionals can be contracted to work on a project or for a specified period of time and are more affordable than you may think.

“We’ve helped townships with their newsletters,” Sherzer says, “and one of the first things we do is ask them to share positive stories with us. Sometimes, we’ll turn around and put those stories in a news release and pitch them to the media.” (Sherzer and attorney Kathleen Duffy Bruder of McNeese Wallace & Nurick are among those presenting media-related workshops at the 2020 PSATS Educational Conference in May. See the list of sessions on page 40.)

## When the media call

While your interactions with the press may be few and far between, township officials still need to be ready to field the media’s questions over the phone and in person because who knows what might come up that catches the media’s attention: the secretary could save a resident’s life at a meeting with CPR; the township could receive a \$500,000 grant to build its first park; or a supervisor could get caught stealing.

## ‘NO COMMENT’ IS NO GOOD

### Here’s what to say to reporters instead

Rather than saying “no comment” when responding to reporters’ questions, here are examples of what to say instead:

- “We can’t rule anything in or out at this time.”
- “We are assessing [studying/evaluating/investigating] the situation [issue/policy/ruling] and will have a complete response once all the facts are known.”
- “Instead of commenting on that right now, let me point out...”
- “It’s premature to comment at this time because...”
- “That’s an interesting question, but what you should really be asking is...”
- “Let’s look at this issue from a broader perspective...”
- “There is an equally important concern...”
- “Let’s not forget the underlying problem...”

Information courtesy of govloop.com



"It's really not a matter of if a reporter will call, but when," says Jason Kirsch, partner and senior counselor of PRworks in Harrisburg. "Sure, you may experience some nerves at the thought of talking to reporters and doing TV interviews, but it helps to go into it with a healthy attitude. Work with the media, not against it."

That's the approach that Ryan Strohecker, manager of Manor Township in Lancaster County, takes. "I was always taught that as a local official, I shouldn't be an obstacle," he says. "Instead, it's better to use the power of the media to your advantage." (For more tips on dealing with the media, see page 41.)

Gavin's Mandy Arnold says that having a plan helps township officials focus on what's important, especially during stressful situations. "It could be something as simple as a five-page document that outlines scenarios and how you'll respond."

"Townships should frame what they're going to say before they say it by thinking about the different angles that reporters could take," York College's Lowell Briggs says. "Come up with five points of information and a one-sentence position statement that's easy to understand and stick to it."

"Ask yourself: What are the essential elements we need to get across to the public?" Arnold adds.

"Whatever you do, though, don't wing it," PRworks Jason Kirsch says.

Experts recommend that townships also designate a "gatekeeper" to be your main media contact and spokesperson. Ryan Strohecker fills that role in Manor Township. In addition to fielding and directing all media calls, he works with the supervisors and other staff to establish the municipality's position on issues.

"This ensures we're all on the same page," he says, "and that a single, consistent voice is going out."

That preparation came in handy a few months ago when the media latched onto a story about a marijuana possession ordinance that the supervisors were considering. The ordinance, meant to make the punishment fit the crime and give police some flexibility, surfaced at the same time Lt. Gov. John Fetterman was criss-crossing the state

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# Be a PSATS Conference VOLUNTEER!

PSATS needs help from its members for the upcoming Annual Conference in Hershey May 3-6.

**If you can volunteer as a PSATS Power of One ambassador, we want to hear from you.**

**Here's what you could help with:**

- Volunteering to be a conference mentor to a first-time conference attendee
- Greeting attendees and scanning badges at numerous events
- Moderating workshops
- Helping attendees navigate the Hershey Lodge
- Helping with decoration and games for the Roaring 20's Welcome Reception

**Interested? Call Mary Lehane at PSATS** at (717) 763-0930, ext. 107, or email [powerofone@psats.org](mailto:powerofone@psats.org). Many other Power of One opportunities and further details can be found at [connect.psats.org/powerofone](http://connect.psats.org/powerofone). We will be in touch with you to discuss your participation.

**Note:** If you have already signed up to be a Fall Forum volunteer, you do not need to do anything further.



## MANAGING YOUR MESSAGE

with his weed legalization tour.

“Because of this,” Strohecker says, “some of the media were trying to twist it to make it look like we were being loose on marijuana, which wasn’t the case at all.”

Rather than let news reports shape public opinion and stir unnecessary controversy, the township drafted its own statements. The board of supervisors explained the ordinance and what the township was trying to accomplish by proposing and passing it. The information was posted on Facebook and on the front page of the township’s newsletter.

“We wanted to be proactive in pushing our message out,” Strohecker says, “and it worked. Afterward, residents thanked me, saying the statements helped to paint a better picture of the situation for them.”

### Preparation and practice

Media training is another step that township officials can take to feel more confident with reporters.

Arnold and her team at Gavin provide this training and are developing classes for PSATS members. Similar workshops will be offered at the 2020 PSATS Educational Conference in May in Hershey. [See the list in the box below. Also, if you have a group of township officials interested in media training, call Scott Coburn, PSATS education director, at (717) 763-0930, ext. 171.]

Media training can help you focus on your message and navigate phone and television interviews. In Arnold’s sessions, for instance, attendees participate in mock TV interviews and afterward receive constructive criticism. That’s one of the reasons why Judy Lizza, manager of Thornbury Township in Chester County, plans to attend.

“It’s pretty quiet here so we don’t have a lot of media interaction,” she says, “but when an incident does happen, I want to be prepared and look professional.”

Strohecker agrees that media training is invaluable.

“You never know what reporters are going to jump on,” he says, “but once they do, it’s like a snowball. We just try to have a clear, consistent message.

“A lot of the time,” he adds, “you only get one shot. If you misspeak, it’s out there, and that’s a big deal. ♦

## Going to the PSATS Conference?

### These workshops will help you master the art of communication

Brush up on your communications skills in one spot: the 2020 PSATS Educational Conference and Exhibit Show, May 3 to 6, at the Hershey Lodge. The following sessions are among the more than 80 workshops on the schedule:

- Advancing Public Communications Through Website Design
- Crisis Management: Communicating in the (New) Real World
- Five Cardiac Township Events and the CPR to Address Them
- Messaging in a Fragmented Media Age
- Municipal eNewsletters: Communicating with Your Audience
- Politicians and Residents Say the Darnedest Things – Part 2
- Social Media Employment Disasters
- Transparency and Communication in Local Government

To learn more about these workshops and others, including their dates and times, see the center spread, go to [conference.psats.org](http://conference.psats.org), or contact PSATS Education Director Scott Coburn at [scoburn@psats.org](mailto:scoburn@psats.org) or (717) 763-0930, ext. 171.

# Experts offer common-sense actions for working with the media

Dealing with the media is a part of public life. Media relations experts recommend the following tried-and-true tips for working with reporters:

- **Be responsive** — Reporters operate on deadlines. To do their jobs, they need a timely response. Understand reporters' deadlines and meet or beat them.

Establishing a reputation for responding quickly to reporter inquiries will earn respect and appreciation. Playing hard to get may cause the media to wonder what you're hiding and encourage them to dig deeper.

- **Be prepared** — Find out what information the reporter is seeking and then, whenever possible, prepare for an interview by gathering facts, figures, and key messages that will address the questions the reporter is likely to ask. It is OK to have this information as a reference during an interview when not on camera. Do not wing it.

In a crisis, it's smart to have a standard holding statement such as, "I want to help you with your story, but I need to gather more facts before I can answer any questions. I know we all want to get the story right so I will contact you within the hour to give you an update." Then be sure to follow through.

- **Be accessible and friendly** — The golden rule applies. Treat the media as you would like to be treated. Get to know the reporters that are covering local issues. The goal isn't to be best friends with them, but to have a friendly relationship. Also, when dealing with a new reporter or another content creator, you may need to invest some time in educating them about township government.

- **Be real** — Authenticity matters to reporters and constituents. The goal is to sound knowledgeable, use plain language, and be sincere. If you need more information to respond, tell the reporter and follow up promptly.

- **Be concise** — Reporters want and need good quotes. To be quoted (*and not misquoted*), keep statements — both written and spoken — short, relevant, and interesting. Do not use jargon or acronyms. A written quote should be one or two short sentences.

Radio and television will edit down a statement to sound bites that are only three to seven seconds long, on average. Avoid the temptation to talk too much. Don't speculate or speak in hypotheticals; stick to the facts.

- **Be courteous** — You may not have much knowledge or interest in a topic to provide what a reporter needs. In this case, say, "Thank you for thinking of me for your story, but I don't think I am the best source for your topic." If possible, try to suggest another contact.

- **Be proactive** — Reach out to reporters if there is a story that needs to be covered. Also, do not hesitate to suggest stories or offer responses to newsworthy events before being asked.

- **Be accurate** — Double-check and even triple-check



**One thing to keep in mind: Reporters want and need good quotes. To be quoted (*and not misquoted*), keep statements — both written and spoken — short, relevant, and interesting.**

any facts and figures used in interviews. Once inaccurate information is distributed, it's hard to pull it back. The risk is that accidental inaccuracy will be mistaken for dishonesty. Let the reporter know that you need to look up information and get back to them before the deadline.

- **Be careful** — Assume that everything is "on the record" and will be attributed. Don't say anything that shouldn't be included in a news story. Never go "off the record."

A reporter can get confused when reading back over his/her notes about what was "off the record" or they may just decide it's too good to pass up and betray your trust. If you can't say it on the record, do not say it.

- **Be aware** — Be careful not to let a reporter put words in your mouth. Reporters may ask questions in a certain way, leading you to repeat what he or she said. Any part of a response may be used in a story; be aware of tactics and say what is best for the issue at hand, not what the reporter is looking for.

Be careful not to fill in long pauses by the reporter; stick to the question and answer concisely.

- **Be cool** — Temperament is important in an interview. Stay calm and avoid expressing anger or frustration.

- **Be honest** — Honesty is critical to both the media's and public's perceptions of township officials' integrity and trustworthiness. Avoid responding with "no comment" as it sounds as though there is something to hide. (See the sidebar on page 38 for what to say instead.)