

# Police and Media Relations: How to Bridge the Gap

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## *Abstract*

*Police and Media Relations has been a concern for both the police and media for decades. How to bridge that gap has puzzled brilliant minds in both professions. For law enforcement, the policy has always been to give as little information as possible. The media is believed to be the enemy who is always looking to destroy the credibility of officers. The media feels that law enforcement is always hiding information. Media feel that they are the ears of the public and it is their duty to "tell it like it is". The following document will discuss police and media relations from both sides. Practices of some law enforcement agencies and media outlets will be reviewed. The results of studies on the subject will be discussed. Finally, existing problems will be discussed and an amicable median will be established.*

## Introduction

The relationship between police and media has always been controversial. Ultimately, the purpose of both entities is to serve the public. Police strive to protect the safety, liberty, and freedom that all citizens are entitled. The media serves to demonstrate the freedom of speech that is the cornerstone of the American way. How could two institutions with the same purpose end up on separate sides of the fence on many issues? Why does animosity exist on both sides?

Police policies are, by nature, secretive. Police are taught not to divulge information. Confidentiality and trust are instilled in every officer that wears the law enforcement uniform. Media on the other hand has a different method of survival. Their existence relies on uncovering information. Their mission is to broadcast facts. The best reporters are always the ones who seem to have the gift of being the first to report newsworthy events. Therein lays the biggest difference. One entity relies on secrecies while the other seeks to reveal the truth. Perhaps the relationship will remain similar to cats and dogs or perhaps it can improve. A closer look into the world of both will offer some useful insight into how the relationship developed. A relationship that can improve and has shown some promise in recent years.

The media policies of law enforcement agencies around the nation are usually very specific and detailed. The underlining theme is to divulge as little as possible. The media relations policy for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office is nine (9) pages long. In Jacksonville, there is an effort to promote a more open relationship with the media. There is a proactive policy of making timely,

accurate, and complete information available to the public and the news media (Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, General Order 49, 09-01-03). The position of a Police Information Officer (PIO) was developed to serve as a law enforcement liaison to the media. Law enforcement agencies around the nation have created this position. PIO's serve in other capacities in their agency. In Jacksonville, the PIO is responsible for providing information to community organizations, coordinating the dissemination of interdepartmental information, and scheduling interviews with staff.

In Boise, Idaho, the local law enforcement agency disseminates a guide (Boise Police Department Media Guide). Reporters are told who to contact for individual crimes, police codes, and police policy. It is evidence of a growing push towards allowing media into a world that was once considered to be sacred.

Conversely, there was a move by the San Francisco Police Department to restrict what information investigators could tell reporters (Derbeken, 2004). Media was directed to the public affairs office and then information could only be disseminated with a supervisor's approval. The department was already known for its rigid stance on releasing information. In 2004, the department also required reporters to file a Public Records Request before reviewing police reports.

Policies as strict as the one seen in San Francisco are becoming a thing of the past. Departments are beginning to understand that a positive relationship with the media can result in good things for the agency.

Police departments should expect to interact with the media. The push should be towards relaying information to the media that is accurate and timely. This would prevent the need for media to obtain information from sources that may be anti-police. The media needs to trust that agencies will remain accessible. The playing of favorites among media outlets could hurt the agencies credibility. All information should be given at a central location that is accessible to all media outlets.

Studies have been concluded that suggest that improved media relations could positively influence the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies. One such study (Buhrmaster, 2005) provided six tips for improving police/media relations. The suggestions included seeking media exposure, an open door policy, looking good in front of the media, open lines of communication, developing empathy, and actually satisfying the needs of media. This new concept of media relations is seemingly sweeping the nation. Law enforcement now understands the old philosophy, "if you can not beat them, join them". The new philosophy can only result in positives for law enforcement. Agencies can still restrict crucial information while appeasing media outlets. The need for the media to start a "witch hunt" would be greatly diminished if information was readily accessible to them. The anti-police sentiment could be overwhelmed by accurate and timely information given by police.

Enhanced media relations could assist law enforcement to achieve its primary mission which is the reduction in crime. The media can paint a picture of a department that is honest and professional or one that is corrupt and not trustworthy. If a good, working relationship exists with the police reporter how

likely would it be that he would write a negative story about the agency. Most stories would be sympathetic to the police. The public obtains its impression of police through media outlets. If they only hear positives they will gain a trust and confidence with the local agency. Thereby, community involvement is enhanced. Citizens would become more likely to call and report crime. People would start to report the drug dealer on the corner or the murder suspect who lives in the neighborhood. There is probably no way to gage the impact of positive community relations on the reduction of crime, but it is proven that unhappy citizens will not cooperate.

Studies have also suggested that good relationships between the police and media could enhance police chances of obtaining local funding and capital improvements. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) identified five police departments that had achieved exceptional success in the budgetary arena. Each agency exhibited a very strong relationship with the local media. It was discovered that a positive relationship gained public confidence and led the public to accept budgetary requests. It cited honesty, candor and access as key elements needed to secure public approval. (Karchmer, 2002)

To create a good relationship, law enforcement must first get to know the media and its audience. Mass media is the means through which information is transmitted to a large audience. This includes newspapers, television radio, and more recently the internet. Those which provide news and information are known as news media (Wikipedia, 2007). One must understand that media is made up of individuals seeking a profit. News sells. Timely and accurate news sells faster. Law enforcement must understand that the media is going to sell a story regardless of the source of information. Most Americans believe what they receive through the media. Only 20% say they disbelieve much or all of the news delivered by many national news outlets (The Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press).

There is also a need to know what the media expects from law enforcement. The purpose is not to appease, but to understand their philosophy. Reporters want certain things from law enforcement. They include accessibility, a written public information policy, relationships, honesty, and professionalism (Lowe, 2007). There are several additional desires, but they all center on the basic principles of being timely, accurate, and professional. For the most part, individuals working in media are not determined to ruin the careers or reputation of police. Their job is to inform the public. Law enforcement must understand that the same audience is shared with media. The community expects each to provide an accurate and honest service. When expectations are not met, there is public outcry.

## Methods

It is evident that both entities have the same mission, but for different reasons. How do we *Bridge the Gap*? The following research will examine the issues from both perspectives; law enforcement and media. The purpose of the research is to develop some ideas that may be used to enhance the relationship between law enforcement and the media.

To gain a perspective from law enforcement, a survey (Appendix A) was sent to fifty – five (55) law enforcement agencies around the state. State and local agencies were included in the study. Various size agencies from all areas of the state were selected to provide a wide range of concerns and suggestions. The number of sworn personnel and population served also varied. The main questions involved the current relationship with the local media, the agency's public perception, is the media responsible for its public perception, and ways to improve the relationship from both a law enforcement and media view point.

To gain a perspective from media, news reporters from four (4) media outlets in Duval County were interviewed (Appendix B). They included three reporters from local news stations and one reporter from the local newspaper. Questions were similar to the questions in the survey (Appendix A). They were edited to make appropriate for the media.

## Results

As mentioned a survey (Appendix A) was sent to 55 agencies. Thirty-nine (71%) of the agencies responded to the survey. Two of the agencies had fewer than 100 sworn while seven had more than a 1000. Sixty-four percent (25) of the agencies had between 100 and 500 officers. Population size was also widespread, however, just over thirty-eight percent (15) of the agencies served between 100,000 and 500,000. Each agency contacted had a written policy for police and media relations.

The survey was sent to individuals within the agency who serve as a PIO or similar position for their agency. Of that number, 41% held the rank of an officer (civilian equivalent) and another 41% was either a Lieutenant or above (civilian equivalent). A vast number of individuals responding (48.7%) had been in that position for five years or less. The second most significant range was over 10 years representing 29.7%.

A series of questions centered on the agency's public perception and relationship with media. On a scale of 1 to 4, ranging from very poor (1) to very good (4), agencies felt their relationship with the media was 3.74. No agency indicated that their relationship was poor or worse. Using the same rating scale, agencies felt that their public perception was a 3.61. Again, no agency felt that the perception was poor or worse. Additionally, 84.2% felt that the media has had a positive effect on its public perception. Only one agency indicated that the media has had a negative effect on its public perception. That agency has between 100 and 500 officers and serves a community of less than 100,000.

Surprisingly to the writer, 89.5 % (34) indicated that the media present an accurate description of its department. Four agencies, 10.5%, indicated that the media is not accurate. Only 27% felt that the media had an impact on hiring, raises, and the purchasing of equipment. No agency felt that the media had a negative impact in these discussed areas. 56.8% felt that that the media was a non factor in these areas.

All agencies felt that the media is used to disseminate positive police stories. Additionally, 94.7 % felt that their agency could benefit by becoming more proactive with the media.

Individuals were given an opportunity to express what steps law enforcement could take to enhance the relationship with media. Most responses centered around a few main topics; be more proactive, train officers to interact with media, honesty, more open, educate media on law enforcement policy, create a full time PIO position (small agency), and impartiality.

When agencies were asked to express ideas that media should use to enhance the relationship many of the same ideas were mentioned; more honesty, more accuracy, train reporters to interact with officers, stop sensationalizing events, stop slanting stories to make law enforcement look bad, report on positive stories, make corrections, and meet with staff members regularly.

Interviews were conducted with four reporters from different media outlets in the Jacksonville, FL area. It was believed that the opinion of the various reporters would be value in gaining a perspective of the media. They were asked questions as written in Appendix B.

The most senior reporter had 17 years experience while the least experienced reporter had less than 2 years. Three reporters worked for television stations while one reporter worked for the local newspaper.

The reporters' answers were consistent for questions 1 through 5. Surprisingly, no media outlet had a written policy for dealing with law enforcement. Each felt the relationship with law enforcement was fair or good. Each felt that their employer has effected the public's perception of law enforcement. This perception was described as neither good nor bad, but accurate. They all felt that law enforcement could be more proactive with media.

When asked what law enforcement could do to enhance its relationship with the media the responses were similar to what law enforcement wants from the media; honesty, impartiality, more proactive, self promotion, fairness, acknowledgement of the public records laws, more consistency, and better explanation of why things are done.

The question was reversed and reporters were asked what they could do to enhance the relationship. The responses were fairness, patience, being non-judgmental, better training, a written policy, and one central contact from the media instead of several reporters calling law enforcement inquiring about the same incident.

## Discussion

The results of the research can be viewed from several perspectives. One could believe that based on the feedback in reference to the existing relationship between law enforcement and media that all is well. Law enforcement agencies rate the relationship with the media as being close to very good. Media representatives rate the relationship as being fair to good. Most law enforcement agencies polled believed that their public perception was basically very good and they overwhelmingly said that the media had an impact on its perception. Media agreed that they have an impact on public perception.

Everything sounds great, but when one reads the response to what can be done to enhance the relationship a more accurate picture is drawn. A review of law enforcement responses indicate that they want the media to do the following: more honesty, more accuracy, train reporters to interact with officers, stop over-sensationalizing events, stop slanting stories to make law enforcement look bad, report on positive stories, make corrections, and meet with staff members regularly. What relationship can be very good if one of the parties wants the other to make the listed changes?

The media also gave the relationship high ratings, but a list of their concern paint a similar picture. They are as follows: honesty, impartiality, proactively, self promotion, and fairness, acknowledgement of the public records laws, more consistency, and better explanation of why things are done. How can a relationship be considered good if these concerns exist?

As discussed earlier, the function of both is to serve the community. Law enforcement seeks to protect citizens while the media's purpose is to inform the public. By the nature of their purpose it is easy to understand why there is quite often a rift. Law enforcement relies on accumulating secretive information to solve crime issues. However, media and the public thrive on obtaining as much information as possible. As long as both entities are striving towards meeting their mission there will always be some issues. These issues can be improved with concessions by both parties, but a 100% cure is not possible.

## Recommendations

Law enforcement can help bridge the gap by being more open to the media. If law enforcement initiated more dialogue the need to "search:" for stories would be diminished. Use the media to disseminate crime concerns and suspect information. Hold regular meetings with media to develop rules of engagement. Establish a Police Information Officer position. Ensure that officers adhere to policies concerning media relations. Training classes can be developed to assist with the process.

The media can also enhance the relationship. Most importantly, a written policy needs to be established. Reporters contacted advised that there was no written policy involving police relations although, a vast portion of their stories involve the police. Inform officers at scenes what information you need.

Reporters need to be aware that some information cannot be released. Often times, when officers advise reporters of this fact, reporters will locate a witness who will give them a story regardless of the accuracy. These reports often hurt future investigations. Some reporters indicated that there is rarely just one individual assigned to cover police stories. It is recommended that a group be developed that interacts with police. It would bring about familiarity and trust if officer see the same faces. Ensure that local agencies are aware of your mission. Invite law enforcement to regular meetings where media policies are discussed.

Law enforcement and the media can coexist while serving two similar yet so different tasks. A key is to develop a strong relationship prior to a critical incident. It will take compromise on both ends. Both sides have to be educated on the policies of their counterpart. Most importantly, both sides have to respect those policies. That requires the most important element found in any type of relationship; communication.

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## Appendix A

Q1. What is your current rank?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Non-supervisor or civilian Equivalent	41.00%	16
Sergeant or Civilian Equivalent	17.90%	7
Lieutenant or above/Civilian Equivalent	41.00%	16
		3
	answered question	9

Q2. How long have you been a Public Information Officer or in a similar position at your agency?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
5 Years or less	48.60%	18
6-10 Years	21.60%	8
Over 10 Years	29.70%	11
	answered question	37
	skipped question	2

Q3. What is the population of the jurisdiction in which you provide law enforcement services?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
0 < 100,000	23.10%	9
100,000 < 500,000	38.50%	15
500,000 < 1,000,000	15.40%	6
1,000,000 or more	23.10%	9
	answered question	39

Q4. How many sworn law enforcement officers work for your agency?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Under 100	5.10%	2
100 < 500	64.10%	25
500 < 1000	12.80%	5
1000 or more	17.90%	7
	answered question	39

Q5. Does your agency have a written media policy?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	100.00%	39
No	0.00%	0
	answered question	39

Q6. How would you rate the relationship between your agency and the local media?

Answer Options	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor	Rating Average	Responses
Relationship with Media	28	10	0	0	3.74	38
					answered question	38
					skipped question	1

Q7. What is the public's general perception of your agency?

Answer Options	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very Poor	Rating Average	Responses
Public perception	23	15	0	0	3.61	38
					answered question	38
					skipped question	1

Q8. Has your agency's relationship with the media impacted its public perception?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	86.50%	32
No	13.50%	5
	answered question	37
	skipped question	2

Q9. Has this impact been positive or negative?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Positive	84.20%	32
Negative	2.60%	1
None	13.20%	5
	answered question	38
	skipped question	1

Q10. Do the media present an accurate description of your agency?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	89.50%	34
No	10.50%	4
	answered question	38
	skipped question	1

Q11. Has the relationship with the media had an impact on hiring, raises, equipment, etc?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	27.00%	10
No	73.00%	27
	answered question	37
	skipped question	2

Q12. Has the impact been positive or negative?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Positive	43.20%	16
Negative	0.00%	0
None	56.80%	21
	answered question	37

Q13. Does your agency use the media to disseminate positive information about your agency?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	100.00%	39
No	0.00%	0
	answered question	39

Q14. Do you believe your agency could benefit by becoming more proactive with the media?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	94.70%	36
NO	5.30%	2
	answered question	38
	skipped question	1

Q15. What can your agency do to enhance its relationship with the media?

Q16. What can the media do to enhance its relationship with your agency?

## **Appendix B**

### **Media Questionnaire**

1. Does your employer have a written policy concerning interaction with law enforcement?
2. How would you rate the relationship with your employer and local law enforcement?
3. Has your employer affected the community's perception of local law enforcement? If so, what has been the affect?
4. Does your employer present an accurate description of law enforcement?
5. Do you believe law enforcement should be more proactive in its approach with the media?
6. What can law enforcement do to enhance the relationship with media?
7. What can the media do to enhance the relationship with law enforcement?