



intermedia
COMMUNICATIONS TRAINING

HOLDING A PRESS CONFERENCE

PREPARATION

- 1. Define your message:** Choose your communications goals for the conference. Write them down. How would you like to see the media handle your story? Plan your press conference around these goals.
- 2. Decide what's news:** Evaluate the potential media interest in your story. Is it local, national, or international in nature? What angles might the media cover? What current related news issues could draw in reporters? What negative issues could skew the conference away from your message? (For example, a development agency might consider holding back a report lauding the benefits of foreign aid to a particular country if that country has just detonated a nuclear bomb).
- 3. Choose your audience:** Based on your evaluation, decide who should be invited. Most press conference invitations go to the news desks of newspapers, wire services, magazines, radio, or TV stations, and they will send whomever they choose. Some invitations can be sent to reporters you know personally who specialize in your subject.
- 4. Timing:** The timing of a press conference has strategic value. Morning is best. The story gets on TV and radio news outlets right away, and will appear in the next day's newspapers. It also gives the press and networks a chance to seek out other sources for more balanced coverage before the evening news deadline. For a major issue you want to publicize, a release early in the week can extend your coverage through the end of the week. If it's bad news you're announcing, a pre-weekend conference late in the afternoon will minimize coverage.
- 5. Length:** Decide on the length of your press conference. Be sure to include this information in the invitation, and announce it before the conference begins. Also advise whether or not the panel will be available for private interviews after the conference, which is a good way for specialist reporters to get the detail they need.

AT THE CONFERENCE:

1. **Fact sheet** . Have basic facts and panel member bios prepared on paper. Give them to reporters while they are waiting for the conference to begin. This briefs them and helps them get the facts right.

2. **The moderator:** A public affairs person in your organization usually acts as the moderator. He/she introduces the panel members, explains the ground rules, watches the time and picks the questioners. Avoid embarrassment by giving the moderator a page with your name, title and any information needed to introduce you.

3. **Opening statement:** One panel member should prepare a *Basic Answer Model* of your main message. Keep it short. Reporters don't like long statements.

4. **Who answers what?** If more than one person is on the panel decide in advance how you will divide up the questions. Agree on a private signal system for who wants to answer which ones. If a panel member gets stuck, signal and then come to the rescue.

5. **Give concise answers:** Twenty journalists, forty five minutes. Do the math and figure how much time they each have to ask one question and get an answer. Each reporter has been sent with a specific angle, and if they don't get to ask *their* question, they'll write the story with a grudge against you.

6. **Stick to the rules:** If one reporter gets away with sliding in three or four questions, others will follow, and complain if they don't get equal time. Sometimes reporters expect each panel member to answer them. Don't do it. It wastes time. Or a reporter may ask several questions all at once. Choose the question that best allows you to deliver your message, and just answer that one. You'll get the crowd's respect.

7. **Handling off-topic or highly technical questions:** If these require long answers of little general interest, keep it brief, and explain that arrangements will be made for the questioner to get the details from you after the conference.

A typical moderator's introduction:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Bob Fujimori, director of information for Worldwide International. To my right is our president, Franchesca Ching, to my left, Ivan Onwona-Ahmed, vice president of operations, and to his left, Imelda Gupta-McCormack, director of research. We have 45 minutes for this press conference. We'll allow one question and a follow-up on the first round, and then allow a second round of questioning if there's time. When you ask a question, please give your name and news outlet. Dr. Ching has a brief opening statement, and then we'll take your questions."

After the statement, Bob chooses the questioners one by one. He helps enforce the rules, but will bow to the panel if they wish to break them. Before the end of the conference he warns that there will be only two or three more questions. At the end, he thanks the media.

Usually reporters mill around the front after the conference is over, trying to get a few words on tape or ask more detailed questions of individual panel members. A certain amount of chaos is fine. Reporters appreciate the opportunity to ask these extra questions so they can get all the details they need.