

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

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Caution. Apprehension. Disdain. Curiosity. Hostility. These and many other words accurately reflect most people's feelings toward the media. Even before the advent of radio and television, I suspect that few people looked forward to being questioned by a newspaper reporter. But especially with the advent of the electronic media, we are all aware of the impact the media can have.

During meetings of the AMA's House of Delegates, perhaps 35 to 40 print reporters are taking notes on the proceedings and the delegates are only mildly aware of their existence. But bring in one camera crew from a local television station and behavior changes: there are whispers, posture changes, and sideward glances.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Before I discuss crisis management and the on-site interview, I will focus attention on letters to the editor.

Let us say that one morning you pick up the local newspaper and read an article maligning you or your organization and containing factual errors. Your first instinct probably is to strike back, but that is usually the worst course of action. Always take time to cool down: talk with colleagues, advisers, or lawyers or take a walk.

Four possible courses of action come to mind:

- (1) No response: Sometimes this is best. Ask yourself, "Is this a one-day story? If it is, write an angry letter to the editor, put it in a desk drawer for 24 hours, then read it again and drop it in the wastebasket.
- (2) Write a letter to the editor but not for publication: This tells the editor that you take the story seriously and want to make sure that future accuracy is assured.
- (3) Write a letter to the editor for publication: Select and respond to two or three of the worst errors in the article and keep your letter under 200 words (one page, double spaced).
- (4) Suggest a counter interview: Arrange to meet with a journalist who may be sympathetic to your position or believes you have been wronged. Supply this person with fresh information, not just a recitation of self-justifying statements.

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