

You and the Public Information Officer, or READs and PIOs

PIOs work for the incident commander (IC), but serve anyone who is affected by, thinks or feels they're affected by the incident. You may have information the PIO needs and vice versa. The PIO might ask you to be interviewed by a member of the news media or you may need to ask the PIO to seek out opportunities to tell a story linked to your work on the incident.

Fireline Handbook, Chapter 8.

The Information Officer, a member of the Command Staff, is responsible for the formulation and release of information about the Incident to the news media, local communities, incident personnel, other appropriate agencies and organizations, and for the management of all information officers assigned to the incident.

Fireline Handbook, Chapter 7, Common Responsibilities - MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Italics & slides added by Pete Irvine, PIOF and his NPS friend, Barb Stewart, PIO2.

- Prepare. Know the facts. Develop 2-3 key messages (*incident objectives and or the information plan are great sources*) and deliver them. Prepare responses to potential tough questions. (*That response may be to refer the reporter to someone else.*) If possible, talk to reporter beforehand to get an idea of subjects, direction, and slant of the interview.
- Be concise. Give 10-20 second, simple answers, and when you're done, be quiet. If you botch the answer, simply ask to start again. (*Really. Most reporters want you to look good.*)
- Be honest, personable, professional, presentable (remove sunglasses and hats). (*Stand up straight, shoulders back and use your best thoughtful look. Practice this using a mirror. If you look bad in yellow, try to wear a bandana or tee shirt with your nomex that helps you look healthy and credible. If you don't have a mirror handy, ask a friend if you look presentable-check your collar, your buttons and zippers! Even print reporters are showing up with videographers these days.*)
- Look at the reporter, not the camera.
- Ensure media are escorted and wearing PPE when going to the fireline or hazardous sites. (*There's a set of guidelines for media escorts. A READ might be one of the incident personnel on such a tour, but should NOT be the only one unless s/he is also at least a crew boss and has discussed the tour with Operations and the PIO.*)
- Ensure local Public Affairs office is aware of media visits. (*Or, at least the PIO who should be in touch with the home unit.*)
- NEVER talk "off the record," exaggerate, or try to be cute or funny. (*There is no such thing as off the record.*)

- DON'T guess or speculate or say "no comment." Either explain why you can't answer the question or offer to track down the answer. (*You can also say, I don't know, but you can check with the PIO or _____. If asked about policy, be sure to direct the reporter to the home unit.*)
- DON'T disagree with the reporter. Instead, tactfully and immediately clarify and correct the information.
- DON'T speak for other agencies or offices; or use jargon or acronyms.

Remember, the words you choose are important, but even more important are your tone and appearance. You have good information to share. Give the reporter and the rest of the world every chance to really hear you by looking like the professional that you are.