9.14: Public Sector Contributors

Public-sector institutional sources are among the most important for some types of communicators to interview. Whether it is the investigative journalist seeking a statement from the state's Department of Natural Resources spokesperson about new limits on hunting in the state, the business reporter gathering information from the federal Commerce Department about import/export regulations, the PR professional working for the university athletic department seeking clarification about how to submit federally-mandated information about scholarships for athletes or any other myriad of purposes, public-sector institutional sources are crucial interviewees.

Local government interviewees

How do you locate the appropriate public-sector institutional source for your interview purpose? Local governments provide substantial help to communicators and community residents who search for information. Most local governments maintain websites that allow citizens to search for information; fill out applications for license and permit requests; send e-mail messages to city officials and staff; and learn of city activities, proposals, development plans and other important aspects of civic life. These websites also identify the various public officials, staff members and related individuals who keep the local government functioning smoothly.

Many local government offices and agencies now maintain a social networking presence along with more traditional sources of information. For instance, when the City of Minneapolis launched a new “311” mobile app for people to use to make service requests, they included an announcement about the app on the City's official Facebook page. In addition to seeing the City's announcement and identifying the relevant city officials to interview, a communicator could also read the reactions posted on Facebook from citizens who had downloaded the app and started using it.

State government interviewees

Like cities and counties, states have established websites where they provide access to information about the
individuals working for the state. For example, the state of Minnesota’s “Northstar” Web site is found at www.state.mn.us/. State and local government information on the Web is indexed at www.usa.gov/Agencies/State_and_Territories.shtml

State government agencies also have a social networking presence with Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. Take care that you have found the government sanctioned profile when searching in social networking sites, however, as there are often pages with similar names that are not official government sites.

You will usually seek interviews with a limited number of state officials rather than from a wide range of them.

The ad agency that has the tourism account might do most of its business with the staff of the departments of tourism, economic development and natural resources.

A public relations staff member with the Association for the Blind, for instance, may have frequent contact with the state officers of the departments of health and education administration.

Legislative reporters, obviously, will be broadly familiar with the state legislature as an institution. They frequently seek interviews with officials from both the legislative and the executive branches of the state government. You can contact the various departments and agencies directly to seek specific interviewee information.

**Federal government interviewees**

A comprehensive guide to federal government information is at www.usa.gov

Federal offices employ public information officers who are responsible for assisting information searchers in locating material and identifying interviewees.

In addition, each member of Congress has an office and staff that constitute a separate information factory. If you need to interview a member of Congress, there are established press offices and procedures for making those arrangements.

Sometimes it is more effective to interview a legislators’ staff rather than the member of Congress his/herself. Each
A legislator has staffers who are responsible for the bulk of the work done by that member of Congress. Individual members’ websites (as members of Congress, not their political campaign/election sites) or the websites of the House or Senate are appropriate search resources for staffers’ names and titles.

As with local and state government agencies, many federal government agencies now host a Facebook page, send information out using Twitter and engage the general public through many of the digital gathering places that are now so common. Again, be certain you are looking at the official page or feed if you use social networking information from any government agency.

As with any other interview, the best strategy for public-sector institutional sources is to go into the interview extremely well prepared. Because many of them are savvy interviewees, institutional sources will try to take your measure and determine how likely they are to be able to dominate the interview. They can usually tell within the first few questions whether or not you’ve done your homework.

The best advice is to know your stuff and approach the interview with an attitude of professionalism seasoned with empathy and friendly openness. Assume that institutional interviewees are talking to you in good faith and with the intention of being forthcoming unless and until they prove otherwise. Public-sector institutional sources are public servants and there is a presumption that they will interact with the public, including communicators, on an open and straightforward basis.

It is possible to ask difficult questions while still remaining on friendly terms. For instance, you can ask a government official about a controversial decision by phrasing a question such as, “Some of your critics suggest that your tax proposal will provide large advantages to the wealthiest citizens at the expense of those in the bottom third of the earning brackets. How do you respond?” This type of question phrasing helps you retain your “neutral” stance, without putting you in the role of adversary and forcing the interviewee into seeing you as the “enemy.”

A very important strategy for successful interviews with public-sector institutional sources is to gain the trust of your source. That is why it is so important for you to cultivate sources that you may need at some point in the future, even when you aren’t seeking something specific.

In other words, identify the people you are likely to need to talk to on a regular basis in your line of work (your public-sector institutional ad clients, the government officials on your beat, the PR officers in the agencies you interact with) and those people who have connections to other potential important sources.

Talk to those people on a regular basis, just to check in and touch base, and to let them get to know you as a conscientious and professional practitioner. Then, when you need to conduct a formal interview with that person or people within that person’s network of acquaintances, your contact knows you and knows that you can be trusted to do a good job.

No matter how hard you try, however, there are times when you will need to talk to someone you haven’t previously interviewed, someone who knows nothing about who you are, or someone who is well-trained to resist your questioning.

The most important strategy for you is to stay in control of the interview. Asking vague questions or demonstrating that you aren’t well prepared assures that your savvy interviewee will be in control. Avoid this.
Good interviewers know how to establish rapport without fawning, know how to admit when they don't understand something without sounding ill-prepared, and know how to ask sophisticated questions without sounding too clever for their own good.

Well-trained public-sector institutional sources can avoid answering questions in any number of creative and frustrating ways. Author Sally Adams lists the strategies that institutional sources (in this case, politicians) use to deflect questions:

- ignore the question
- acknowledge the question without answering
- question the question
- attack the question
- decline to answer
- make a political point, for example attack an opponent
- give an incomplete answer
- repeat a previous question
- claim to have answered the question already (ftnt 1)

Many sources may use some or all of these tactics. The sophisticated interviewer understands this ahead of time and knows how to counter. In almost every case, you can get the interviewee back on track by using some stock phrases or understanding responses that demonstrate that you are going to be persistent.

For instance, in response to an interviewee who gives an incomplete answer, you can use the stock phrase, “tell me more about …” In response to an interviewee who ignores a question or acknowledges a question without answering, you can use the stock phrase, “let’s return to the issue of…” And always, ask every institutional interviewee, “How do you know that? What is your evidence?”