6 ‘keepsakes’ for working with the media — your conduit to neighbors and constituents

When I walked into the conference room, there was a collective “hmmph!” from the hundreds gathered.

Such is the life when you’re a political reporter entering a conference of county board members who feel they’re constantly misquoted, misunderstood and, overall, mistreated by their local media. People tired of reading about how a tax cut was called a tax credit or seeing the expiration of part-time and fixed-term jobs called “layoffs.”

Dealing with the media is not as difficult as you might think. We are your neighbors. We are your constituents. The biggest difference being, we share your information to large numbers of your neighbors and your constituents, and it’s extremely important you make sure we get it right.

Here are a few easy tips to remember in dealing with the media.

1. Keep it simple
   This is the fundamental rule you learned in high school English, except there was one more “S” word attached at the end of the sentence. Chances are most people don’t understand what a TIF district is or that FTE stands for full-time employee. We all have professional lingo we use in our own worlds that outsiders would need a translator to decipher. Use common language you use with friends or family, not colleagues.

2. Keep it personal
   My goal was to cover the capital outside of the capital: Find the people, places and things impacted by proposed legislation and you have compelling, real-life stories. If your work will eventually save someone’s home, see if that person will talk to reporters. If your work will help a family in need of child care, see if that person will talk to reporters. If your work will eventually save someone’s life, see if they will talk to reporters.

3. Keep it timely
   The root of the word “news” is “new.” Don’t call a reporter with stories that happened a week ago. That’s not how the game is played. It’s a relationship game. Find individual reporters whose work you like and develop relationships with them. It’s much easier to get a story done by pitching a reporter whom you know and with whom you’ve worked in the past, than it is to blindy send it to five people in a newsroom with whom you have no relationship.

4. Keep it friendly
   I like it when government folks call to tell me what they’re working on or see how I’m doing. We all understand how the game is played. It’s a relationship game. Find individual reporters whose work you like and develop relationships with them. It’s much easier to get a story done by pitching a reporter whom you know and with whom you’ve worked in the past, than it is to blindly send it to five people in a newsroom with whom you have no relationship.

5. Keep it truthful
   Please don’t tell me something that’s misleading or flat-out untrue. It does a disservice to you and to our relationship. Nothing steams reporters more than journalists who feel they’ve been lied to. If you can’t tell me something, be up-front and just say that. That’s much better than lying.

6. Keep it up
   My high school basketball coach always used to tell me, “You can’t score if you don’t shoot.” Media members’ phones, social media feeds and emails are open to your story ideas. Please don’t assume a reporter knows about a story. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard from politicians saying, “Why didn’t you cover (fill in the blank)?” The No. 1 reason is that I didn’t know about it.