

RTD MEDIA RELATIONS
HANDBOOK

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A GUIDE FOR DEALING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

I. INTRODUCTION

The guidelines that follow governing RTD relations between RTD officials and members of the news media are based on the premises underlying RTD Executive Bulletin No. 74-33: that the public has an inherent right to know what the RTD is and what it is doing. The guidelines also assume that details of District operations and activities should be matters of public record, subject to public scrutiny and public accountability. Since it is principally through the news media that the public is informed of District activities, making District facilities and officials accessible to news media representatives improves public access to the RTD. Our society would not countenance or prefer a form of government that permits a tax-supported public agency to function in secrecy. In fact, the Freedom of Information Act compels the District to make public some documents and activities.

II. THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA RAPID TRANSIT DISTRICT
MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT

The RTD's main public information arm is the Marketing and Communications Department.

Operating units in the Marketing and Communications Department are Advertising, Market Research, Passenger Communications, Field Services, and the News Bureau.

The RTD News Bureau

The RTD News Bureau is one of five operating units within the RTD Marketing and Communications Department. The News Bureau has a Supervisor, two information specialists and a secretary. The secretary is responsible for processing and mailing news releases and other matter the District distributes to the media and for maintaining the computerized mailing list. The News Bureau, under the direction of the Manager of Marketing and Planning, conducts RTD media relations for the entire RTD operation within the Counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino.

Devices for Informing the Public

Types of News Releases

RTD issues about 12 different kinds of news releases including, but not limited to:

- O releases informing riders of service adjustments
- O releases informing the public of RTD Board actions
- O releases announcing new lines
- O releases announcing service innovations
- O releases announcing findings in RTD surveys or studies
- O releases announcing RTD ridership changes
- O releases announcing RTD personnel changes
- O releases announcing RTD receipt of funds
- O releases announcing bus purchases or new construction

In addition, RTD issues releases announcing promotional events for new services and announcements to the media of news briefings or other calls to news media members.

Some routine RTD news releases are of small interest to the "hard news" media but all are of interest to some media and their distribution is localized in accordance with the specific public they are designed to inform. Due to the high use rate by newspapers of routine RTD line-change or other service adjustment releases, the decision to issue them is not based on "newsworthiness" in a general sense, but on the fact that, when accurately localized, they provide useful transit information at the lowest cost to affected riders of the service involved.

Review Procedure for Releases Prior to Dissemination

To insure their accuracy and clarity, RTD news releases are reviewed by a selected group of specialists from the Marketing and Communications and appropriate technical departments. All RTD news releases must be reviewed for policy implications by the Manager of Planning and Marketing or the General Manager. Under the direction of

the News Bureau supervisor, information specialists with journalistic training and experience initiate releases in which they attempt to balance "color" with accuracy. The project manager of the transit program the release involves, or his delegates, are included in the review cycle to assure that the release is technically accurate. Also in the review chain are the RTD Manager of Operations or his delegate and the Manager of Customer Relations. If these officials or their delegates are unavailable, the release may be issued only with the approval of the Manager of Planning and Marketing, the General Manager, or their delegates. Managers are encouraged to suggest items beneficial to the District which may be publicized through news releases.

Managers in the review chain selected for their technical or other non-journalistic ability are urged to restrict their editing of news releases to correcting technical or factual errors, since

to do more may mar or cause imbalance to carefully stylized releases, decrease their use-rate by the news media, and incur ineffective costs.

News Briefings

News Briefings are held when in the judgement of the News Bureau Supervisor in consultation with appropriate RTD executives, the media and the public would be better informed if reporters were brought in or when the risk of public misinformation on an issue of importance to the District is present. News briefings may be held on short notice.

Criteria for holding news briefings:

- The topic must be highly significant (labor, political or funding matters: the District Board's position on major public transit policy; visit by distinguished transit official).
- The topic must be of such magnitude that it cannot be handled by a news release only.

--The topic is so complex that explanation or interpretation by the General Manager or an RTD Board member is essential.

One-on-one News Interview

RTD officials will be made available for personal interviews by members of the news media whenever it is convenient to do so and when it does not interfere with officials' performance of their duties. Depending on the news reporters' experience, attitude and ability, such interviews pose dangers to the agency only if managers do not observe the following ground-rules:

--Ascertain the subject matter from the RTD News Bureau so that all pertinent documents may be assembled to be referred to as necessary during the interview.

--Although the News Bureau person present will remain in the background during the interview, use his or her expertise to help determine if the reporter's question is "off the track" or irrelevant to his or her mission.

--Think of what you're going to say before you say it and consider everything "on the record."

--Assuming that anything you may say may be published, be attentive, clear, accurate, truthful and as pleasant as possible.

--If you don't have the answer to a question, say so, and try to get it.

--Try to refrain from using transit jargon and if you do use technical terms, translate them in clear everyday language.

Media Luncheon

This device has the same objective as the news briefing. The difference is that it occurs in a luncheon setting.

Media Activity at RTD Board Meetings

Although they are not yet completely installed, facilities to accommodate electronic news media needs in the RTD Board Room will soon be forthcoming. The latest Board Room media accommodations achievement was the change of lighting to enable television film crews to do their work with

"available light." With the news media in mind, RTD during construction of the Board Room asked the management of local radio and television stations to send technical advisors to confer with RTD operations personnel to assure media access and comfort while covering RTD Board meetings.

--refrain from pushing the television news media into a corner of the room during their filming. This may be orderly, but if it deprives camera-people of interesting shots of board members and people appearing before the board, it interferes with good communication to the public.

--camera-people should be free to roam around the room. They are quite capable of doing this and still not interfere with the proceedings.

--camera-people will refrain from damaging public property during the course of their work.

Tips on Television Interviewing

Television news reporters prefer top spokes-people for the RTD. In spite of this, exigencies connected with RTD-related incidents often preclude interviews with the General Manager and his executive staff or with RTD Board members. Often, television reporters talk to operations personnel at the scene of bus related accidents, or with mechanics at their work. Here are some tips that may prove helpful in such cases:

--If time permits, contact the RTD News Bureau and inform the bureau of the interview opportunity.

--Be mindful of the fact that, due to the nature of commercial television news, the editing process will delete all but the most pertinent and interesting part of the employee's statement.

--Keep to the substance of the topic being discussed, be open, truthful, straightforward and friendly and be aware that when the story goes on the air you will represent the RTD.

--Look at the news person naturally as you talk, the camera-person will select the best angle.

--If you feel tight in the chest, expel a deep breath. This has proven to be a relaxer.

--Don't pick your nose or tug at your ear during the interview.

If you are interviewed at the television studio:

--Wear suits or dresses of soft, medium colors or pastels. The RTD uniform is fine. Avoid sharply contrasting patterns and colors.

--Bald heads may require a little powder. Pancake makeup is available for exceptionally oily skin.

--Women should avoid heavy make-up and over-use of lipstick.

--Eyeglasses are not a problem, the studio will arrange lighting to avoid excessive glare.

--Cooperate with the director and floor manager during your appearance. If taped show is to be produced within set time limits, you will get hand signals indicating the number of minutes left and the "winding" signal indicating it's time to wind it up.

III. DANGERS OF DEPARTMENTAL NEWS MANAGING AND SECRECY

"News Management" is the attempt--more often than not the unsuccessful attempt--by a public agency to "ration" information about its operation to the news media, and to the public, with the aim of internally controlling the agency's public representation by trying to accommodate the interests of the agency's bureaucratic elements rather than the public's right to know.

(A.) Some Relationships: Information Management, News Management, Damage to the Agency.

In an operation the size of the RTD the practice of "information management" on a unit level may occur within a division, within the division itself or on a departmental level. This example, with others to follow, may make clearer the distinctions between information management, news management and damage to the agency:

The leadman on a maintenance crew at RTD Operating Division No. 30 habitually steals District tools after carefully ordering his crew to other locations. His supervisor is heavily dependent on the foreman and is aware that tool replacement

in this unit is extremely high. Yet, fearful of an encounter with the leadman, the supervisor in his reports to the division manager conceals the high tool replacement rate. Due to the tool related information managed by the supervisor, the manager makes reports and decisions based on this bad information.

An employee who knows about the tool theft rate in the unit makes an anonymous call to a newspaper and reports that at Division 30 some \$500,000 worth of tools have been stolen over the past six months. A newspaper reporter calls the RTD news bureau. Inquiry by the media relations representative occasions an investigation by the division manager. His records show no indication of tool theft. The reporter probes deeper. He interviews an employee, who prefers to remain nameless. The employee tells the reporter: "It's common knowledge that Joe Blow will steal the white out of rice." Further inquiry by the reporter reveals that the unit supervisor has falsified his report to the supervisor. The agency has a media relations problem due to efforts by the unit supervisor to manage information.

In other hypothetical cases we will discuss:

- an allegation that RTD employees are misusing assigned automobiles.
- a bureaucrat's insistence that a future meeting is confidential.
- a downtown traffic accident involving an RTD bus.

IV. DISTINCTIONS: CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF PUBLIC
INFORMATION AND SECRETIVE NEWS MANAGMENT

Although the basic premise underlying these guidelines and District Executive Bulletin No. 74-33 is that the public has an inherent right to know, RTD officials should be free of undue pressure by reporters in pursuit of their "story." The District employs media relations personnel to serve as intermediaries, whenever possible between District officials and the news media. Normally, news people respect the obligations officials have and they usually want only that information -- mainly technical information on maintenance costs, one-way route miles, number of buses in service, etc. -- necessary to complete their stories.

Only a lazy reporter uses a media relations persons to do his stories for him. Most reporters are quite aware of the fine balance that must be struck between getting the facts they need for their story and unduly injecting themselves into the administration of a public agency.

We will now discuss hypothetical situations that will distinguish between controlling the flow of public information and secretive news management.

These situations will involve:

- a pushy reporter "on deadline."
- a media relations representative with a buddy-buddy relationship to a reporter on an influential metropolitan daily
- a news story leaked to the news media

V. SOME MEDIA RELATIONS PRINCIPLES

The following principles should guide managers in their conduct with the news media either in or around RTD facilities or property or in the field during emergency situations:

- The quickest way to foul the flow of information to the public is to attempt to be the sole spokesperson for a department. Subordinates should be trained to relate to the news media whenever the department head is absent or unavailable and to make maximum use of the RTD News Bureau.
- Due to sensitivities gained in the course of their work, reporters are quicker than others to detect evasiveness. Signs of evasiveness tip them to a deeper story which they will eventually get.
- Only publicly-supported federal contract research centers such as the Rand Corp. or the Jet Propulsion Laboratory -- organizations whose work concerns the national defense -- have "classified", "secret" or "top secret" categories of information. The RTD has no secrets.

--Managers have a right and, in order to assume maximum accuracy, a duty to control the flow of information in the agency's interest as long as their intention is not to conceal facts the public has a right to know.

VI. MEDIA RELATIONS GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUAL RTD DEPARTMENTS

1. Community Relations/Government Affairs

In the course of their work, members of the RTD Community Relations/Government Affairs Division meet and talk to members of the news media in the course of their contacts with communities in the RTD service area.

Thanks to the fine cooperation of the head of that division, the District has arrived at a procedure for keeping public information staff people informed about what is said to the press by Community Relations/Government Affairs staff people. It is hard to improve on a memo written to his staff by Sam Olivito on October 11:

"As you know we are often required to respond to questions posted by reporters from both the print and electronic media while in the field. It is essential that you provide factual information. Immediately upon your return to the office, please contact the RTD News Bureau providing bureau personnel with information as

to the name of the reporter present, the media and outlet represented and what was provided while in the field. If, on the other hand, you know a story is being prepared in advance, the News Bureau staff should be contacted prior to the meeting to insure proper coordination of District information. We must recognize that when we are being used as a source of information by a reporter we are not always quoted in context. It is therefore necessary that you have that reporter contact the News Bureau. If you need any clarification on the above, please see me."

2. Planning Department

Route-of-Line information should be given to a News Bureau member rather than directly to the reporter. Planning Department personnel should confirm the accuracy of information given to News Bureau personnel. Planning Department officials should contact the News Bureau when they are approached or contacted by newspeople.

3. Division Managers and Staff

Managers of RTD operating divisions and RTD special agents should notify the dispatcher of media presence in or around RTD operating divisions and refrain from taking any action before contacting the News Bureau. Dispatcher personnel will contact the RTD News Bureau (Ext. 6323) during working hours. After normal work hours and on weekends the dispatcher personnel contacted by the news media will take the reporter's telephone number and organization and contact a News Bureau staff member at home. Dispatchers will not give to the reporter the home telephone number of News Bureau personnel. News Bureau personnel will then make contact with reporters. Dispatcher personnel will as quickly as possible provide bus accident information to News Bureau personnel as completely as possible as soon as it is communicated from the field giving the time, line number, bus run, direction of RTD and opposing vehicle, number of passengers on board, driver's name, number of passengers injured, injury to driver, time of accident and name of hospital to which the injured, if any, were taken.

When incidents other than emergencies or disasters occur which may have human interest value they should also be brought to the attention of the News Bureau. Such incidents may include a lost child on a bus, a missing deaf girl, a pet monkey aboard a bus, a fire blocking the run, a duck in a puddle in the path of the bus, etc.

Dispatchers must select from among such items only those with distinct human interest value and none that would cast discredit on the agency.

4. RTD News Bureau Personnel

(Should be contacted in the following order of priority weekdays after normal working hours or on weekends).

Walt Thompson - (213) 737-3038

Mike Barnes - (714) 846-2308

Alice Tolbert - (213) 653-1684

If none of the above is available, call Dick Dimon, Acting Director of Marketing/Communications Department (213) 790-1788. If Mr. Dimon is unavailable, call George McDonald (213) 373-1406.

5. Maintenance Department

When television crews request permission to film buses in yards at operating divisions, the News Bureau contacts the head of the RTD Maintenance Department for clearance. Such press activity which interferes with RTD operations should not be permitted. This means that it is the RTD News Bureau's responsibility to assure maintenance officials that visitation by media representatives will not (1) unduly tie up maintenance personnel (2) subject the District to liability due to injury suffered by media representatives (otherwise interfere with RTD schedules and obligations). Every attempt shall be made to dispatch a media relations staff member to the maintenance yard involved.

6. Transportation Department

Media requests to do filming or recording in or about RTD buses are cleared by the News Bureau through the Superintendent of Transportation. News Bureau representatives will accompany television reporters aboard buses, during filming, whenever practicable. Requests

by television stations to execute filming ideas in or about RTD buses which, in the mutual views of the Superintendent of Transportation and the Manager of Marketing and Planning will unduly interfere with operations or adversely affect passenger safety or comfort will be denied.

7. RTD Telephone Switchboard

Information calls to RTD Headquarters through the telephone information service which are generated by news items about the agency should be brought to the attention of the Manager of Customer Relations who will consult with the Acting Director of Marketing/Communications. The News Bureau will then prepare a script to be used by information operators to respond to questions from the public. The switchboard operator receiving calls from the news media after normal working hours or on weekends will contact News Bureau personnel in the priority order indicated above.