Using the Media

Good relations with the media are essential for effective seismic safety advocacy. The public looks to the media as significant sources of information on earthquakes, earthquake preparedness, and earthquake policy. Media sources—newspapers, radio, TV, Internet—have the ability to influence public opinion and to place seismic safety on the policy agenda. This brief offers suggestions to those responsible for developing media strategies, as well as to those who may become spokespersons with the media.

ADVICE FOR MEDIA STRATEGISTS:

Before Contacting any Mass Media Source, Develop a Communications Plan
Establish a time frame reasonable for different media initiatives, taking into consideration both the time needed to develop media messages and important dates, such as earthquake anniversaries. Divide the labor, assigning responsibility for writing, speaking, arranging media contacts, and other tasks associated with a campaign. Select one or more spokespersons who will communicate directly with the media, making sure that they are both credible and comfortable interacting with the media. Your plan should cover approaches and messages during routine times before a disaster and the messages and strategies you may use after an actual earthquake event in your area or nearby. In advance, think about what you want to communicate, and when you want to do so.

Media Sources May Find You before You Find Them
If media representatives contact you before you are ready, say something. At the very least, thank them for their interest. Don’t make things up. Don’t let them pressure you because they have a deadline. If they ask you a question you can’t answer, say you will check facts and get back to them. Do your homework quickly and then get back to them. Or recommend an expert who can answer their questions. Never say anything that would damage your cause or hurt your allies if it showed up in print.

The Media are Dizzingly Diverse
There are more media outlets now than ever before, appealing to very diverse audiences. New media such as cable television and the Internet coexist with more traditional print and electronic media. Media usage is highly segmented, with different age, ethnic, and other social groups getting specialized information from various media sources. This variety makes launching public media campaigns extremely challenging, and potentially very expensive.

Media have Different Strengths and Weaknesses
Mass media differ in terms of what kinds of, and how much information can be conveyed, the impression the information is likely to make on audiences, and how easy it is for audiences to access and refer back to that information. They also differ in terms of “market share,” in that some media (network television) reach a larger proportion of the public than others on a typical day. Additionally, media outlets differ in terms of the costs associated with delivering information. In crafting media campaigns, think through these differences carefully.
Understand the Needs of Different Mass Media Outlets
Establish long-term relationships with people who work in media organizations so that they will assist you in your work. View the media as collaborators in your advocacy efforts and work with media representatives in ways that make their jobs easier. Give the media representatives what they need and they will cover what you want them to. Many media work on very tight deadlines. Be flexible enough to handle the very short time frames associated with breaking news, as well as the longer time frames permitted by in-depth and feature stories. Television requires good visuals—always have some or be able to suggest great images. Local television news typically consists of short spots with short messages. More substance can be communicated in print than through electronic media.

ADVICE FOR SPOKESPERSONS:

Develop Skills that Enable you to Work Well with the Media
- Don’t use scientific jargon. Learn to talk in plain and simple language.
- Don’t be afraid to say that you don’t know something, and don’t feel pressured to respond immediately to difficult and complex questions that require more thought. If more information is needed in order to address a question, say so, and then get that information.
- Keep your message consistent, and remember what your audience needs to know.
- Don’t let anyone divert you from conveying your message.

Adopt a Style that Enables you to Relate to your Audiences
- Be honest, but also speak and carry yourself in a way that conveys trustworthiness.
- Be genuinely responsive to concerns that are raised, even when those concerns seem outlandish or unfounded.
- Never treat the media or members of the public dismissively or convey the impression that you think their questions are trivial or silly.
- Allow yourself to act easygoing and approachable. Avoid appearing arrogant to audiences.
- Recognize and address the emotional dimensions of issues that are being discussed, especially in situations that involve controversy.

ADVICE FOR BOTH:

Manuals and Courses can Help you Deal with the Media
Developing good relationships with the media is hard work, but there is information available to help with a range of communications challenges, from speaking with reporters after an earthquake to formulating effective letters to the editor and opinion pieces for newspapers. You don’t have to wing it. FEMA has training courses for media relations, as may your state office of emergency services. Local non-profits may be another source of training, along with university extensions and professional trainers. There are books too.