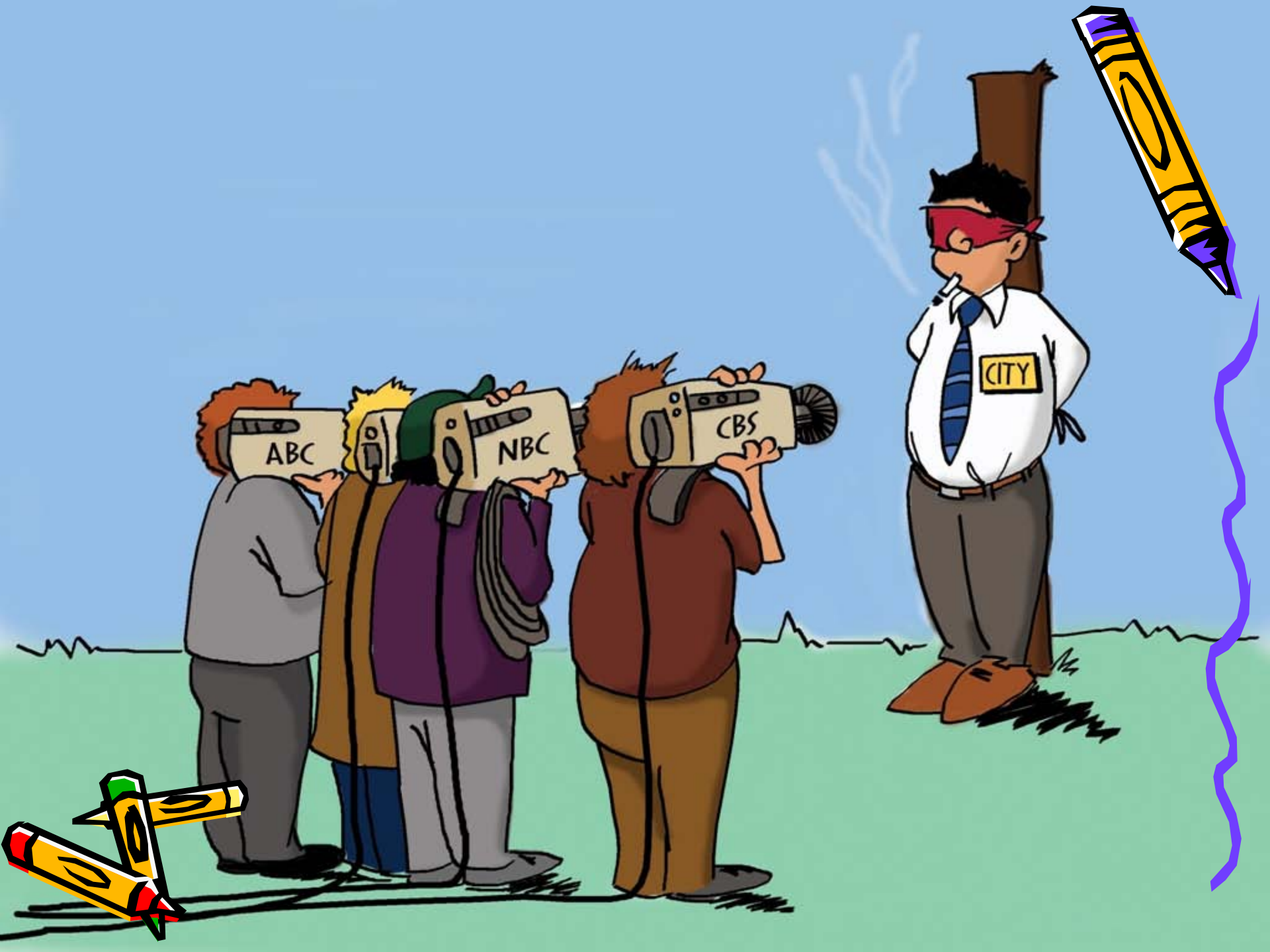


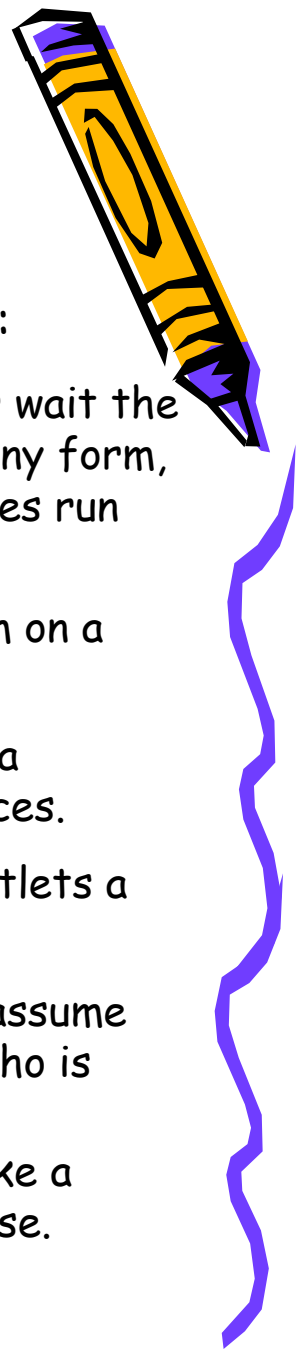
Interview Survival Tips

James Kunke
City of Lewisville





In the Line of Fire



No one voluntarily steps in front of a firing squad, but your own actions (or inactions) can have the same effect. Mistakes to avoid:

1. **Stalling.** This can mean not returning phone calls or making a reporter wait the "legal" 10 days for a simple document you hold and know is public. In any form, stalling rarely kills a story and almost always means the story that does run will make you look worse than it otherwise might.
2. **Misleading.** Don't try to downplay a reporter's story idea or send them on a wild goose chase for a story that does not exist.
3. **Lying.** The biggest mistake someone can ever make when dealing with a reporter. You **WILL** get caught, and you **WILL** suffer ugly consequences.
4. **Scooping.** Reward enterprise, don't betray it by sharing with other outlets a story idea that was brought to you by a reporter.
5. **Under-reacting.** If someone on your team thinks it might be a story, assume that they are right or seek input from a professional communicator who is on your side.
6. **Over-reacting.** Reporters can smell panic. Don't make a small story into a big one by too strong of a response. Again, if in doubt you should seek input from a professional communicator who is on your side.



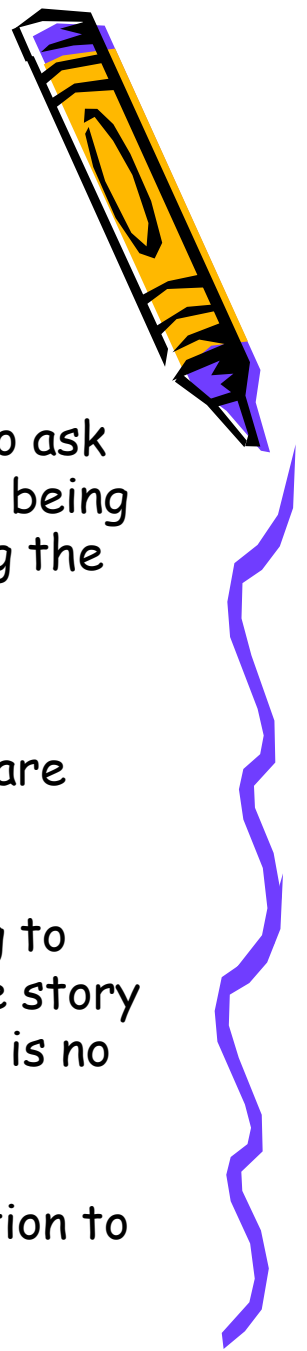
Before the Interview

As the interviewee, you are the keeper of the information. You should know before the interview starts what information you possess and how you want to present it:

1. **Know Your Message.** Make sure that you are clear as to what message you want to get out to the public, and think of several different ways to present it.
2. **Know Your Anti-Message.** It is equally important to know what information you do NOT want to discuss, so that you can prepare ways to avoid or mitigate those topics.
3. **Know Your Limits.** You cannot possibly be the expert on every topic, so know who your other in-house experts are and call them for assistance if you need it. You might even have their names and numbers handy to offer to the reporter.
4. **Know Your Reporter.** What is his or her reputation within your organization or with your neighbors? Be familiar with the style and tone of his or her previous work.
5. **Know Your PIO.** Smart cities hire professional communicators for a good reason - this stuff is harder than it looks! Call him or her for advice.



Rights of the Interviewee



As the interviewee, you are an equal participant in the interview and thus have certain rights. You have the right to:

1. **Be Prepared.** You have the right to buy yourself some time, to ask about the topic of the interview and the types of information being sought, to make a list of your key points and refer to it during the interview.
2. **Be Comfortable.** Be aware of your backdrop for television interviews, and pick the location of the interview so that you are comfortable.
3. **Tell Your Story.** Don't let yourself be interrupted while trying to answer. Remember that if you delay too long, they will get the story elsewhere. Introduce topics that are important to you. There is no such thing as "no comment," but you can defer answers.
4. **Not Tell Your Story.** You are under no obligation to participate in an interview.



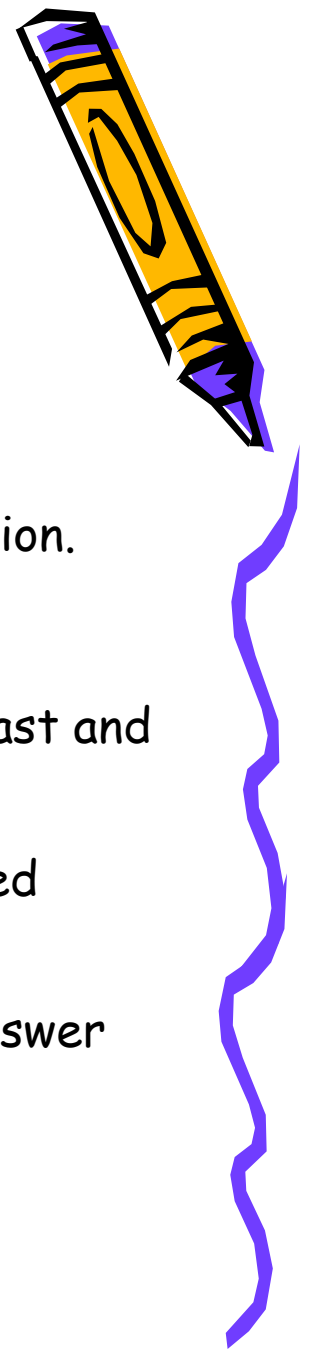
Ways to Answer Questions

As you work to stay on message, there are different ways in which you might answer the "tough" questions:

1. **Direct Response.** Give a direct answer to the question.
2. **Sum It Up.** Summarize the information in 8-12 seconds, or about 20 words.
3. **After Thought.** Don't pause while collecting your thoughts, and don't label it as a "good question" while you consider the question, but you can ask them to repeat or clarify the question or you can rephrase it yourself before answering (often when they ask the second time, the question will be less pointed and easier for you to answer).
4. **With Caution.** Tell why you are not giving an answer. Don't speculate or make up an answer. Remember that the camera is always rolling.
5. **Not His/Her Way.** Build a bridge between the question and your message. Don't give yes/no answers, don't avoid the question, and don't over answer. Start with the answer, and then back it up or just stop and wait for the next question.



Caution: Danger Ahead



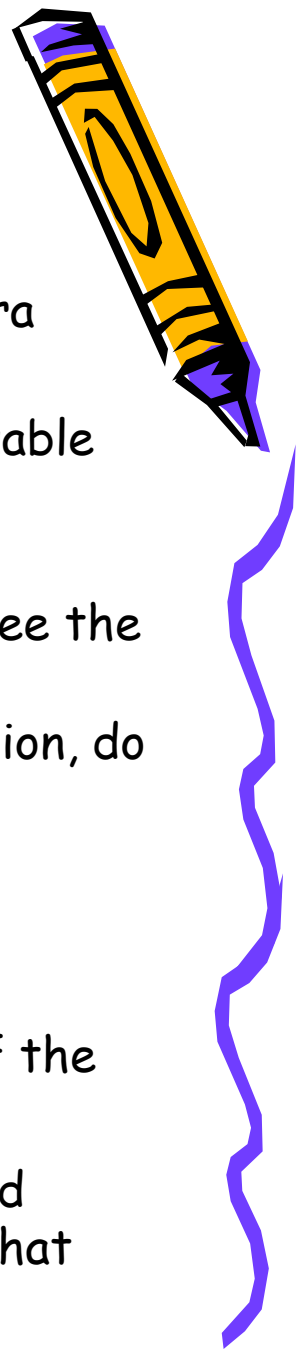
Watch for these types of "trap" questions from reporters:

1. **A or B Questions.** Often the answer is "neither."
2. **Putting Words Into Your Mouth.** Don't repeat the negative.
3. **"Other People" questions.** Don't react to third-party information.
4. **"Iffy" questions.** Don't speculate.
5. **Inconsistency Trap.** Don't allow bogus comparisons between past and present.
6. **False Comparison.** Don't allow bogus comparisons with unrelated situations.
7. **Dumb Questions.** Don't make the reporter feel stupid, just answer with courtesy.



e.g. "How high was the plane when it crashed?"
"Was it his last run of the day?"
"What is the condition of the deceased?"

After the Interview



These steps after an interview can lead to a better final story:

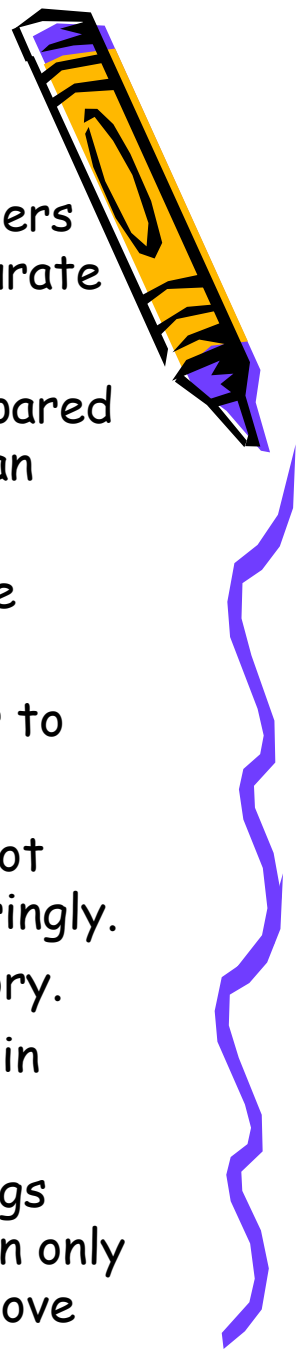
1. **Be cautious.** Remember, you are still on the record. The camera never stops rolling.
2. **Be helpful.** Volunteer to get information or suggest other valuable sources.
3. **Check yourself.** In the interest of accuracy, you can ask print reporters to read back your quotes. Do not, however, ask to see the entire story prior to publication.
4. **Respect deadlines.** If you agree to deliver additional information, do so in a timely manner.
5. **Follow up.** See if any additional questions have emerged.
6. **Check the schedule.** Ask when the story will be published or broadcast, and make sure you read or watch it yourself.
7. **Ignore minor errors.** Mistakes that do not affect the point of the story are not worth fighting over.
8. **Pursue major errors.** Call the reporter first and politely point out that there are inaccuracies that do affect the point of the story.



We've Struck an Iceberg!

There are plenty of bad reporters out there, but even good reporters can produce bad stories. If a story appears that is seriously inaccurate and creates a crisis situation for your agency:

1. **Call the reporter first.** Always start with the person who prepared the story to see if it is possible to correct the problem with an accurate follow-up story.
2. **Call the editor second.** If you receive no satisfaction from the reporter, then it is time to move up the chain of command.
3. **Letter to the editor.** If no correction is forthcoming, a letter to the editor can be used to present your side of the story.
4. **Guest column.** Similar to a letter to the editor, but carries a lot more weight. This is the hammer in your toolkit, so use it sparingly.
5. **Press release.** Use other media outlets to correct the bad story.
6. **Press briefing.** Similar to a press release, but only to be used in extreme crisis situations.
7. **Don't pout.** If you refuse to have future dealings with the paper or station in question, things can only get worse. Try to resolve the situation, then move on with the business of the city.



Crisis Communications

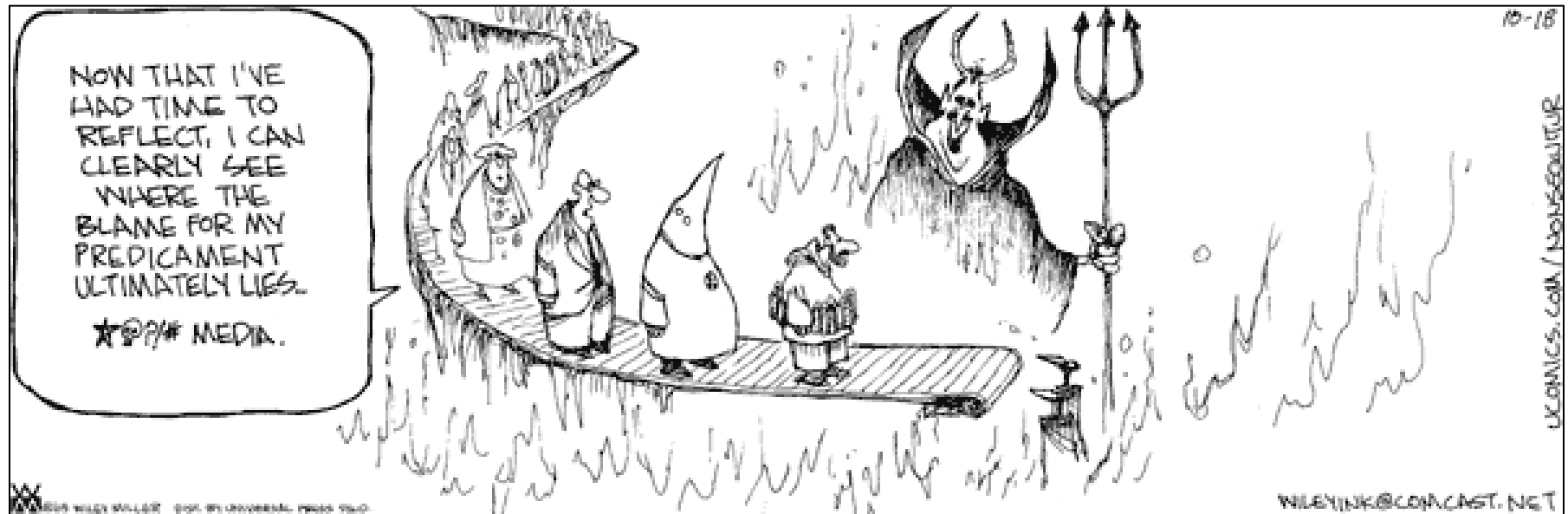
Some quick tips for communicating during a crisis:

1. **Prepare ahead of time.** Have a plan in place before you need it.
2. **Have a hierarchy.** Know who will communicate what information.
3. **Establish ground rules.** Then stick to them.
4. **Watch the clock.** Be accessible and be aware of deadlines.
5. **Be consistent.** This means speaking with a single organizational voice, even though more than one person might be speaking.
6. **Watch for silver linings.** Look for ways to turn a negative into a positive.

"Most communications crises are little more than everyday problems that have been allowed to get out of hand."



If the story is true,
don't blame the messenger.

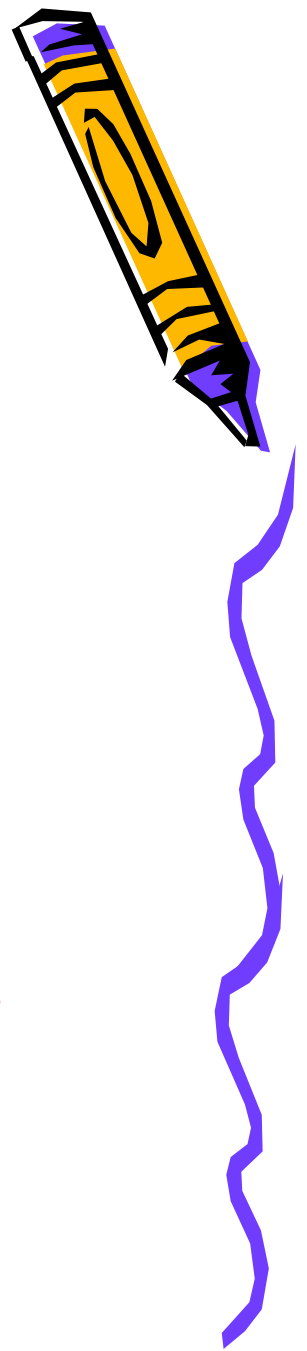


The public expects
public accountability.



When all seems lost,
just remember...

Your landfill is filled with
yesterday's "hot" headlines.





Interview Survival Tips

James Kunke
City of Lewisville

