Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

Hello, I am Valerie Byrd Fort an instructor at the University of South Carolina and part of the Get Ready, Stay Ready Community Action Toolkit team. I'm pleased to welcome Thomas Fladung, who is leading us in a series on crisis and reputation management for school and public librarians. Fladung serves as managing partner for Hennes Communications, which is a team of award-winning journalists highly experienced in public relations and reputation enhancement.

 The crisis communication training series will help you and your library team develop strategies for responding to any crisis, big or small, making sure you arrive on the other side with your reputation preserved and even enhanced. All of these sessions have been recorded and are housed on the Get ready, Stay Ready web page. This evening, we will have our last session in the series titled Taking Control of Q&A, as there will be time for questions at the end and this presentation is recorded.

So now I'll turn it over to our speaker. Thank you so much for being here.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

All right. So, as we've been discussing now for three weeks, as folks running public libraries for, I think the last couple of years, you guys have been facing tougher and more persistent questions than is perhaps ever been the case in your careers. We want to end this series today talking about a series of simple, pragmatic steps that we think you can apply to be more effective in a Q&A situation.

And hence we call this media training. And we do conduct it to help prepare folks for media interviews. As you'll remember, I was 33 years, in media, as an editor and a reporter. So especially in my years as a reporter, I literally did thousands of interviews. It was my job to control those interviews.

Even if you've been interviewed, what you would consider a lot. You run into a veteran reporter like I was, and that scale is going to be heavily weighted in my favor. What today is all about is, is how to prepare and practice and use these preparatory steps to help even out the scale. And while we do call it media training, it's equally applicable to any situation where you may face a Q&A, whether that's one-on-one with a patron in a community forum, meeting with your board, any place where you're subject to being asked questions.

We think these techniques can help. We call them the control tools. And the number one thing we stress is that we don't think anyone should enter into a Q&A session without being armed with key messages. What are key messages? Well, they are what you most want people to remember when they're at that Q&A, after they read that story, after they see that broadcast, after they've attended that community forum.

They're what we used to call in my former business to walk away. What do you want people to remember when they walk away from this Q&A? Key messages they should reflect your public library's mission and values. They are, as we have said, all for weeks now. They are truth. They are always truthful. But they are not just statements of fact.

They're what you want, most want, people to know about you and your library in this situation. That's why they're particularly applicable to controversies and crisis situations. Since they are sound bite length, they are punchy. They are memorable. We use the rule of three. How many key messages should you have going into an interview? Which three? Why? One is not going to be enough to get you through a Q&A, particularly with a reporter, but you get more than three you might not be able to remember them, especially in that kind of rapid-fire saga war that can occur during a media interview or any Q&A situation.

What we suggest is if you have an hour to get ready for a Q&A, if you have a day, even better. If you have a week, take advantage of that time. Sit down with your colleagues at the library and brainstorm. Hey, what are the three things we most are going to go through in this Q&A? What are the three things I most want people to take away from this?

What do we want to remember and remember again? That they should reflect your values and your mission as a as a public librarian and as a public library. Okay. So, you got those key messages down there, punchy. They're truthful. They're the things that people are going to remember about this. What do you do then? Well, brainstorm the questions, particularly if it's a media interview.

But again, any Q&A and not the easy ones, not the ones you know you can handle. See if you can come up with the most impertinent, rude, or unexpected questions you possibly can. The ones that you really hope you don't get. Because then if you get them, you're going to have prepared for them now, particularly if it is a media interview.

If you're dealing with a reporter, I can tell you can go to one of a couple of places, to start to think about what that reporter's going to ask. And again, it all starts with this will not be a surprise to anyone who sat through any of these other sessions. It starts with social media. If this is a situation, if you're being interviewed about a situation that was in any way playing out on social media, social media has become a tip sheet and a source list for reporters.

I'm going to go check out and see what people are saying about this situation on social media, and I'm going to build questions right from that. I may take questions directly from what people are asking on social media. So, you should review social media if there are comments about the situation there. By the way, I'm also going to go to your social media, the library, social media channels and your private social media if I can get to it and I'm going to see what you do there and what you're saying. So social media is one.

Number two, I'm going to know your history. I want to know your public library's history. So, if this situation has come up before or something similar to it, or you've had other controversies or you just had a tough tax levy, I'm going to know all those things.

So, you need to know. And by the way, I don't care if you've been at this public library for six months or 36 years. They give you to me as a source. You inherit the history and I'm going to know it. So, you need to know it. Third, and this sounds simplistic, but people forget it. I'm going to scour your website.

So, you need to remind yourself what's on your website. What are you saying about yourself? What is the public library saying about itself on that website? And how could that lead to questions that you may face? We do a lot of harness. We do a fair amount of work with heavy construction firms because obviously they that's dangerous work.

And accidents do occur and people get injured. And sometimes sadly people die on workplace sites. Inevitably you have a serious injury or you have deaths in that kind of in that kind of situation. I would go to that company's website and it will have emblazoned across the homepage. We put safety first. Well guess what? One of the questions that CEOs going to face is going to be you put safety first.

It says on your website, how did that work out for you today. So, you can prepare for that. So, know what's on your own website. Again, brainstorm with colleagues. Hey, what do you think? What would you ask me if you were in this situation? What do you think we're going to get asked? Once you have those questions, obviously what are effective answers?

Well, effective answers in any situation, but especially in a meeting situation, they're brief. If it's legal, moral and ethical. To answer the question, we think you should answer the question. Don't dodge questions. Don't spin. Spinning is the first cousin of lying, and it will get you in more trouble. But once you've answered the question, stop. And if it is a media interview, stop.

 Even when the reporter does this.

I was about 5 or 6 seconds, and it always feels like about a minute and a half. It gets uncomfortable, especially in an interview situation. This is one of my favorite techniques. When I was a reporter, I would just, the person would answer, they would stop and I would say nothing, and then I would say nothing. And almost inevitably, they felt compelled to fill that vacuum with more information.

And a lot of times it didn't matter. But sometimes they said things to me that they wish they had, so don't feel compelled to. Once you've answered the question, stop. And if you have to get in a staring contest with the reporter, do it. But don't do my job for me. Answer the questions as honestly and transparently as you possibly can, but when you feel like you've answered them, just stop.

Effective answers besides being brief. Never, never speculate. And I'm going to try to get you to speculate. Not necessarily because I'm a miserable S.O.B., although I may be, but because it makes my story more interesting, especially in a crisis. Or if you're dealing with a problem, you're probably at point A, I want to jump to point J. I want to know whose fault this is.

I want to know who's getting fired. I want to know if you're getting sued. I want to know all those things that you probably can't answer at this point. So, by the way, I don't know is a very fine answer. You can't get through an entire interview repeating, I don't know, but if you don't know, you don't know if you can refer me to somebody who you think might help me get that information, great.

If you need some time to gather the information, great. And if you just don't know, you just don't know. And there are many times, especially early on in a crisis when you don't know because you don't know what happened, you don't even necessarily know what you're going to do about it. Now, if you say, I don't know and you do know and I find out, then it's really going to be game on.

But I don't know is a legitimate answer when you don't know if in the course of asking the question I get something factually wrong, correct it. Don't let that sit out there. And by the way, one of my other favorite techniques was I used to ask sources questions that I knew were factually wrong to see if they knew and to see if they would correct it.

So correct misstatements of fact. If you're in an interview situation and this includes everybody, but especially with reporters and let's say your 2 or 3 questions down the road and you realize how you wish you would have answered that question a few minutes ago, unless you're in a live situation led TV situation, which is really extreme, and I just can't imagine any of you are very many of you ever being in that situation.

But if you want a do over, ask the reporter for a do over. 99.9% of reporters, I know will do it. I mean, they need you to, right? And they may need to go back to you, especially if it's a controversy or crisis. That's going to be a long, ongoing story. So, you say, hey, Thom, you know, you asked me that question a few minutes ago about banning. I have a better answer. I'm going to say, lay it on me. Let's go. Now, even if you're effectively answering these questions, you're really doing well. You've anticipated these questions. You have short answers. If all we're doing, though, is I'm asking questions and you're answering, I'm asking questions and you're answering. That scale still is tipped in my favor.

So, the other piece of the control tool we strongly recommend people practice is getting back to your key messages, pivoting back to your key messages. And that can be as simple as phrases like you see here. You know, Thom, I can't speculate about that right now, but what I can tell you is and deliver a key message. The most important thing I want your readers to know about this situation is deliver a key message that there's a couple of things.

First, it signals to the reporter what's important. And to remember, while this interview may be the center of your day, it's probably one of five, six, seven, ten interviews I'm doing that day. So, you give me some key messages that are truthful and make for good quotes. I'm going to be pretty happy, and I'm more likely to stop the interview and move on, which you also would like.

But here's the real reason to keep repeating key messages. The most natural thing in the world for me to do as a reporter is to ask you a question or follow up question about what I just heard, and if that's off of your key message. Now that scale's starting to even out because that's what you want to talk about.

You want to expand on your key messages. You'd love to get questions about your key messages because they're based on your mission. They're based on your values. And those are the things you want to talk about. That's one of the ways that you help take control of an interview. All right. So, if you're just delivering key messages, though, even if you're repeating them like I've urged you to do, and they're just you just have key messages, you're going to sound like you're sloganeering. You're going to sound, frankly, like the Sunday morning politicians who are, you know, elected officials and politicians. Whatever you think of them, I can tell you they're expert at delivering key messages.

Sometimes I don't hear the supporting facts, the examples that illustrate that point. And you have them. You have them in large volumes. You’re public libraries. You've been doing this for decades. You have the good works, the best practices to support those key messages. So be ready to trot those out. When I was a young reporter, in South Carolina, actually, when I was at the State in Columbia, I was a business reporter for 3 or 4 years.

I've been a business reporter for about three weeks, when it suddenly hit me that every business in North America puts its employees first, because I, every everybody I interviewed about their business said, you know, Thom, we put our employees first. Well, you know, the first time I heard it, it started to not mean a whole lot. In the 55th time I heard it meant nothing.

But as I was interviewing a CEO and she said, you know, Thom, we put our employees first. You know what that looks like? We have a scholarship program for employees who want to get a higher degree or their undergraduate degree if they don't have it. And that scholarship program also applies to their kids. And we have a retention rate here of 93%. And seven of our nine members of our leadership team, they came up through the ranks.

Now it sounds like she puts her employees first because there's meat on that bone, and I'm more likely to use that key message and those supporting facts, which is exactly what she wants me to do. Examples bring messages to life, and it makes it more likely that those people are going to remember and use your key messages.

So that's it. That's the control tool summary. It's that simple. On this slide. These slides will be on the Get Ready, Stay Ready toolkit site. But already there is an expanded version of this I believe it's seven pages on preparing for interviews, particularly media interviews. More tips, bridging phrases a lot of other stuff that I think you'll find you can use but that, in essence, is how we recommend anyone get ready for any Q&A situation. And especially one involving a journalist in a media interview situation. And with that, about Q and A's, I welcome any Qs.

Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

Thank you so much. I have not seen any questions come up in the chat yet.

I thought this was about Q&A, right? So, it was full of A's. but if you do have any questions, we'll wait a few moments to see, and you can place them in chat. All right. So, I have a few great, maybe more connected to a previous week’s tips for communicating with school board. It popped up on me.

So, tips for communicating with school board. Be a frequent speaker just on special occasions or better to email.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

What a good question. So, in terms of tips for communicating with the school board, I think it's best to pick your spots. Really? and there's nothing wrong with being a frequent speaker. It also depends on what you're most comfortable with. I'm trying to shoehorn people into communications techniques that they're uncomfortable with. I think everybody can prepare and practice and get better.

It's like the old joke, how do you get to Carnegie Hall? Well, you practice. How do you become a better interviewee? Well, you practice. That said, though, I also want people to be in the form where they're most comfortable. And in this case, I think I might say, you know, keep my powder a little dry and be a less frequent speaker.

But you mentioning that on email reminds me of a tip I forgot, which it's a tip that makes me hold my head in my hands when I think about journalists doing this. These days. But they do. Here's one of the ultimate control tools. If you are in a media interview situation, ask the reporter to email you their questions in advance.

You know, I can assure you that when I was running newsrooms, we never would have done this and I would have killed a reporter who did it. But these days, with reporters frequently under the gun, having to post constantly, they're much more likely to do it. And I mean, you want to talk about a way to keep control of an interview, you know, have the questions right in front of you.

You answer them at your leisure in writing. And by the way, you save that. So, if the story doesn't reflect that Q&A, you can publish the Q&A on your website. So anyway, that's the email. and then there was a follow. A crazy community member mentioned a librarian by name, his school board, community time rant, how to respond?

Well, I think oh, I think that I would probably, I here's what we talked about. I think we talked about this in a previous session. When you're dealing with outraged people, arguing with them and correcting them will not make it better, especially in the moment. In fact, they will get angrier. So, I would say confronting this person about and I'm not saying you're suggesting confronting them, but confronting them about it in that setting probably would make it worse.

One of the things I'm going to be thinking about is, first of all, getting to that librarian who was mentioned by name and talking to them about what just happened, talking to the rest of your staff about what just happened. Because I want to inoculate the people that are closest to you, I want to we almost always take an inside out strategy communications, and I want the people who are closest to you care about you.

The most, those insiders, to understand your position on this. And then, if necessary, I'll take it outside. But the poor what probably wouldn't work because in that public setting, taking this person on, as tempting as it might be, what happens if you misspeak, ask for do over as soon as you realize it happened up?

Believe it or not, even in 2023, people are pretty forgiving of that. Reporters are pretty forgiving of that. So, if you misstate something, misspeak about something, say, you know what I, I, I realize now, ten minutes ago I screwed up. I said x about y. Here's what I mean. Now, people, your critics may accuse you of either lying then or lying earlier, but you'll never win them over anyway.

You're speaking to those people who either do care about you or are quizzical about how you're handling this situation, and the more authentic you can come off to them, the more authentic you can be to them, not come off, but the more authentic you can be to them, the better. And people do misspeak. So, I would just take it on, I'm going to keep going here.

Valerie. awesome stuff. Right? Trying, tying this in with your crisis communications plan. Chat would it be smart to have those key messages you've mentioned already? Part of that plan?

Absolutely, absolutely. Crisis communication plans are built around key messages. So, if you think that your subject to facing activists who may want a book ban, if you think you are subject to activists who may want to take you on over LGBTQ issues and get your key messages together now about that, put them in a crisis communications plan.

Even if it's not a formal thing. Put them somewhere you can get to them. Brainstorm them now with your staff. Do that work ahead of time and you'll have used peace time wisely. And then when, then when the bullets start flying, you'll be all that much better prepared. And then if you know the local media wants to interview you about it, you already have key messages.

So those are great questions.

Speaker: Valerie Byrd Fort

Yeah. Thank you so much for those questions. And thank you so much for this series. It's been really powerful, really important. And like we've said before, the recordings are on the Get Ready, Stay Ready community toolkit website and stay tuned for more, from our team, in the future. And I thank you so much for all of this.

And thank you all for being here. And if you have any other questions, what we're here and, have a great night.

Speaker: Thom Fladung

Thank you so much, Valerie. Thank you all for taking this time. I really do appreciate it. I hope that was helpful. And, you know, we're friends now, so if you ever need any other advice, you know how to get in touch with me. At least get my cell phone.