

Focus on the Media



Proactive Media Relations The Visual Library Initiative

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Electronic and print media always seek opportunities to obtain photographs and videos to enhance the stories they produce. Although they often can capture visuals when law enforcement activity occurs, such as at crime scenes, motor vehicle accidents, or press conferences, some situations do not provide opportunities to gather them (e.g., cold cases, internal investigations, closed crime scenes with limited or no access, or incidents involving juveniles or protected classes). Agencies can capitalize on the media's need for photographs and videos by hosting a visual library initiative, a creative way to develop a stronger relationship with these outlets.

The Purpose

A visual library initiative provides the media with opportunities to photograph or videotape an agency's personnel performing a variety of functions at noncritical times. They can procure visuals

to use in publications and during broadcasts when unable to acquire actual ones for a current story.

Law enforcement departments have myriad opportunities to showcase programs, training activities, and various situations for this initiative. The greater the variety of visuals the media obtains, the more likely they will have appropriate pictures for specific stories with limited access. Based on resources, the agency controls the types of photo opportunities during the initiative, but input from local media will ensure the coverage of major areas for the benefit of both parties.

An Effective Plan

Once law enforcement organizations decide to establish this proactive initiative, they must carefully develop and implement a plan to ensure success. First, administrators should designate an individual to manage the program, which will need to be reviewed and updated at least annually.

Generally, the public information officer (PIO), whether a full- or part-time employee, is the appropriate person. Agencies without a PIO should assign the individual who most frequently interacts with the media.

Second, departments should identify media outlets to invite and then send formal invitations, explaining the purpose of the program, along with what items, personnel, and activities they plan to have for guests to photograph or videotape. PIOs aware of past instances where media representatives were unable to obtain pictures should try to include these in their visual library if possible. Attendees should be given time to submit suggestions for additional footage opportunities they anticipate finding valuable. If agencies cannot arrange for such requests, they should explain their inability to fulfill them.

Finally, departments should hold the program on at least two different days and times, ensuring access during both the day and night for outdoor settings. Further, although a variety of locales makes the initial set-up more complicated, it results in more realistic venues.

Valuable Visuals

The types of file footage agencies consider providing the media will vary, but certain basic visuals will benefit most outlets. Simple photographs and videos of the police chief or sheriff are crucial and should include two head shots, one with a somber demeanor. Other photographs of the leader signing paperwork at a desk or conversing with a citizen or officer provide important but nearly impossible footage for the media to procure at a moment's notice. Other simple visuals sometimes hard to obtain include dispatchers talking on the radio and

answering telephones or officers receiving a briefing before the start of their shift.

Patrol cars driven with emergency lights activated usually are fairly easy for the media to acquire and have become a highly recognizable aspect of what many people believe officers do quite often. But, access to an academy driving track can provide video of the intense training that officers and deputies must undergo before getting behind the wheel of an agency vehicle. Such video footage can prove crucial as a supplement to stories after a high-speed pursuit has occurred.

Traffic stops are another notably visible aspect of law enforcement. Agencies can arrange one at a location where drivers typically run red lights. Then, the media can use these photographs to augment future stories about a department's seatbelt usage campaign pedestrian safety, or DUI enforcement efforts.

Depictions of officers performing forensic work, such as fingerprinting and casting shoe impressions, and engaging in tactical operations (e.g., rappelling, conducting defensive tactics drills, or handling arrest scenarios) also offer great visual value. Agencies can permit and easily organize photography of specialized vehicles and equipment, such as armored cars/trucks, ballistic shields, or a cache of weapons, at no cost. The slamming of a jail cell door can produce dramatic footage for news stations to play during reports involving arrests and convictions. Further, doors that have signs with the words *internal affairs*, *interrogation room*, or *juvenile* will help set the scene on stories where no access is possible.

Additional Considerations

The visual library initiative supplements but does not substitute for effective proactive stories

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with the media. Extending an invitation to the media to conduct stories at regularly scheduled field training exercises, major operations, firearms qualifications, SWAT training, and community events will provide in-depth coverage that educates citizens on important aspects of law enforcement and community policing. Such stories also present opportunities to improve media relations, resulting in minimal additional work for the agency.

Any visual library initiative must include a candid discussion of the media's ethical use of visuals. Media outlets often save photographs and videos shot for a previous story and reuse them, which can result in the pictures not matching the current topic (e.g., an officer is arrested for stealing two bags of marijuana from an evidence locker, but, during the news report, the television station shows a tabletop full of cocaine confiscated in a major drug bust earlier in the year). Moreover, photographs or videos from a visual library or file footage never should identify a specific officer not involved in a case or incident nor should they mislead the public regarding the scope of a situation or operation. All photographs and videos not taken for a specific story should be labeled as such, a common practice at most media outlets.

Conclusion

Although the media certainly prefers to have current and immediate access to law enforcement activities to obtain photographs and videos, this is not always possible. A visual library initiative represents a proactive effort by law enforcement to advance and, in some cases, improve relationships with the media. By developing an effective plan to implement such a program, organizations can help ensure that appropriate visuals will enhance news stories. Law enforcement agencies, media outlets, and the public all can benefit. ♦

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Wanted: Photographs



The *Bulletin* staff is always looking for dynamic, law enforcement-related photos for possible publication in the magazine. We are interested in photos that visually depict the many aspects of the law enforcement profession and illustrate the various tasks law enforcement personnel perform.

We can use color prints, digital photographs, or slides. It is our policy to credit photographers when their work appears in the magazine. Contributors should send duplicate, not original, prints as we do not accept responsibility for damaged or lost prints. Send photographs to:

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