



## **New Supervisors Institute**

Session III

Materials for

# **Tab 8**

# **Media Relations**



# Supervisor's Guide to Effective Media Relations

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## Who are we & why should you listen to us?

- Former journalists
- Working on behalf of counties
- Decades (too many) of experience



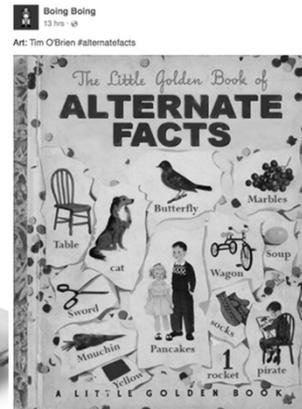
## Getting to know your local media

- Election season news coverage – a different breed
- Since then? Your experiences...
- Your concerns?

## Nightmares...



It's a whole new ball game –  
or is it?



So what is news?

***And why do they always focus on when things go wrong?***

- News has immediacy, impact and importance; out of the ordinary
- It is *not* news that we showed up and did our jobs
- It *is* news when we don't

## Who is covering your Board?

- TV
- Radio
- Newspapers – daily, weekly, monthly
- Online publications & Bloggers
- Trolls

## What happens when we don't tell our own story?



Someone else will; we just lose the chance to shape it. Once rumors are repeated enough, they're presumed to be facts.



## Defining your relationship with the media

- Establishing your connection
- Feeding the beast
- Setting boundaries
- Delegating
  - County staff
  - Your office staff
  - Community partners
  - Other electeds



## Protocols & rules of the road

- Chair
- Vice Chair
- By District
- By Topic
- Staying in your lane...



## Define Your message(s)

Just the facts...

- Develop your key messages and own them.
- Bridge back and make sure no interview ends without you reinforcing those messages.



## Define Your Message(s)

Don't feel compelled to fill time or space. Answer the question, but don't offer more unless you are bridging back to your messages..

Practice; say them aloud; say them to someone else; look at how they look in writing – these can have a life span longer than your road project or grant funded program.



## Value of good communication

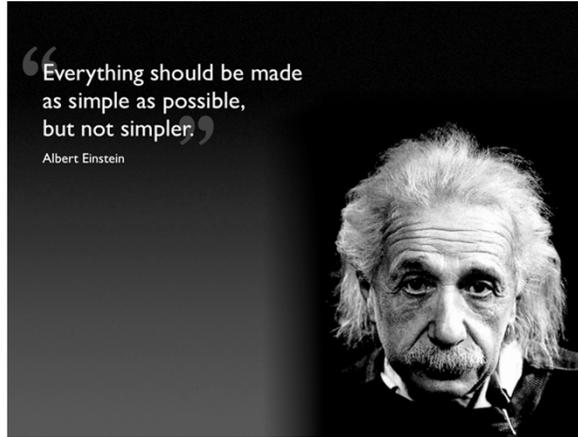
- Builds your reputation and credibility and that of your organization
- Wins friends and influences people
- Earns public support
- Builds a relationship that can payoff when things go bad



## Bad communication can destroy your credibility

- In 2008, Senator Norman Coleman was accused in the media of improperly accepting gifts from someone.
- During a press conference, his campaign manager, Cullen Sheehan, may have stayed on message a bit too much.

Even Albert says: Keep it simple,  
stupid -- in his own words, of course



You have to be able to explain  
something in language a class of  
8th graders could understand



You have to be able to explain something in the time it takes to ride the elevator about 10 floors



"You talkin' to *me*?"

## How will I get the word out?

- News Release or Media Advisory
- Interview with Key Reporter
- News Conference
- Editorial Boards
- Website
- E-blasts
- Social Media

Today's news cycle: Not 24 hours  
– 24 seconds



## Social Media is the new normal

- Government has evolved along with society – often a bit more slowly – in usage of social media to not only get the word out.
- No long have to rely on others; craft your own message

## Using social media to your advantage

### Your turn: how to use social media

A big pile-up has shut down the main highway into town.

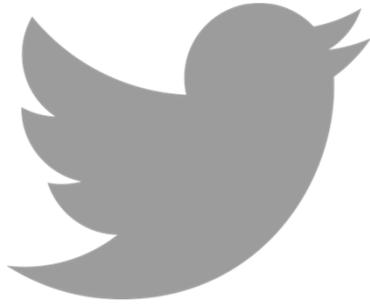
How will you approach this on each social media platform?



Social Media allows you to take matters into your own hands



## Twitter – who uses it?



- 67 million users in United States;
- 80% are mobile users
- First place many people get their news

## Facebook – who uses it?



It's still a happening place...

- 214 million users in US
- 54% are mobile users
- More than 17 million users in California

## Pause before you hit send

Ask yourself.... Do I really want to post this?



## So ... why do we care about all this?

“Next to doing the right thing,  
the most important thing is to  
*let people know*  
you are doing the right thing.”

-- John D. Rockefeller



## Ways to preserve your sanity

- Don't wait until there's a problem to figure out how to communicate if things go wrong.
- Make sure follow up is included in your plan.
- Always assume the person you're sending information to is on his/her first day on the job.
- It's okay to ask for help...



## When you return to your office:

- Questions to ask back home
  - Who handles your public outreach County?
  - Who handles media outreach for the County?
  - How do I reach the right person 24x7 in a newsroom?
  - Who has set the Google Alert on my name, agency, boss?
  - Which reporters cover my agency/department, and how will I engage them?

## CSAC Communications Unit:

We may not be Nationwide but we are on your side.



## So what can we do for you:

- Help you stay informed
  - What's happening in other counties
  - What's happening in Sacramento and DC
- Help you tell your local story
- Promote county best practices
- Promote your social media efforts
- Assist in times of crisis
- Provide media training



## **Keys to a Successful Interview**

### **Plan in advance**

A media or blogger interview should be treated just as any critical business initiative that can impact your county's reputation – and your career. You should have an overall strategy going in, complete with what you want to achieve. Put it all in writing, but prepare to be flexible and adapt to changing situations. Find out as much as you can about the reporter's style and the publication or broadcast news program in which you will be quoted. If you are being interviewed in person, suggest a location that will have a good backdrop. Set a time limit and stick to it. The longer you are talking to a reporter, the greater the chances of being misquoted or wandering off message.

### **Rehearse if you can – especially if it's a difficult issue**

Even if the topic is one that you know inside and out, practice, practice, practice. Role play with a staff member, and make sure your answers to the toughest questions are solid. Ask for feedback; are you rambling? Off message? Sounding insincere? The more you can practice, the more confident you will sound during the interview.

### **Develop your key points and stick to them**

A media or blogger interview is a two-way encounter. You will want to answer the reporter's questions honestly, but you will also focus on getting your key points across first. Make sure you have written down three key points you will want to make during the interview and practice them out loud until they come naturally. You don't have to memorize them, but don't let the interview end without getting them across. It's perfectly fine to have a page of notes in front of you.

### **Speak to the speed of the reporter's note-taking skills.**

You know your material, and you may be passionate about the project, event or program you're showcasing. It may be the first time the reporter has even heard of it, though. It shows when you launch into a lengthy speech while the print reporter is furiously scribbling away (or, in a phone interview, is clicking away at his computer at the office), trying to get down even a little bit of what you are saying. Slow down. Ask "do you want me to clarify that?" if you get the feeling you've sped through a response.

### **Once is not enough – repeat your key messages often**

Make sure your key messages have been stated and restated multiple times, even if it sounds to you like you're overdoing it. You want the reporter to have your point stated in several ways to boost the chances of it being part of the story. Reporters often pause during questioning, knowing how much we tend to want to fill the silence. If you aren't comfortable with a little silence, fill the gap with your key message again.

### **Speak in short, quotable sound bites**

Broadcast reporters want short, complete sentences that can be easily edited into their on-air stories. The long, rambling explanation in answer to a question will never make it on the air. TV and radio are looking for 10 seconds or less, so practice how your main points sound in small, efficient sound bites. Don't waste your words. You can speak longer in longer sentences for print reporters, but each sentence should convey a single thought.

### **Can I try that again?**

The vast majority of broadcast reporters know when you've said your point as clearly and effectively as possible, and don't need much more from you for radio or TV. But if you find that you've botched your key message, ask for a do-over. It's perfectly ok to say, "I'm sorry, that sounded better in my head than on tape. May I try that again?" If you're being recorded, they'll want the cleanest sound bite for the easiest editing. If you're live, you can still finesse a better answer if you've fumbled. "Let me answer that another way that might be clearer."

### **Don't repeat the negative**

Think before you answer when the question has a negative angle. A classic example during an emergency situation: Reporter—"This is pretty scary for the people of the town, isn't it?" You – "It is a very scary time for the people in our community." Guess what the headline of the story would be and who'd be quoted?

### **You're not done when the interview ends**

The most important part of an interview is the follow up. If possible, do it by email right after the interview where you can clean up your quotes and start a paper trail in case you end up misquoted or misunderstood.

## Media Relations Tips for Newly Elected Officials

[www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations](http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations)

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Working with the media is an integral part of being an elected official. The relationship is interdependent as elected officials need the media to amplify their voices and communicate to constituents.

Media needs local officials as an authoritative source of information. Interviews with local officials are an important source of information just as attending public meetings and reviewing agency documents.

Rapport with the media is essential in accomplishing the objectives of an elected official. An effective working relationship with the media (television, radio, print, blogs, etc.) can enhance the day-to-day work of an official and help in crisis situations. Accessibility to an agency and its elected officials also fosters a greater sense of public transparency.

### Reporters Are People Too

As is the case with all humans, no two reporters are alike. They differ in their levels of experience and by the medium (radio, TV print and blogs) within which they work. It is the reporter's job to report accurate information in a relatively quick timeframe. The better one understands and work within the reporter's constraints, the more effectively one communicates with the public.

Print reporters are more likely to be assigned to a "beat" which may include local agency or specific issues, such as education, environment, business, health, and so on. A challenge that local agency officials often face is that the "local government beat" can be the starter beat for less experienced reporters. This creates an opportunity to help reporters learn the intricacies of government issues, functions and procedures. Pointing them to the Institute's "Local Government Basics" materials for background is one option ([www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics](http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics)).

Newspaper reporters typically need and/or want quotes, background, details, facts, figures, graphics, photos, etc. More often than not, daily newspaper reporters will do their interviews by phone in preparation for their story to run the next day. A larger story may not run immediately and the reporter may choose to conduct interviews in person.

The Institute is grateful to Jann Taber for preparing this piece. Ms. Taber has thirty years' experience in media relations working with and for government officials, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private firms.

In contrast, broadcast reporters, both radio and television, are less commonly assigned to specific beats. This means they tend to know a little bit about a lot of issues and are often learning the issue as they are reporting on it. Providing them with background information before the interview can accelerate their learning curve. This can result in better interview questions on tape or camera.

Broadcast reporters have to distill complex issues into a very limited amount of time, typically less than a minute. They are not going to want or need mounds of information, so synthesize key messages into a few concise sentences. Also, whereas radio reporters capture words solely with sound, TV reporters also need visuals to go with their interviewee's words. Such visuals offer another tool to help convey information and key messages, so consider working with your agency's staff to supply them with the appropriate resources.



### Additional Resource for Working with the Media

A companion piece to this tip sheet, "Short Sound Bite Secrets," is available on the Institute's website: [www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations](http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations)

## Best Practices for Working with Reporters

Reporters have a job to do. They are talking with local agency officials, and probably others, to gain information on a story they are producing. They will often ask difficult questions that may seem antagonistic, but are usually not. They are simply trying to get the job done. Regardless of their demeanor, it is important to stay calm and:

- **Be Responsive.** Reporters operate on deadlines. To do their jobs, they need a timely response. Understand reporters' deadlines and meet or beat them. Establishing a reputation for responding quickly to reporter inquiries will earn respect and appreciation. Playing hard-to-get may cause the media to wonder what one is hiding, which may encourage the media to dig for something to uncover.
- **Be Prepared.** Find out what information the reporter is seeking and then, whenever possible, take the time to prepare for an interview by gathering facts, figures and key messages that will be responsive to the questions the reporter is likely to ask. It is okay to have this information as a reference during an interview when not on camera. Unless one has to, do not wing it. In the instance of a crisis situation, it is wise to have a standard holding statement such as, "I want to help you with your story, but I need to gather more facts before I can answer any questions. I know we all want to get the story right, so I will contact you within the hour to give you an update." Then, be sure to follow through.

- **Be Accessible.** Reporters generally want access to elected officials instead of their spokespersons. Reporters not only want it, they need it to do their job. The quickest way to tick off a reporter is put up barriers.
- **Be Friendly.** The golden rule applies. Treat the media as one would like to be treated. Get to know the reporters that are covering local issues. The goal is not to be best friends with reporters, but to have a friendly relationship.
- **Be Real.** Authenticity matters to both reporters and constituents. The goal is to sound knowledgeable, use plain language and be sincere. If more information is needed to respond, make the reporter aware and follow-up promptly.
- **Be Concise.** Reporters want and need good quotes. To be quoted (and not misquoted), keep statements (both written and spoken) short, relevant and interesting. Do not use jargon, acronyms or wonky terms. A written quote should be one or two short sentences. Radio and television will edit down a statement to sound bites that are only three to seven seconds long, on average. Avoid the temptation to talk too much. Don't speculate or speak in hypotheticals; stick to the facts.
- **Be Courteous.** Sometimes one may not have much knowledge or interest in a topic to provide what a reporter needs. In this case, say, "Thank you for thinking of me for your story, I don't think I am the best source for your topic." If possible, try to suggest another contact.
- **Be Proactive.** Sometimes it is appropriate to reach out to reporters if there is a story that needs to be covered. Do not hesitate to suggest stories or offer responses to newsworthy events before being asked.
- **Be Accurate.** Double-check and even triple-check any facts and figures used in interviews. Once inaccurate information is distributed, it's hard to pull it back. The risk is that accidental inaccuracy will be mistaken for dishonesty. Let the reporter know one needs to look up information and get back to them before the deadline.
- **Be Careful.** Assume that everything is "on the record" and will be attributed. Don't say anything that shouldn't be included in a news story. Never go "off the record." A reporter can get confused when reading back over his/her notes over what was "off the record" or they may just decide it's too good to pass up, and betray your trust. If one cannot say it on the record, do not say it.

*"Our most tragic error may have been our inability to establish rapport and a confidence with the press..."*

*- Lyndon B. Johnson*

- **Be Aware.** Be careful not to let a reporter put words in your mouth. Reporters may ask questions in a certain way, leading an official to repeat what he or she said. Any part of a response may be used in a story; be aware of tactics and say what is best for the issue at hand, not what the reporter is looking for. Be careful not to fill in long pauses by the reporter; stick to the question and answer concisely.
- **Be Cool.** Temperament is important in an interview. Staying calm and avoid expressing anger and/or frustration.
- **Be Honest.** Honesty is critical to both the media's and public's perceptions of local officials' integrity and trustworthiness. Avoid responding with "no comment" as it sounds as though there is something to hide.
- **Be Mindful.** Consider the interview environment in determining time, location and topic. If it is at home or office, take into account what you leave on your desk and walls.

## What Makes News

The basic components of every news story are: who, what, when, where, why and how. But what makes something worthy of news coverage goes far beyond these basics. The following ten elements determine newsworthiness:

- **Controversy/Conflict.** Controversy is the #1 element that creates news. Conflict is in ample supply at the local level. Championing a worthy cause or resolving a difficult conflict is likely to be newsworthy.
- **Timing/Relevance.** News is new information. It can also be something that is happening right now or that has just occurred. News must be fresh and current to be relevant. Elected officials are wise to stay on top of what issues local media are covering, should they be asked to comment on the developments of the day.
- **Notoriety/Celebrity.** The better known the person, business or organization, the more newsworthy the story. Local officials are newsworthy because of their positions as decision-makers. Reporters closely watch what decision-makers say and do and what they have said and done.
- **Impact/Consequence.** Consequence is how the information contained in the release impacts viewers, listeners and readers. The more people affected, the more likely something will get news coverage.

- **Nearness/Proximity.** The closer the event is to the news audience, the more news value it has. Although state and national news gets covered in local media markets, the majority of coverage is on news close to home. Reporters sometimes want a local perspective on a state or national issue.
- **Change/Gridlock.** Change, the potential for change and sometimes a lack of change is newsworthy.
- **Action/Drama.** Doing something is more newsworthy than having an opinion about it. The more dramatic the action, the greater the news value. This is particularly true for television, which needs more than a talking head to create a story visually.
- **Tangible/Understandable.** The abstract has less news value than the concrete. Take the time to work with agency staff to make agency facts and figures understandable and relatable to the public.
- **Emotion/Human Interest.** A story about people that generates any type of emotional response – inspiration, awe, happiness, sadness, anger, and so on – has an element of human interest. People like to hear about other people’s triumphs and failures. That is why tabloids and daytime TV shows are so popular.
- **Rare/Unique.** A highly unusual, rare or unique situation has high news value as John B. Bogart famously observed “A dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news.”

## Conclusion

Building and maintaining relationships with media is an important aspect of public service. Elected officials face a variety of challenges along the road of public service. In all occasions, having an effective relationship with media can serve an official and an agency well in efforts to distribute accurate and genuine public information. How an elected official relates to the media and reporters covering an agency will have a direct impact on the type of coverage that occurs.

As a newly elected official, learn the role and needs of media and reporters, as well as the demands of public office. If done authentically, the relationship between reporter and elected official will likely strengthen. When reporters have greater accessibility and confidence in the elected official and the public agency providing information, a mutually beneficial relationship develops and the public is better informed.

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### ABOUT ILG

This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Local Government Basics go to [www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics](http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics). To access this resource directly, go to [www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations](http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations).

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email: [localgovernmentbasics@ca-ilg.org](mailto:localgovernmentbasics@ca-ilg.org) Subject: Media Relations for Newly Elected Officials*
- *Mail: 1400 K Street, Suite 205 • Sacramento, CA • 95814*



## Short Sound Bite Secrets

[www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations](http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations)

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“That’s not what I said!” That is a common complaint people have after seeing their interview incorporated in a radio or television piece. But ask yourself, was this really taken out of context, or did the reporter just not have time to include the entire response?

Interviews may last for 10 or 15 minutes, but just a few lines will likely appear in the story. Reporters have to tell the entire story in one to two minutes (and sometimes even less).

The secret to getting one’s message in radio and television news stories is to make it easy for the reporter to use them by responding to questions with short, concise answers. This is known in media jargon as a “sound bite.”

## Key Concepts to Remember

Delivering a key message or solid sound bite requires skill and technique. Outlined below are several techniques for elected officials to consider when responding to a reporter’s questions.

## Develop Your Key Message in Advance

When a reporter calls or emails, take a few minutes to try to find out what information the reporter hopes to get from the interview and who the audience is. Develop two to three key messages to emphasize. The way to do this is to make them in single sentences in the active voice. Work with agency staff to provide supporting data and sync messages for consistency with the latest media strategy. Keep information simple and easy to understand.

## Be Prepared

To ensure a successful interview, know and practice messages. Before the interview, write up a list of anticipated questions and practice the answers.

The Institute is grateful to Jann Taber for preparing this piece. Ms. Taber has thirty years’ experience in media relations working with government officials, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private firms.

Have someone ask these questions as well as some surprise questions to practice concise answers. Use a clock or stopwatch to time answers. Aim for seven seconds.

Speaking faster to squeeze an answer into seven seconds is cheating! Speak at a pace that allows clear articulation of each word. Practice, but do not memorize answers. The goal is to sound spontaneous and conversational.

## Make Answers Simple

Answer questions as if speaking to a friend. Do not use jargon, acronyms, wonky terms or complex words.

*“If you can't explain it to a six year old, you don't understand it yourself.”*

*- Albert Einstein*

One would never say to a friend, “the financial condition of the agency is difficult because the revenue stream is not keeping pace with the expenditures and we face the possibility of having a deficit.” Instead, one might say, “Things are tough right now because we don't have enough money to pay the agency bills.”

Reporters are more likely to use sound bites that average resident can relate to and understand.

## Be Relaxed and Personable

One of the reasons Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were so successful was their ability to speak to YOU and only you. When answering a question, imagine speaking to someone. When being interviewed by a television reporter, look at the reporter when answering the questions, not at the camera. The reporter is the conduit for getting information to the community, not the end consumer of the information.

## Remain Focused

It's okay to pause for a few moments before answering a question. This provides an opportunity to focus on one's answers. Stick to one subject at a time. Lead with the most important point first. Then give an explanation or additional information to back it up.

Try to include your two to three main points as often as possible. The interview is likely to be edited prior to publishing or broadcasting. Repeating the main points reduces the possibility that key messages will be edited out.



### Additional Resource for Working with the Media

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## Speak Clearly and Confidently

Most people use non-words like “umm” and “uhh” unconsciously. Not only do non-words fill up precious time, they can make a speaker sound boring, uneducated and unsure. Instead, pause without sound.

## Stay Away From Traps

Avoid filling in silences. After responding to the question and delivering one’s key message, stop talking and wait for the next question. Many reporters will pause to make sure the interviewee is finished. Natural human reaction is to fill in these silences with more talking. Stick to the message, give the answer, and stop talking.

Sometimes a reporter will ask a question one cannot answer or does not want to answer. Say one does not have the information they need. If it is a policy not to discuss certain issues, it is fair to say "It's our policy not to discuss XYZ" and then bridge on to what the agency can talk about. Never say “no comment.” It sounds like the agency is hiding something.

Avoid saying things “off the record.” If it was not meant for the public’s ears, don’t share it with a reporter. Avoid saying anything you don’t want as the lead story of the news.

Sometimes a question may be based on wrong information. A good strategy is to lead with correction information, if possible without framing the information as a denial.

### The Basic Questions

Reporters will generally ask basic who, what, when, where, why and how questions.

#### Who

Who is most affected by this issue?  
Who will foot the bill for this initiative?

#### What

What does an official know about an issue, and what still needs to be learned?  
What does this mean for a city, county, or region?  
What do officials see taking shape because of this development?  
What would it take to create change on this issue?

#### When

When did officials first become aware of this development?  
When do officials think this will be resolved?

#### Why

Why did this happen?  
Why should residents or voters care?

#### How

How does an official make a difference in addressing this issue?  
How can constituents take action or access additional information?

A clear and concise response to a reporter’s questions provides an opportunity to convey important information to the public.

## Speak in Complete Thoughts

It is good practice to include part of the question in one's answer to ensure a complete thought. Remember, a quote is going to stand-alone so it should be easily understood without any set-up.

*Question:* What should people know about staying safe in this area's hiking trails?

*Answer:* If you want to stay safe when hiking in the "City of / County of X", the single most important thing to do is always stay on the marked trails.

When appropriate, consider starting each response with your agency's name.

*Question:* What efforts are being taken to conserve resources?

*Answer:* "The 'City of / County of' X has established aggressive sustainability goals to help conserve resources and save money."

## Overcome Your Fear

Microphones, cameras and lights can often create nervousness. The practiced seven second answer may turn into a long, rambling answer spoken too quickly in a real interview situation. Nervousness may cause one's voice to go up a pitch, or break up completely, which can undermine one's credibility.

One option is to practice to increase one's comfort delivering messages in a real interview situation.

## Conclusion

Interviews are an opportunity for an elected official to deliver a message in a clear, concise manner. Thinking through key messages and using these techniques to shape sound bites will help establish credibility and poise. Remember, the reporter is talking to the official as an expert. Media needs officials and officials need the media, so be prepared and welcome this opportunity to bring key information to the public.

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This resource is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Local Government Basics go to [www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics](http://www.ca-ilg.org/local-government-basics). To access this resource directly, go to [www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations](http://www.ca-ilg.org/media-relations).

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email: [localgovernmentbasics@ca-ilg.org](mailto:localgovernmentbasics@ca-ilg.org) Subject: Short Sound Bite Secrets*
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