

The Right to Remain Silent?



*By Filomena Fanelli, CEO/Founder,
Impact PR & Communications, Ltd.*

One of my favorite bits of [public relations](#) advice to give is this: build relationships when things are good. If you proactively tell your story, you prevent someone else from telling it for you.

This past week our social media newsfeeds were chock full of images of police officers, along with heavy-hearted sentiments from those shocked and hurt by the violence in [Dallas](#), where officers were senselessly killed. Then there was Louisiana and Minnesota. These are hardly the first times social media chatter centered on police departments. Remember Ferguson? Or the discussions surrounding the Los Angeles Police Department and brutality?

Officers are often the subject of the media and public's fascination – and scrutiny. One moment a departments' actions are questioned, the next moment those same men and women in blue are lauded as heroes. With all of this attention comes great responsibility and a need to connect with the very communities each police department serves through clear, consistent communications. Is it time to consider PR for the PD? Perhaps.

In recent years, many police departments have turned to public relations firms for assistance on that front. Some are doing so to stay ahead of a crisis; others to manage a situation that has already grabbed headlines or spun out of control. A

few examples come to mind.

Three months ago, the Honolulu Police Department announced that it had retained a public relations firm for the first time ever. Among the agency's duties are to media train staff and leadership, perform research, offer branding advice, strategic counsel and crisis communications assistance. Sounds wise, right? Now the kicker: the move was made following public criticism about Chief Louis Kealoha and his wife, Deputy Prosecutor Katherine Kealoha, and court cases involving disputes with family members. Accusations of police misconduct related to the investigation were made, but the Deputy Chief Marie McCauley, in a statement, noted that the impetus behind retaining a public relations firm was to "expand our team's capacity to communicate clearly and effectively to our community as we protect and serve."

A year ago, after several years of negative attention, the Portsmouth Police Department brought on a PR firm with a niche in representing police and fire departments. The agency's mission was to highlight some of the positive activities within the department, handle social media training for officers, disseminate news and respond to media inquiries and incidents. The most interesting part about the agency's direction? It wanted to eliminate missed opportunities to talk about the world of good these officers were doing in keeping the community safe and making it a wonderful place to live in, work in or visit.

[Ferguson](#) hired a public relations firm after the city became synonymous with racial profiling and police brutality. Then the very act of hiring an agency to protect its image – and one that was not at all diverse – caused more negative chatter. In this instance, timing was everything. Had that same firm already been in place as part of an ongoing public relations effort, the outcome may have been different.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) now has a robust

media relations department to better respond to news media, keep the public informed on its activities and to stay on top of the public's perception of the force. Smart move, LAPD, smart move.

There are certainly examples of getting it right. For instance, the Topeka Police Department recently hired a PR outreach person to engage in social and traditional media outreach. In a communication style that oozes 2016, the newly appointed PR person shared her plans to put together an "Ask the Chief" session to allow Topeka's Police Chief James Brown to more personally interact with the public on Facebook and Twitter and announced the formation of "Tweet Alongs," Twitter-based versions of ride-alongs that more fully explain what each unit does and encourage a two-way conversation.

While police departments all over the United States face enormous challenges by the very virtue of their work and the real-time responsiveness that today's media environment demands, the need for trust and transparency are always present. Telling a story is as important for public agencies as it is for private companies (and perhaps even more so). Do police departments have the right to remain silent? Maybe. Should they? In a world where what you say can and will be used against you, and one where what you *don't* say can be just as problematic, I'd think twice.

About the Author: Filomena Fanelli is the CEO and founder of Impact PR & Communications, Ltd., an award-winning public relations firm based in Poughkeepsie, NY. She is also an adjunct professor at Marist College's School of Communication and the Arts. Filomena can be reached at filomena@prwithimpact.com.