



by Kevin Sandell

Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part series focused on improving your unit's communication efforts through your Public Affairs Office. The first part of this series can be read [here](#).

The unit public affairs office (PAO) – and ultimately the unit's ability to communicate with its internal and external audiences – deteriorates without two critical factors: commander support and emphasis. Public affairs is a commander responsibility, and the ability to shape and affect the information environment ultimately falls to the commander. By laying out his/her intent for public affairs, the commander emboldens the unit's PAO to synchronize public and command information, crisis communication, visual information, and community engagement activities.

Without a commander's support and emphasis, a PAO may just be relegated to taking "grip-'n-grin" photos and running the unit's social media pages. While that may simply suffice, an emboldened and trained PAO is capable of accomplishing so much more to help shape the information environment.

According to [Field Manual 3-61](#), Communication Strategy and Public Affairs Operations, the commander's "communication influences internal and external audiences, as communication links information to decisions and decisions to action" (p. 1-2). The PAO is the commander's de-facto action officer for ensuring the unit's messages match those of the Department of Defense and the service's public affairs directorate.

Once the commander's intent for public affairs is complete, there are 10 ways to bolster your unit's PAO and communicate better to all the unit's key audiences:

1. **Initiate a Commander's Communication Synchronization Working Group (CCSWG) and have the PAO lead it with CoS/XO oversight.** Synchronized messages and communication strategies build credibility and directly impact communication effectiveness. The PAO should chair the recurring working group and invite representatives from the unit's Information Related Capabilities, such as Information Operations, Cyber, Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, and Electronic Warfare. The Chief of Staff (CoS) or Executive Officer (XO) should participate as much as possible to ensure command emphasis.
2. **Conduct media space analyses (MSAs).** PAOs at the 2 & 3-star levels should have the ability to conduct a media space analysis (MSAs) for the command. MSAs provide a critical information requirement because they often focus on the public's sentiment about a military operation or mission, both from traditional media and social media. PAOs should determine whether the sentiment is positive, neutral, or negative, which can help build the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) process or a public affairs running estimate. Commercial, off-the-shelf software, such as Sprinklr, can provide this data.
3. **Use the talking points, speeches, and Public Affairs Guidance provided by your service's public affairs directorate in your formations and social media posts.** The Army's Office of the Chief of Public Affairs (OCPA) develops a quarterly communications playbook that touches on each of the Army's lines of effort (including People, Modernization and Readiness, and one-page "Bugle Notes" that summarize a topic and provide hashtags, websites, and points of contact). These products are disseminated to all Army public affairs officers and public affairs noncommissioned

officers, and are designed to synchronize top-down messaging across all Army commands

4. **Sit down with your higher headquarters' PAO and discuss your communication intent and theirs.** We all like to complain that our next higher headquarters is aloof, overbearing, or unresponsive. Commanders and their PAOs, however, can help get the unit's communication priorities amplified by regularly engaging with the higher headquarters PAO. It is amazing what happens, and how quickly, when commanders engage staff officers to action a task, but it should be mutually-beneficial. The commander and PAO must also understand how the lower unit can support its higher headquarters' communication intent, which makes everyone look good.
5. **Start a community relations program with surrounding communities.** The U.S. military should inherently be a good neighbor to the surrounding communities outside its gates. In today's post-9/11 world, where military installations are walled off with limited civilian access, civilians often have little knowledge of the military or how service members train and live. Connect with, and even "adopt" local communities that surround you, by participating in city parades, neighborhood cleanup days, tutoring/mentoring in schools, equipment static displays or color guards, etc. Community relations is a pillar of public affairs, and your PAO is best equipped to oversee this program and liaise with local governments, schools, etc.
6. **Have your PAO lead an LPD or a PT session.** PAOs are often well-read or well-versed in lots of different topics, and can be a great resource for professional development sessions. Leverage your staff officers' experience and expertise to "open the aperture" on professional development topics beyond field manuals, hip-pocket training, or annual training requirements. Additionally, have your special staff and personal staff officers lead a PT session with the unit staff. Not only does it build camaraderie and esprit-de-corps, but you may be pleasantly surprised with the unique ideas for PT that are quite the workout.
7. **Participate in installation emergency drills or tabletop exercises:** As demonstrated during the 2009 and 2014 mass shootings at Fort Hood, units that were conducting their day-to-day business were suddenly thrust into defending the base, treating and evacuating patients, and even escorting media. Have a representative from your unit participate in the installation's emergency drills where they can learn response procedures, network with other installation/garrison departments, and bring that training back to the unit.
8. **Synchronize the PAO and S3/G3:** Your PAO and S3/G3 should be in unison for event

and training coverage. While PAOs do not report to the S3/G3, they should be in frequent communication with the operations/plans team, and each should be aware of the other's priorities. As mentioned in the series' [first part](#), one way to do so is by inviting your PAO to the daily command group meeting. PAOs should also be briefing in both Command & Staff meetings and training meetings. Ultimately, the PAO should be covering the same training events the S3/G3 has resourced, and the S3/G3 should resource the PAO with access to equipment, transportation, etc.

9. **Develop a crisis communication playbook and update frequently.** Units must develop pre-approved talking points, news releases, social media posts, and commander quotes for emergencies or incidents that may occur within the unit. For example, an aviation unit should develop a playbook for hard landings or crashes, a sustainment unit should develop a playbook for chemical/hazardous spills or vehicle rollovers, and an installation garrison can develop playbooks on training noise abatement, military vehicle congestion on civilian roadways, and active shooters. The playbook should not only address common scenarios, but also direct who's on the crisis action team, and provide wake-up and CCIR criteria. The XO or CoS should oversee revising the playbook at least annually.
10. **Provide feedback to your PAO.** Everybody wants it, but we rarely get it. Counsel and mentor your PAO (and the other staff officers too) with sustains and improves. Develop a plan of action between the two of you and provide a commander's intent for public affairs (sounds familiar, right?). Make a concerted effort to develop your staff, and you'll see dividends pay off.

When used with your commander's intent for public affairs, the unit's public affairs office can be a force multiplier in the information environment. By using these 10 ways (and the other 10 from the series' first part) to embolden your PAO, you will see the unit's communications efforts pay off. Your leaders, service members, and their families will be better informed; your external audiences will appreciate and understand the unit's accomplishments and challenges; and you may even play a role in convincing our allies, partners and adversaries that America's military is the partner of choice and a force to be reckoned with.

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