

Chapter 5

Public Relations

5.0 Introduction

In keeping with the mission statement, MDT strives to promote a positive public image to our customers, both internal and external. This means being courteous and helpful at all times. It also means providing information and answers wherever possible.

Public relations are accomplished through a variety of efforts such as:

- Public Relations Guidelines
- A Public Information Office
- Transportation Awareness Program
- Adopt-a-Highway Program
- Traveler Information System
- Official Correspondence
- Public Meetings
- MDT Internet web sites
- Customer Surveys

5.1 Public Relations Guidelines

MDT strives to provide the news media/public with accurate information in a timely manner. Therefore, all employees should cooperate with members of the news media or public seeking information concerning the Department. If someone asks questions that you are not comfortable answering or can't answer, please refer them to your District Administrator (DA) or the Public Information Officer (PIO), whichever is appropriate.

When questions are posed, remember that you do not need to answer on the spot. It is fine to ask a reporter or customer what their deadline is and what information they are seeking. If the deadline is extremely tight (i.e., they call at 4:15 p.m. on Friday and need the information by 4:45 p.m. that day), it's okay to tell them that you'll try to make their deadline but that you may not be able to get the information they're seeking. Either way, you need to follow up and let the person know what information you've been able to locate. We need to be responsive to both our customers and the media.

Here are a few guidelines that will help you in dealing with the media/public:

- Do not speculate or discuss topics outside your area of expertise. A reporter may ask, "What if..." when dealing with a controversial situation, and a great response is, "I can't speculate on that. Do you have another question?"
- Do not tell the media, "No comment." Instead, refer them to the District office or Public Information Office.
- Never lie or turn away from a camera. If you are not comfortable with the questions being asked, simply tell the reporter that the District Administrator or Public Information

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Officer would be the appropriate person to contact and then give that person the means to contact those people (phone numbers, cell phone numbers, etc.). We ask that you contact the DA and/or PIO to let them know this reporter will be calling and to give them the reporter's name and phone number.

- Do not let opinions get in the way of facts. Again, reporters often try to catch you off guard by saying something like, "Yes, but what do you really think?" A good response would be, "I think we need to stay on track. Do you have another question pertaining to the topic at hand?"
- Remember that you are never "off the record" with a reporter. Many great interviews have been ruined by the informal chitchat that takes place once the camera or tape recorder has been turned off. EVERYTHING you say is fair game for a reporter.
- If you discover that you have made a mistake during an interview, correct it as quickly as possible. Likewise, if you are misquoted or the reporter makes some other mistake (i.e., with data), please contact the Public Information Officer, who can assist with follow-up calls.

After a media interview, please send a written summary to the Public Information Officer via e-mail or fax. The Department has an on-line News Media Contact Form for this purpose.

5.2 Public Information Office

MDT maintains a Public Information Office to coordinate the public information efforts of the Department. The phone number is (406) 444-7205.

The Public Information Officer serves as the Department's primary media spokesperson, handling all information disseminated from the main office in Helena. He/she also assists the Districts with their media efforts. MDT's general guideline is that the Districts should handle district-specific issues and that all issues with a broader impact should go through the Public Information Officer.

5.3 Transportation Awareness Program

One of MDT's public outreach efforts is the Transportation Awareness Program (TAP). Volunteer highway maintenance field employees developed the original program in the fall of 1991. The Standard Operating Procedures for the TAP program identify event planning recommendations and employee compensation rules. This information is available on the Department's Intranet.

TAP is designed to incorporate all areas of MDT by combining Maintenance, Construction, MCS, Right of Way, Environmental, Materials and Office Employees into the program. The TAP team members give public presentations about maintenance and construction activities, safety in a work zone, and general information about how and why MDT does the things it does.

The program's intent is to:

- Improve safety for the public and MDT employees

- Improve public relations
- Improve public knowledge of what MDT does
- Improve the image of MDT employees
- Reduce liability claims
- Offer an opportunity for employees to participate in public awareness

This is a free service in Montana offered by MDT and facilitated by a trained TAP presenter, with high quality pamphlets and visual aids. Whenever possible we will bring a snowplow to the presentation site for the group to get into. Each presentation is tailored to the age group and time allotted. A typical TAP presentation is given to student driving classes, 55-Alive classes, grade schools, high schools and civic groups. Our public awareness displays are now present at tradeshows, large events and fairs.

Training is provided to the employees through the TAP coordinator. For more information about the Transportation Awareness Program or to set up a presentation, contact the Area of statewide TAP coordinator.

5.4 Adopt-a-Highway Program

The Adopt-a Highway Program encourages local community groups or individuals to adopt a section of roadway for highway beautification. Roadway sections are typically two miles in length. The group or individual agrees to pick up litter several times a year over a two-year period

There is an agreement entered into that identifies specific terms and conditions. A significant concern is the safety of those who are picking litter. The Department furnishes a safety-meeting guide, safety vests, trash bags and safety signs for use during cleanup activities. MDT Maintenance employees pick up the bags and debris for disposal at an approved disposal site. A courtesy sign is erected to recognize the group for adopting the section of highway.

5.5 Traveler Information System

The Travelers Information System was developed and is used to provide the traveling public with timely, accurate information on roadway conditions.

Winter Road Reporting

Winter roadway condition information gathering and distribution is a cooperative effort that utilizes maintenance section personnel, road reporting team members from Area/District offices and Helena headquarters staff. Winter roadway conditions are reported from approximately the end of October to the end of April. The exact dates are weather dependent.

Sections are polled by radio at regularly scheduled times twice each weekday, by 6:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Weekend reports are compiled each morning. Friday's report will be used over the weekend unless section reports changed conditions. Updates must be made when significant changes to roadway conditions occur.

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The Helena headquarters staff uses the information provided by the Area offices to produce the condition reports. Once all the Area offices have their information in, the statewide detailed report and maps are created on the Internet. These road condition reports are provided to media outlets, transportation industry information systems and on the Internet.

Load and Speed Limit Restrictions

The Area Maintenance Bureau Chief, for a number of reasons, may place load and speed restrictions on a route. The most common of which is during the spring of each year, when freeze/thaw cycles produce frost heaves and pavement distress on MDT routes. During this time, the Area Maintenance Bureau Chief will make a decision to put a load and/or speed limit restriction on specific stretches of a route to lessen the amount of break-up that occurs.

Once the decision has been made to put a restriction(s) on a route, the information is entered into the Load and Speed Limit Restriction Program. The restrictions can be load related, speed related, or both, and must be entered by Wednesday morning to go into effect the following Monday morning. Sections must place load limit or speed restriction signing at appropriate sites to be in place on the affective date.

The report is distributed weekly by bulk mailing, e-mail, fax and on the Internet in our Traveler Information Page under the Load Restrictions tab. Each new report with that week's changes goes into effect on Monday morning at 8:00 a.m. Once conditions improve load limit and speed limit restrictions are lifted.

Summer Construction Reporting

The MDT Road Reporting Unit provides a weekly construction and maintenance project detailed report from mid-April to mid-October each year. All major maintenance and construction projects should be reported. Delays, detours, road conditions and size restrictions are identified in the report. The report is distributed through bulk mailing, fax, e-mail and MDT's Internet Traveler Information Page under Construction /Maintenance tabs, and includes a map showing the project locations.

5.6 Official Correspondence

All official correspondence must be on the current MDT letterhead. Any correspondence representing MDT must be at the request of, and reviewed by the appropriate Area or District Administrator.

The Public Information Officer is the Department's primary spokesperson. Refer to 5.1 for additional media relation information.

5.7 Public Meetings

An employee may be required to attend and/or represent the Department at public meetings. You should be prepared to represent the Department's best interests, and familiarize yourself with the topic to be discussed. A few recommendations when representing the Department:

- Do not speculate or discuss topics outside your area of expertise.
- Do not let opinions get in the way of facts

- Remember you are never “off the record” at public meetings
- If you discover that you have made a mistake, correct it as quickly as possible
- Don’t fabricate any answers
- Dress appropriately for your audience

5.8 MDT Web Sites

MDT maintains two (2) web sites. An Internet site provides information for general public use and an Intranet site that is for internal Department information and use.

Internet- www.mdt.state.mt.us **(Public web site)**

Intranet-<http://mdtinfo/> **(Internal employee information)**

5.9 Customer Surveys

MDT conducts customer surveys every two years to determine prevailing attitudes and needs of our customers. These surveys are used to identify our customer’s expectations as well as to measure how MDT is meeting those expectations. These surveys are one of the many tools MDT uses to establish its long-range goals and objectives.

