

BetterPR- Understanding Military and Federal Public Relations

Kathie Taylor 00:00

Welcome to Better PR. Wherever you are in your PR journey you'll love exploring the stories from your peers about the many faces of public relations. Better PR is brought to you by In Plain Sight Marketing, a public relations and marketing agency in Carson City, Nevada, Renown Regional Medical Center in Reno, and the Sierra Nevada chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. I'm your host Kathie Taylor. Okay, welcome to Better PR. Today we have April Conway, the Public Affairs Officer for the Reno Housing Authority as our guest host, and I am so excited to welcome you, April and your guests, Please take it away.

April Conway 00:37

Well, thanks so much, Kathie. I appreciate the opportunity to come on the show and do this kind of stuff. I've never done this before. So I'm a little nervous. But as you said, I'm April Conway, Public Affairs Officer for the Reno Housing Authority. And with me today is Captain Emerson Marcus, the Public Affairs Officer for the Nevada National Guard, and Diedre Forster, the Media Operations Officer for the National Guard Bureau in Washington, DC. In this podcast, we talk about all types of public relations issues, it's trends, it's best practices. But today, we wanted to focus on federal government PIOs, specifically Department of Defense, and how they straddle the PR world between information dissemination and true operational security. So let's dive right in with Captain Marcus. You come from a journalist background. So you came to the dark side later in your career. Tell me how and why you made the transition from newspaper guy to the communications director for the 4500 person strong national guard.

Captain Marcus 01:50

Well, thank you, April, fist off before I answer your question, I just want to say thank you for having me on and how much of an honor it is to be here. I'm going to embarrass them really fast. But Deidre and April are two of my best mentors throughout my career. Obviously, April had my position for an extended period of about 10 or 15 years. And Deidre is doing a lot of what we do at the national level at the National Guard Bureau. So I seek their counsel and advice on a regular basis. And it's just an honor to be here with you today. So to answer your question about my journey from prints to public relations, or public affairs, I would say it was less of a transition and more of an evolution. When I joined the National Guard in 2009, it was to pay for my college debt. Obviously, patriotic duty, my father and my grandfather served in World War Two and the chance to join the military was always something in the back of my mind. But really, what it came down to was, I was a journalism student at the University of Nevada, Reno, who was facing some substantial student loan debt and I joined the military and one of the paths I took in the military was public affairs. So while I was going to journalism school, I took a semester off and went to the Defense Information School at Fort Meade, Maryland, for about five months, and where they have the Public Affairs training. I can tell you that bouncing back and forth

between traditional media and that background and to military Public Affairs, both realms helped me one realm helped me in the other and the other realm helped me and in the traditional realm. So during that time, I was a part time Guardsman. I did work as a reporter for the Reno Gazette Journal. I did community news. Well, first I started in sports, then I did community news and then I did breaking news. But the entire time I remain a public affairs specialist for the Nevada Army National Guard. Eventually, I left the reporting world in 2015, and went full time for public affairs. But the entire time I kind of kept one foot in traditional media and I really think that when you ask that question, I really feel like it's important to, as communicators, to try to maintain a proficiency on multiple platforms, multiple media, when I say this, not just public affairs or public relations. So what has served me well is over this course of my career, I tried to maintain proficiency in both and while freelance journalistic work hardly puts food on the table for my family, it has helped me hone my skills, I maintain a level of credibility among my journal friends. So just for instance, I was able to work as a stringer for the Associated Press while I was a public affairs specialist full time and I also did some sports reporting for the local paper in Carson City. So I really think that in this age of mass communications and how it has expanded so much over the course of the last two decades, maintaining kind of proficiency in both has really served me well. So I think that might answer your question.

April Conway 05:43

Absolutely. It sounds like you've really mastered the art of being a jack of all trades, which is, as we've seen in the industry, so much morphing, you know. PR used to be very, very thus and so about you, you started at A and you ended up at B But now, in the last 20 to 25 years that just exploded and PR is everywhere in so many ways. And let's next, a chat with Deidre. You've worked as a civilian for the National Guard in Wyoming and now in DC. But you've also held federal positions with the US Missile Defense Agency, and Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA, is there any PR professional with more crisis communications experience than you?

Diedre Forster 06:32

Which girls? Yeah, you know, any of us who are in PR really never hope to be a crisis communication.

06:40

Oh, I think Deidre has frozen. It's not even winter in DC and I think she's frozen. So we'll wait for her to come back online. But Emerson, conventional wisdom used to be that the military didn't talk a lot about its activities, it was very closed, unless you were in the military or had served. But that's changed a lot in the past 10, 15, even 20 years. What are your thoughts on why that's happened? And what does that mean for the public and their level of knowledge of US military activities?

Captain Marcus 07:27

I'll answer by saying no comment.

April Conway 07:30

No, you won't. Absolutely not.

Captain Marcus 07:33

So the Department of Defense is not the FBI, right? So a lot of our activities, especially in the National Guard, which is much different, in so many ways than our active duty counterparts because we are a kind of a community based here in the state working kind of for the, definitely working for the governor, on activation for the governor. We are, as we say, neighbors helping neighbors, we're members of the communities we serve. And so when it comes to that, you need a little bit different of approach to engage your community. When it comes to the guard, and maybe being more outspoken in the community over the course of last 40 years, I think a lot of this, and I'm a history nerd, as you know, April. But a lot of this goes back to the post Vietnam War era, and the total force concept where the guard and when were the was basically a concept to end the draft. And so the active duty, the military started leaning more heavily on the guard for more things. So under this all volunteer force, under this total force concept, we've had to help boost recruitment efforts. So our messages align a lot with recruiting, right? So we have to try to, when we get engaged our community, we're always thinking about more recruiting is always kind of in the back of our mind. And with this, with the events after what happened with 911. And this, for lack of a better term, prolonged wars that the US military engaged in. The guard continued to be relied on more heavily for the federal mission overseas and supportive these wars. So the guards mission has taken on a completely different role over the course of the last 40 years because of that evolution. And in order to continue to engage our community and continue to maintain our just our presence and these communities, we've had to do a lot more to be a little bit more open and transparent and telling our story. So I think I mean, just to go off on a little bit of a tangent here, the guard is such an interesting agency or organization.

April Conway 10:29

Animal, it's a beast, it's a beast.

Captain Marcus 10:32

We have a huge internal communications message, our mission, and we have a huge external communications mission. But like you said, we're all nearly 5000 people in the National Guard, and 75% of our members aren't full time. So that internal communication is so vital, because the vast majority of our force were a reserve force, by definition, by origin, that in order to maintain cohesion in the force, we must also work very hard on those internal communications. But those external communications are always there, because we are community members and we are a community organization. So like you said, it is a behemoth.

April Conway 11:24

Okay. definitely agree with that. Deidre, we lost you there for a while. But now your it looks like you're back. Are you back?

Diedre Forster 11:31

I think I'm back. I'm listening to what Marcus has to say. No, he was totally correct, that we have to be very transparent in government affairs.

11:43

I want to go back to some of your previous experience Deidre, especially working with FEMA, the

Federal, I'm sorry, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the US Missile Defense Agency, both are which deal with crises, one, the crises that we never hope we have to deal with, with actually deploying missiles, and then be FEMA and that goes hand in hand with the National Guard with, you know, ready response in our local neighborhoods for fires, floods, local catastrophes. Tell me about the difference between PR and both of those types of agencies.

Diedre Forster 12:24

Well, you know, I am here from the government. So I am here to help, right? What everyone's really, it's kind of, there's a lot of proactive communication that goes into a reactionary thing, you know, when we're deploying to assist, it's FEMA, right, we're coming out to help out at the request, or, at the end of a major disaster, we still had to plan how to do that. We still had to talk about all the messaging we're going to have prior to that, you know, same with the National Guard. When you're deploying the National Guard to respond to a state emergency example. You want to know what you're going to say and what you're going to do before you get there. So proactive strategic communication is super important in both of those things because you have to practice the what if, you know, and you have to make those relationships with people on the ground before you get there. And I think that's one thing that a lot of people don't really understand is that you do have to plan for that service. Right? You do have to plan for crisis. What if we have to deploy a missile to counteract another missile? How are we going to message that? What are we going to do? So there's a lot of role playing and a lot of planning that goes into those responses.

April Conway 13:47

Absolutely. And moving on to just the interesting dichotomy of your career, Deidre, is some may be under the impression that in order to work for the US military in a PR role, you got to enlist, you got to go to basic training, you got to go to war, all of that kind of stuff. You're living proof that that isn't the case. You're well trained, of course, but just not in a uniform sense. Tell us about the career opportunities that exist for someone interested in working in a civilian role.

Diedre Forster 14:20

Well, I would be remiss if I don't encourage people to enlist and join the Public Affairs community on the military side of the house, right? Because, as you know, that's kind of our role is to get people to support and and want to be a part of the military in some way. But yeah, I mean, there are a lot of civilians in the military world, supporting military operations and being a public affairs professional is just one of the ways you can do that. I started my career as a state employee working for the Wyoming military and then I transferred into federal service to central service PA. But, you know, as Marcus said, all of those skills that you've learned, as a journo, or you know, in your in your school courses, whether it's web design, social media, how to write a news release, how to run a press conference, all of those things come into play. And you just have to capitalize on those skills and make sure that those are honed and ready to go when you have the opportunity.

April Conway 15:28

Absolutely. So we've touched a lot on military public affairs and a little bit on FEMA and a little bit on US Missile Defense Agency. But there are a lot of other federal agencies and departments that have PIO and PIO positions federally. If you aren't in that world, you may not know that Bureau of Land

Management has PIO jobs, US Department of Treasury, the IRS Department of Transportation, NASA Corps of Engineers, all of those different places, and people have federal agency, PIO and PIO roles within them. Do you guys work with those other federal agencies communications folks?

Diedre Forster 16:12

Yeah, partnerships are super important. One thing that, you know, we all try to do when we're doing communication is as we stay in our lane, right, we only talk about our role, what we do, what we know. So if we're working in a partnership, then we have to work with the BLM, for example, and have them chat about what they do. And then we have to work with FEMA. You know, all of these people have their own messages, their own communication goals that they want out. So one of those things that you have to do is work together with those people to make sure you're covering all the bases.

Captain Marcus 16:45

Yeah, well, I'll just add that one of our units missions is a firefighting mission. And we work closely with the US Forest Service who leads the mission, right? And this is interesting, because one of the things I am very open about, as a public affairs officer is the guard is the last one in and the first one out. And it almost feels kind of weird to say that from a public relations standpoint, but it's an important message to get across that we are a support element, we support. Like I said, that dual mission that the guard does for the federal government and for the state, and then with firefighting for the US Forest Service, but we support. We don't lead these missions. And it's like I said, it's not something that anyone after I say it to a reporter sometimes they're like, oh, wow, that's interesting that you're admitting that but it's true. We are there to support so when we go on these firefighting missions, we use something called the modular airborne firefighting system that is owned by the US Forest Service, but it rolls into the back of a military C 130. And we get called

April Conway 18:01

Thats an aircraft by the way.

18:03

Yes, a military. Yeah, big gray transport aircraft. But yeah, so that system is owned by the Forest Service. And we basically, on missions, based on what the Forest Service tells us to and only after the private fleet is exhausted, and needs assistance. So we work very closely with the Forest Service. We work very closely with the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho on these missions. And these myths and these partnerships are vital.

Diedre Forster 18:38

And Marcus, when you do that mission, you have to work with other guard units from different states. And so all of you guys have to work together to make sure everyone is communicating what they all want to communicate.

Captain Marcus 18:52

And Deidre is chiming in right now. She's from Wyoming and Wyoming has one of the four units that does the mission. That's how we first originally met.

Diedre Forster 19:03

Had to train you up, but.

Captin Marcus 19:06

I said you were one of my mentors. I already admitted it early. You don't have to keep rubbing it in.

April Conway 19:11

This is another way that she should be mentoring you, Emerson, Deidre in addition to your undergrad degree and a Master's in Communications and Organizational Leadership. Yay, Gonzaga. You've also earned Accreditation in Public Relations with the plus m military designator. Clearly that plus m is not just for uniform to PR practitioners. Tell me what that designator and the APR in general has brought to your career.

Diedre Forster 19:39

Now Marcus pay attention. Because I tell you, Emerson, this is the way to do it. Because honestly, when I think any accreditation, whether it's an APR or an accreditation in some other organization, is it provides credibility, right? It shows that you know, what you're talking about, and you can speak the same language as other people in your profession, the plus m for military communication, especially when it's a civilian, right, that shows military folks that I can do more than just know where a common goes according to AP style. I can, you know, I understand the joint planning process, I understand that there's a PA annex and an off border, and I can speak army, I can speak Air Force. And all of that, I think, help to create some level of comfort, because a military command that I do have to talk to. So they know I can understand where they're coming from. In fact, April, before you got on today, I was telling Emerson, that he should probably get on that, get on that horse, study for that.

Captain Marcus 20:46

I feel like this is turning into an intervention.

April Conway 20:50

Nothing wrong with that interventions are good.

Diedre Forster 20:53

April and I studied for our APR at the same time, and as I said, if April and I can do it.

April Conway 21:00

Hey!

Diedre Forster 21:02

I have to throw you in there, girl.

April Conway 21:04

No, no, no, it was it was definitely a whole lot easier to hold myself accountable when I had other friends that I was doing it with, going through the process with. So we've talked a little bit today about

how the federal government, public affairs and military public affairs in general seems very different. Because it's such a weird world. But Captain Markus describe for me a typical day in your PR world. I want to, I want people to get the sense that federal and military PR isn't super disconnected from from agency works, per se, and other types of corporate PR.

Captain Marcus 21:50

Well, the first thing I do is, I read an email from the National Guard Bureau and DHS office that goes over the top stories of the day, and they do a really good job of disseminating that to the states. So I guess what I'm trying to say is the first thing I tried to do is educate myself on where we are, where the news cycle is, not different than what a typical public relations job would do. So then moving on from there, I tried to get my kids and their backpacks and everything out the door, because I didn't bother and then go to work. So a typical day lately is we have been having a lot of media requests and media activity. Because we have a boss right now and the Nevada National Guard has a boss who is very active in the community and has been for decades. His name is Major General Andhra Barry. And so I would say in the last couple of years, we have focused more on external communication, just purely because who my boss is. Our direction has changed a little bit more towards that. But at the same time, we do a lot of external communications throughout the day, too. So a typical day, there is no, I mean, to answer your question, there is no typical day. And really, that it's almost impossible to just kind of map and explain it like a regular day. For me, it's a lot of sitting on my computer, a lot of walking the offices, a lot of going out into the community for events. But that would be a typical day for us.

April Conway 23:48

You touch on social media, you write news releases, you interact with local media, you're out speaking to the Rotary Club about what it is that your organization does. That's a lot of what other PR professionals do for their clients as well. You just happened to be an in house one. Deidre, you're a little different in that you're at the National Guard Bureau level. So you, as the Media Operations Officer, you're more pigeonholed into just media relations. But tell me a little bit about what your day consists of.

Diedre Forster 24:24

Well, the first thing I do is I make sure that Captain Emerson marketing's opens daily email, his kids out the door. But as you said, I mean, we definitely have to scan the environment so that we can keep everyone informed going. You know, we want to make sure that as all of the different things happening in the media are available to our leadership, to our customers, of which we call them The 54 which is The 54 people who do the State Public Affairs job like Captain Marcus does right? For other states and territories. So we want to make sure all of those people have kind of a level playing field, right, in which they can advise their leadership on what's going on in the day. You know, Emerson was right, though we don't really have a typical day. A typical day for me might include things like monitoring a mailbox, you know, running an interview for someone, helping write a news release, that sort of thing. But it is more pigeonholed at the bureau level, because we have specific roles to fit into a specific piece of the pie. For as Emerson is doing all of those pieces of the pie, you're doing all of those pieces of the pie yourself. Whereas we have a social media team, we have a community relations team, we have, you know, Media Relations team. So it's a little different up at our level, but part of my job is to make sure the person has the tools to do his job.

Captain Marcus 26:01

Yeah, I think it's important to mention for the audience to, it is an interesting job, or interesting organization based on the fact that there is that federal and state element. So we can be categorized as a state entity. But we can also very much everything about 85% of our funding comes from the federal government, we have oversight from the National Guard Bureau and oversight and assistance support, huge support from Deidre and her folks at the National Guard Bureau. So I can't emphasize how important that is, for me in my role too but a lot of agencies don't have that. And I think that is important to mention that we are, it is very helpful, what they are able to support and assist us with in getting our message across.

Diedre Forster 26:54

One thing that I think that sometimes government PIOs have, that maybe a professional PR agency doesn't have is we really have the ear of our leaders, right? I mean, part of our job is to sit there and kind of be the, the no kidding, common sense, man on the ground.

April Conway 27:20

We call it the Jiminy Cricket to sit on the shoulder of let your conscience be your guide.

Diedre Forster 27:25

Yeah, you know, you want to make sure that the good ideas your leadership sometimes have that maybe aren't so good, that you provide the counsel to them that this is maybe, you know, maybe we tried this a couple years ago, and it didn't work out well. And this is why so maybe we should do this, I'm not certain that, you know, a social media person in the private sector would have the opportunity or the ability to just go up to the boss and say, Hey, that idea, let me tell you why.

27:56

And touching on those opportunities. I think that's what definitely Military Public Affairs and certainly Federal Public Affairs gives people anyway, is opportunities to touch and feel and influence either policy on the federal level, or as Emerson said, goodwill in your own neighborhood, or taking care of your own friends and neighbors. As we kind of wrap up today, I wanted to let people know, you know, if they are interested in checking out federal government public affairs, public information officer positions, USA jobs.com is really the clearing house, you can really knock down, hey, I want to be in San Francisco. And I want it to be a hybrid position. And I want it to be at this grade level, meaning you know, entry level, intermediate senior level, you can dig down all of that information and look for positions that way. There are a lot of remote positions that the federal government offers now, which is super helpful for people who, you know, like where they live, but don't necessarily, want to work for, you know, a federal agency in the DC area. So I think those opportunities exist out there. And until you start looking around, I'm not sure that you might be aware. So any other last parting thoughts you can give on that Emerson?

Captain Marcus 29:26

Oh, yeah, well, I mean, you go to USA jobs.com. and you can, like you said, you'd be just blown away by how many jobs are available nationwide, and just how they can range and just intensity or, I mean, you could be to be looking to be a photographer or you could be looking to be a public affairs officer

more of a communications director role. So those positions are out there and it's just a quick search on USA Jobs.

April Conway 29:55

Do you have a lot of experience with USA Jobs?

29:58

I do. I will tell you most have those jobs and pay fine under the series 1035. That's the Public Affairs category for all of the different types of jobs underneath that, whether it's a photo journalist, a social media manager, things like that most of them you can find under the series 1035. And it isn't, it is interesting to me the number of jobs that you can find in some very interesting places. I mean, most people think for federal government jobs means the National Capital Region, right, but they're all over the place. And you just have to, you know, get out there and look for them. And I think that federal PR offers some great opportunities for people that, you know, are really great resume builders, for people who want to go out on their own in the future as well.

April Conway 30:48

Absolutely. Well, thank you guys so much for being with us here today, Captain Emerson Marcus, the Public Affairs Officer at Nevada National Guard, and Miss Deidre Forster, the Media Operations Officer at the National Guard Bureau in Washington, DC. If you have any other questions, I'm sure that Kathie, I'm deferring back to you that people can actually submit questions and it can get to us. I didn't ask that before, but I'm assuming that's the case.

Kathie Taylor 31:16

Absolutely. April, thank you so much for hosting for us today. And this fabulous conversation. I think it's eye-opening to understand the breadth and depth of communications within government entities. I think it's surprising maybe for people on the ground so thank you very much.

April Conway 31:37

Thanks so much, Kathie.

Kathie Taylor 31:40

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