Chapter 2:
**Interaction with the Public**

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Interacting with the public may be the most important part of your day. You are the public face of your organization. When you do your job well and interact effectively, people trust and believe in you and your agency.

When you are asked a work-related question, be professional. Share only the agency position or information. Answer as thoroughly and efficiently as you can. When a question is outside your area of responsibility, refer the questioner to your supervisor.

This chapter briefly describes some of the many situations in which maintenance workers may interact with the public, what citizens expect from you, and some typically useful responses. The chapter concludes with some rules of thumb for communicating effectively with the public.

**Typical Interactions with the Public**

At various times people will want to talk with you about local streets and roads:

- You’re conducting routine snow removal, and an adjacent property owner flags you down with a question about winter maintenance schedules.
- You’re refueling at a local business, and someone at the next pump asks you about the county’s fuel budget.
- While you’re doing some routine pavement patching and joint sealing, a passing motorist tells you about a pothole on her street.
- You’re relaxing at home, and someone calls to tell you about a sign that’s down on a gravel road.

**What Do Citizens Want to Know?**

People may contact you for a variety of reasons:

- Citizens are interested in how their taxes dollars are spent. They may want to know about annual maintenance budgets or the cost of a specific project.
- Many citizens find your work interesting and are curious about how certain procedures are done.
- Sometimes people want to understand the background behind street- and road-related decisions made by the county supervisors or the city council. Citizens who want more information may see you as a communication link to your agency, to other departments, or to elected officials.
- It’s not unusual for citizens to want to know about employment opportunities at your agency.
- Sometimes citizens will contact you to lodge a complaint or to tell you about a problem they’ve noticed.
What Should Citizens Expect from You?
Citizens should be able to expect the same treatment from you that you expect from others:

- Be honest, courteous, and respectful.
- Provide good service.

What Should Citizens Not Expect from You?
Sometimes citizens want information or a service from you that is the responsibility of another department or another government agency. Sometimes citizens have unrealistic expectations about the kinds of information you can provide.

In these situations, you can be most helpful by referring them to your supervisor or someone who is responsible for their concern. See the next section.

Good Responses
Remember, your responses reflect on your agency. Be courteous and professional.

Sometimes just listening can be useful. But silence can also be misunderstood as inattention, disagreement, or anger. Be sure to respectfully acknowledge all comments or questions.

Gestures, expressions, and vocal inflections also communicate. Be aware of what your body language is saying, especially in situations that may be tense for you.

In general,

- If a question is about something you can fix, respond.
- If a question is outside your area of responsibility, refer the question to whoever is responsible.
- It is always helpful to document all questions or comments from the public and report them to your supervisor.

Rule of Thumb
It is always a good policy to document all questions or comments from the public and report them to your supervisor.

Useful Communication Tools
In some agencies, maintenance workers carry cards with contact information (name, phone and fax numbers, e-mail, etc.) for various services. When citizens have questions, workers can use the card to refer them to appropriate staff or offices. Figure 2–1 shows a sample card.

Another useful communication tool is a “door knocker”: a flyer to hang on house doorknobs. These can be especially useful for answering questions / providing information in advance of specific road maintenance activities. See an example door knocker in appendix A.
Following are some effective responses to questions or requests for information:

- That’s a good question. I don’t know the answer, but let me refer you to someone who will know the answer.
- [After responding to a question for which you are responsible.] That’s a good question. Have I answered your concern?
- Thanks for your interest.

**Key Points to Remember**

The following suggestions for interacting with the public are just good business practices. You may want to review this list with your supervisor and fellow maintenance staff and come up with your own suggestions:

- Always be professional and respectful.
- Know your agency’s position on work rules and maintenance policies and procedures.
- If you don’t know an answer, say so. Refer the questioner to your supervisor or other appropriate person.
- When you’re asked a question, share only the facts. Don’t represent your opinion as your agency’s position or policy.
- Do not share your personal opinion. Do not argue. A good question to ask yourself is, “Do I want this conversation on the front page of the newspaper?”
- Be loyal to your agency. If you disagree with a policy or position, take it up with your supervisor, not with someone outside the organization.
- Have information for appropriate contacts readily available.
- Don’t take questions or complaints personally. You are a symbol of the organization, much like the referee in a sporting event, and comments are not about you personally.
- Document all questions or comments from the public and report them to your supervisor.