

## Tips on Talking with the Media

Your attitude with a reporter often can be as important as what you say. The more you know about his/her job, the more comfortable you will feel with what is happening. The more you understand your position in an interview, the more you will feel in control. The more second nature the mechanics of an interview situation become, the more you can concentrate on getting your point across.

Following are some basic rules about dealing with the news media, how various media operate and how to deal with reporters.

### General Points to Remember

- **The news media is not the enemy.** Reporters will ask tough questions — it's their job. It's easy to begin feeling defensive. Don't be.
  - **This is your chance to be heard.** Thank the reporter for making the effort to get your side of the issue. Be friendly, helpful and sensitive to the time constraints and deadlines some reporters will be under. If there is time, sit down with a broadcast reporter to provide background information on the issue before the tape is rolling.
  - **Respond in a timely manner.** Be aware of the reporter's deadlines.
  - **If there is a microphone or camera, consider it on.**
  - **There is no such thing as "off the record."** Consider everything you say to be eligible for the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. Do not make cracks about opponents or even self-deprecating remarks about your company or organization. A well-meaning reporter could misinterpret you; a mean-spirited reporter could make you look horrible.
  - **Nice people ask tough questions.** Do not be surprised if a reporter's demeanor changes drastically once discussion turns to the subject at hand. Radio and television reporters may want to use their question as part of the story and so they want it to sound confrontational and cynical. Concentrate on the question and your answer and remain measured and calm in your response.
  - **You are in control.** This is the most important point to remember. If you don't say something, it can't be used. If you are asked a question about something irrelevant to the issue, answer politely that that was not what you understood the interview was about and indicate the subject matter you were told you would be discussing.
  - **Never say "no comment."**
- If you do not know an answer to a question, say so. Promise the reporter you will find the answer and get back to him/her. Then do it. You have agreed to be interviewed on a certain subject. If you refuse to answer questions, you will appear to be stonewalling.
- **A reporter's responsibilities.** Conflict of opinion is one of the main ingredients of news. If you are criticized in a story, you should be given the chance to respond. Likewise, you must expect critics to respond to your points. Make sure a reporter knows how to get in touch with you after the interview in case he/she needs more information or a response to a new development.

### Newspapers

- **Dailies - Morning** Many large metropolitan daily newspapers are delivered in the morning. Their readership generally can be regarded as the most sophisticated, most educated and most likely to be active in the community among all news media outlets. Deadlines for news stories run from mid-afternoon until late evening.
- **Dailies - Afternoon** Many local newspapers are delivered in the afternoon. They cater to an interest in local issues, and readership is much the same as morning newspapers. Deadlines for afternoon dailies are early in the morning.
- **Weeklies** Weekly newspapers have a variety of missions. Some cover geographic areas, others cover ethnic, racial, religious or sexual communities. Many California cities have weekly newspapers with large circulations that cater to local entertainment and have a liberal perspective. Typically a weekly paper is delivered on Thursday with a deadline on Tuesday. However, there are many variations on this schedule and it is best to check on each paper's deadline.
- **Newspaper Reporters** It is common for newspaper reporters to conduct interviews over the phone. It is also common for them to call back three, four or five times to make sure they have the details straight. Encourage this. Make the reporter feel welcome to get back in touch with you if he/she has any questions. If you are going to be away from the office, let him/her know how you can be contacted. The interview might be quite lengthy. Remember, everything you say is quotable.

### Radio

- **News** Many radio news interviews are conducted over the phone and reporters are required to tell you they want to record you on tape for airplay later. This is called an "actuality." Have one or two of the key points ready and stick to them. A long radio story is 45 seconds. Your answers must be short and to the point. If the reporter can come to you or meet elsewhere, all the better. You will sound better without the phone line.
- **Talk Shows** Talk is consistently among the highest-rated formats in radio. It also is one of the rare times in dealing with the news media where you will not be edited. Listeners will hear everything you say, good and bad. Also, this format often pits one side against the other and callers often can add wild card questions. Go to the studio, if at all possible. You will sound better.
- **Sound** Radio reporters love to be able to use sound in their stories. Think about the key points you want to make and your organization or company and figure out what sounds, if any, are associated with them. If a reporter uses a sound on the air, it must be explained. Feel free to suggest certain sounds a reporter may want to record, but don't be pushy about it.

### Television

- Most people get their news from television. It is immediate and visual, which can make it dramatic and powerful. To be part of a television story, you must be on camera. Giving someone information over the phone is not enough.
- Expect a television news crew to travel to you and to want to take pictures of anything that goes with the story. Think of ways to visualize your key points. If there is another location that would be better, suggest meeting the crew there. Explain the pictures that will be available and you'll seldom hear a "no."
- **How you look is important.** If your tie looks like a test pattern or your hair is out of whack, the viewer will concentrate on that and not on what you're saying. The most important thing to remember: be comfortable. If you don't like ties, take it off, or, at least loosen it. Use your common sense. Wear what you normally would wear to work. Trying to look like something you're not will hurt your credibility.
  - **Sound bites** The typical television story will run about 80 seconds. Be concise and to the point. You

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will be lucky to get 10 to 15 seconds for your sound bite (that's you talking). Keep in mind that even if you are asked 20 questions, you still will fill up only a short part of the story. Be wary of a reporter asking the same question in different ways. He/she may be trying to elicit a different response. Stick to your guns. Keep going back to your key points. Consider each response to be the only one that will get on the air.

- **Live shots**

Sometimes a reporter may want to do a remote live shot with you being interviewed on the air. Usually this will involve a reporter's introduction to a taped piece with questions of you afterward. You should be fitted with an earpiece that will allow you to hear the taped report. Listen to it.

If the piece contains factual errors, correct them briefly at the end of your first answer. Concentrate on the reporter's questions.

A live shot is especially distracting. There is the usual reporter plus camera operator, as well as a monitor featuring you on television and a microwave or satellite van nearby. Spectators also may gather. Ignore them. Look at and listen to the reporter.

- **Cable TV**

Local cable news is of increasing importance. Local versions of Cable News Network are springing up around the country. Treat all news media representatives with respect. Organizing responses by reporters' deadlines can help you make sure you meet all their needs.

### Foreign Language Media

Every major market in California, and most of the smaller ones, have Spanish language newspapers, radios and television stations. Other languages, primarily Asian, also are represented in the news media. These are important outlets and should be treated as such. Reporters from foreign language outlets usually are bilingual and will interview you in English and translate your remarks into the foreign language. If you have someone who speaks the language in question and can be briefed, it is valuable to offer him/her for the interview.

### Preparing for the Interview

#### *Before the Media Calls*

- **Look around your offices — if someone were to call today, where would you suggest holding the interview?** A newspaper reporter will have the fewest needs as to location. A radio reporter will want a room with peace and quiet. A television interview conducted in a related environment is the best possible situation.

An interview conducted outside in front of a bush or a tree will look good if the sun is in the interview subject's face and the noise level is low. Doing the interview in your office is fine. In front of a bookcase is a good location.

What you don't want: Don't sit behind your desk. You will look bureaucratic. Try not to stand in front of a plain white wall. Do not pick a location with a lot of activity immediately behind you. The movement could distract the viewers and keep them from listening to what you have to say.

What does your office say about you? When a reporter walks into your office, what impression will he/she get? Personal items — pictures of family and friends, mementos, awards, indications of charity work you do — will help a reporter realize you are a human being. Don't be afraid to have a little small talk with the reporter if time permits. Don't overdo it, but be friendly.

#### *After the Media Calls*

Between the time you are asked to be interviewed and actually are talking with the reporter, there are a number of things you can do to prepare.

- **Get your thoughts in order.**

- ✓ Write down the key points you want to highlight.
- ✓ Practice saying the key points aloud.
- ✓ Consider the toughest questions you could get.

- **Check the physical arrangements.**

- ✓ Notify the receptionist that a reporter will be arriving if the interview is to be conducted at your office. The unannounced arrival of the news media sometimes can bring a reaction that creates a sense of suspicion on the part of the reporter.
- ✓ If you don't want to hold the interview

in your office, make sure your preferred site is available.

- **Check your appearance.**

- ✓ If this is a television interview, get to a mirror and make sure all the peripheral items — clothes, hair, tie, makeup — are in order.

#### *During the Interview*

- ✓ Listen to the reporter. It is easy to concentrate so hard on your key points that you forget to listen to the question. Make sure your answer is responsive to the question or it will appear you are trying to evade it.
- ✓ Talk to the reporter. If this is a television interview, face the reporter. Consider the camera a bystander listening in. Listening to the reporter's question and then turning your head to the camera looks rude. (The exception is if you are interviewed on camera by someone in another location. In this situation, look at the camera and remember not to make funny faces.)
- ✓ Be flexible. If a reporter doesn't like the location you select for the interview, try to accommodate him/her with another spot.
- ✓ Relax. If you stumble through an answer, start over again at the beginning. Broadcast reporters are under severe time constraints when they put together a story. Even the most critical reporter can't use you "um"ing and "aah"ing your way through a sentence.
- ✓ Be friendly. Feel free to take time to talk about whatever non-related subjects arise. Remember, you want the reporter to realize you are a human being.
- ✓ Be reachable. Tell the reporter how to get in touch with you should there be new developments.
- ✓ Be honest.
- ✓ An interview is an effective way to reach the public. Remember, you are in control of the interview.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to show compassion. Sharing your concern about health problems, for example, can be more effective than a long string of scientific data.

Text in this section adapted from Speakers Manual/News Media Tips prepared by Woodward & McDowell, a political and public affairs consulting firm.