

Media Basics: When a Reporter Calls

Preparation is the key to becoming comfortable with media calls and interviews. These tips should help you prepare to work effectively with reporters.

- **Tell the truth.** Never lie. Always tell the truth. If you don't know or aren't sure, say so and don't guess. Your credibility is at stake. Being truthful does not mean telling all you know. Use good judgment.
- **For the record.** Anything you say to a reporter is fair game for a story. If you don't want it reported, don't say it. Asking a reporter to go "off the record" is not appropriate. Don't ask reporters not to print something after you say it.
- **Avoid no comment.** "No comment" sounds suspicious. If you really can't comment, explain why. "We're gathering that information and will provide it when it's finalized." Or "Our policy doesn't allow us to comment on personnel matters." It's OK to say you don't know and offer to find out.
- **The media's role.** Objectively telling all sides of a story is the media's job, even if views are unpopular. Don't expect reporters to present only your perspective and never tell a reporter how to report a story. Don't expect a reporter to make you look good; make yourself look good by providing clear, concise information.
- **Be prepared.** Doing your homework makes you a better source and less nervous. Before an interview, anticipate possible questions and think through answers. Ask yourself: Is this a controversial or sensitive topic? How will my answers be perceived? How can I best explain this? Gather background materials for the reporter that help reinforce details.
- **Key points.** Before interviews, identify the three main points you want to make. For each point, develop three responses that support or help communicate that point. Work on making key points in 20 seconds or less. Come up with a couple of 10-second or under responses.
- **Respect deadlines.** Reporters live by unbending deadlines. If a reporter calls for immediate comment, try to help or point them to someone who can. But beware of giving a "quickie" response if you have inadequate information.
- **Know who's calling.** When a reporter calls, ask some questions to determine whom you're talking to and what they need. If you don't know a reporter, get his/her name, employer and phone number. Clarify what information he/she is seeking from you.
- **Respond promptly.** Return media calls promptly. If a reporter catches you unprepared, find out what he/she is looking for and offer to call back in a few minutes. Gather your thoughts, anticipate questions, plan your response and call back quickly. If you have an appointment for an interview, be there. Dodging a reporter won't make the story disappear; it just will be reported without your perspective.
- **Lead with the bottom line.** Remember to provide key facts or points first. Add details if time allows. Your key message can get lost in too much detail and technical information.
- **Talk slowly.** Reporters will write furiously as you talk. Some will use tape recorders. Talk slowly and be clear. Leave nothing to chance.

- **Short, sweet, stop.** Keep your answers brief. Your main message gets lost unless you discipline yourself to provide concise answers. Radio or TV reporters often must tell an entire story in 20 seconds to a minute. Answer the question and stop talking. Don't keep talking to fill the silence.
- **Don't babble.** Listen to questions and think about your answers before you start talking. Don't ramble. It's OK to pause briefly to gather your thoughts before answering.
- **Dump the jargon.** Technical terms and acronyms are confusing or meaningless to the public. Be a translator by using everyday language and examples. Relate your information in ways everyday folks can appreciate – why is this important and what does it mean to their lives, community, families or livelihoods?
- **Be proactive.** Answer reporters' questions and volunteer information to make key points. Reporters may welcome another angle or idea, but offer ideas as suggestions, not directives. Reporters aren't likely to let you see a story before it appears, but always invite them to call back for help or clarification.
- **Summarize thoughts.** After discussing the subject, concisely summarize key points in every day language. "My major points are: 1. ... 2. ... 3. ..." This may plant the idea of a story outline in the reporter's mind.
- **Potential pitfalls.** Always have the facts before commenting. Stick to what you know even if this disappoints a reporter. If you are unprepared or unqualified to answer, refer reporters to someone who can help. Avoid personal views or speculation. Don't let reporters put words in your mouth.
Reporter: "So you're saying ..."
You: "No, let me clarify ..."
Do not repeat inaccuracies, even to correct them.
- **Identify yourself.** Don't assume a reporter knows who you are or what you do just because they've called. Provide your name, title, company or agency name and names of other people or programs you're discussing.
- **Feedback.** It's OK to tell reporters when they do a good job. If they make a mistake, weigh what's at stake. If it's a major error in fact, tell the reporter or editor, but don't quibble over minor misunderstandings. Remember, you're building long-term relationships.
- **Don't assume reporter knowledge.** Don't assume that a reporter is knowledgeable just because he/she is covering the story. Most reporters are generalists who cover diverse topics and have little time to background themselves on breaking stories before reporting them. Provide simple information to help out.

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