

How To Respond When The Media Calls

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Media attention is often valuable free publicity, which lets you deliver your important message to a large audience. However, for many people it is a very stressful and nerve-wracking event when the media calls asking for an interview. There are two basic goals for you to keep in mind anytime you do an interview 1) Meet the reporter's needs, and 2) Get your point across!

Here is the quick list for preparing:

1. Reporters are neither your friends nor your enemies.

Too many people whip themselves into a fear frenzy about a reporter coming over because they see reporters as shifty, threatening, and "out to get them". Some reporters are literally seen as the enemy. Most (but not all) reporters are simply trying to do their job, get the story and their sound bites and get package story on the air so they can go home.

Besides assuming a reporter is the enemy, many people make the mistake of trying to become friends with reporters. This can be trouble because you will say things to friends that you should never say to a TV or print reporter.

2. Understand Reporters

Reporters are typically negative because they deal with so much negative news. They are reporters (and by definition journalists) but frankly the electronic press is not interested in too many facts about your corner of the world. They like the sensational, unusual or bizarre aspects of any story. They can be skeptical and probing and can become overly focused on distracting details especially if you lead them there.

The smoothest way to give an interview is to make an effort to save the reporter time. Give them great sound bites and your contact information as you pat them on the back and guide them to your front door.

3. Reporters are in a hurry

Reporters are always in a rush. You'll experience this first hand when you call the newsroom in an attempt to sell your story. Most reporters have to file two reports per day, usually one for the noon news and one an evening news broadcast. Knowing this, help reporters get their job done by being "easy to produce". They will love you for it. This means not only delivering concise message points that are right on target, but also helping with simple things like finding a good setting for the camera before they arrive, making sure there is adequate electricity, a semi quiet environment and not too many distractions.

4. Determine What They Want

If possible, in advance determine a few key factors about the story and what the reporter wants from you. Use this knowledge to determine if you 1) want to do the interview, and 2) how you will frame your answers.

Before an interview ask these questions:

- Is this a soft or hard news story?
- Is this a controversial subject or a general interest story?
- Do they want a short sound bite or an extensive interview?

- Is this a print or electronic reporter?
- Is this happening immediately, or do I have some notice?
- What is the reporters angle?
- What is their interest in the story?
- Who else are they planning to interview?
- How did this story come to their attention?

The answers to these types of questions will tell you a great deal about the story and whether you wish to participate.

5. You do not have to agree to an interview

While a print, TV or radio interview can be a powerful publicity event for you, it can also hurt you. If your better judgement tells you there is a problem with this subject, the reporter or the angle, you can respectfully decline to be interviewed. If you are not a specific target of the story, simply refer the reporter to someone else in your field who they might interview. If this is an investigative report and you see trouble, it may be best to simply decline and issue a statement.

6. You do not have to agree to their terms

Time, place, scope and other parameters of an interview should be discussed in advance. If a camera crew in your office would be disruptive, if the interview will be too broad in scope or if 8 AM is not good time for your staff, you do not have to agree to their terms. It is perfectly reasonable to ask for changes or even negotiate some terms to benefit you. Remember the reporter probably needs your sound bite and also needs to get back to the station. Don't be dominated by aggressive journalists that are used to running over star struck business people.

7. What is this reporter's history

If you are interested in practice publicity, then you should also be an avid local TV viewer and radio listener. Therefore you know which shows and channels are appropriate for your subject and which ones are either inappropriate or possibly aggressive to your position. You should also know a reporter's reputation for being simply a good story teller, or for being a real bull-dog investigator. While you may choose to do the interview with the "bull-dog", you will prepare and deliver differently.

8. What impact will this story have on your operation

As an individual practice or business you are in control of your advertising, promotion and public image. Hence you can make individual decisions and enjoy the consequences of the results.

However, if you work for a publically held corporation or you operate a chain of stores or hospitals, you are typically not free to make public statements without approval and guidance on message delivery and legal issues. Therefore, when the media calls, consider what short or long term impact the resulting story will have on your entire operation.

9. Who else are they interviewing

It is VERY important for you to know who else this reporter is interviewing for this story! I've seen many news reports where an individual was interviewed and it was clear they thought they were in a news vaccum. No thought was given to what others with an opposing viewpoint might say. To ask "who else are you interviewing on this story", is a perfectly reasonable question and can tell you a great deal about how to frame your answers.

10. How did this reporter choose to do this story

It is very telling how a reporter gets the assignment to complete a story on a particular subject. The story could have been generated by somelse in your field attempting to gain publicity. It could have been the reporter was treated unfairly at a situation and they are "going to get to the bottom of this

issue” by doing a report. The subject could be in the news or the issue might be a simple assignment by the assignments editor.

When you know what generated the story, you will also be armed with important information about how to frame your answers. You may choose not to be involved in any way if this reporter is on a mission to discredit an industry or profession.

11. Stay aware of the news of the day

There are two very important reasons why you should be an avid news consumer. One is most news is generated because of other news. TV reporters and assignment editors pour over the morning newspapers every day to find the stories they will report that night on the evening news. Therefore, knowing what’s happening in your area of expertise will keep you one step ahead of the media’s phone call.

Another important reason to be a good media (news) consumer is to generate stories about your practice that come from the current events. By calling the press when you see a current news item that is related to your business or profession, you are miles ahead of getting a story on the news or being a guest on the local radio talk shows.

12. The “pre-interview”

The call you receive might be a pre-interview. Here the reporter is simply searching for some facts to see if they “have a story”. Even if you are not interviewed on camera, you could take this opportunity to become a valuable source to the reporter for future access and publicity.

NOW TAKE SOME TIME TO PREPARE!

Here are some of the preparation steps you must take after you have agreed to an interview and the news crew is on their way over!

1. Anticipate the questions you will receive

Write down all the questions you think you would ask if you were the reporter. Be sure to include all the questions that might be tough. This list of questions will get you well on your way to feeling more comfortable about the interview.

2. CRAFT your 7 to 15 second answers!

If this is going to be a live 2-3 minute interview you can relax about the “7 second sound bite”, be more natural and take your time. However, if this is a taped interview for television, your message will be lost unless you master the art of delivering a point in a few seconds. This does not happen naturally. It only comes with good writing and then practice. All good interviews are properly thought through and answers practiced the day before the interview. Good interviews don’t just happen! You have to prepare and practice and then learn the skill of delivering sound bites and message points quickly.

3. Begin to practice

I suggest you write as many possible questions and answers as you can. Then initially practice them all. Next select the most likely “top ten” and get those down cold knowing full well you will only be asked about 3-5 of them and one or two will make it into the story. Your practice should be out loud with a friend playing reporter. If that is not possible, then practice aloud in front of a mirror. You will be amazed at how well this practice prepares you for the real thing. NEVER WING AN INTERVIEW!

4. Write and practice all the HOT SEAT questions

These are the most feared and dreaded questions you MOST DO NOT WANT TO BE ASKED. They involve areas of law, money, personal interest and the like. Frankly, you know them better than the

reporter does. If you have not gone through the exercise of constructing an answer to these types of questions, you will be caught by surprise on camera – and that should never happen to a media savvy publicity minded businessperson.

5. Practice answers out of order

When you think like a reporter you will list a flow of questions beginning with basics and background information, then lead up to more pointed questions and even the tough ones. This is a normal flow of questioning and you'll probably practice them in this order as well.

However, practice your answers out of that order. It's so surprising when you are all "psyched" and ready for your interview and a news anchor, host or reporter will ask you questions completely out of your sequenced order. It can catch you by surprise and make you look unprepared.

6. Practice working in your message early

Another surprising thing can happen in an interview. You will be delivering very nice answers to the host's questions and believing things are progressing quite well. Then you hear the dreaded words; *"Well, thanks for joining us..."* In your mind you are shouting... *"But wait! I haven't told you my key messages yet!"*

The host has cut the interview short for some reason OR your 2 ½ minutes went by so fast it felt more like 30 sec. and you've lost your chance to tell the audience about your product or service.

This happens more than you think. The fix for this problem is to work your message points into your answers early in the interview. This can be done naturally and should never seem artificial. When you practice answering questions for the interview, practice this technique as well.

7. Support what you say with credible third party sources

This third party support is very important and many reporters look for it in the pre-interview or through their questioning. I suggest you have these ready and be prepared to add such support and credibility to your answers.

When the media calls you for an interview, perhaps you see the call as a chance to achieve some free and valuable publicity for your product, business, service or professional practice. On the other hand you may view the media's request for an interview as a real potential risk or a difficult situation because you know this reporter is the investigative type.

Whatever the case, you should be prepared to make the most of the event. If you can meet the reporter's needs and get your key message points across you will be miles ahead of the competition when it comes to public visibility, credibility and new business!