



What to do when a reporter calls

Talking to the media requires skill and preparation.

BY BOB WEISS

The secret to dealing with the press is the same you employ to deal successfully with clients, judges, juries and opposing counsel – preparation. Many professionals do not understand the rules that govern giving information to the press. Editors and reporters consider the following when deciding what they will cover:

Impact: To whom does the story matter? Does it have an impact on the audience that reads the publication, views the site or listens to the broadcast?

Conflict: Does the story involve controversy?

Timeliness: The story has to affect people or organizations now or in the near future.

Prominence: Who is announcing the information or product? The person making the announcement will affect the amount of coverage received; the more prominent the person, the more likely it is that the idea will be covered.

Proximity: Where is the story taking place in relation to where you are trying to get coverage? Location matters – the story must be relevant to the place and the people.

Human Interest: Does it evoke an emotional response?

Remember, what is newsworthy one day may not be the next. When a reporter calls unexpectedly, begin the discussion by asking questions – not answering them!

Ask:

- What is your name and make sure to get the spelling of it.
- What media do you work for?
- What questions do you need answered?
- When is your deadline?
- At what number(s) can I reach you?
- Who else are you interviewing for this story?

Calling the reporter back gives you a chance to think, consult with others (including your PR person) before you answer and to get your facts straight. It also allows you to consider client and referral source reaction.

Do not be intimidated into giving an interview just because a reporter and/or camera crew shows up at your offices or corners you at a public event. Tell them you will get back to them before their deadline.

Remember, the press has no right to interview you. You have the right to

grant them an interview. We encourage you to grant them that right, after preparation.

Handling a media interview: Tips for dealing with the press

The reporter is interested in the story we sent, and now he or she has called for an interview. Many people think they will “just wing it” when the reporter calls, but this is generally a mistake. The reason: You aren’t talking to just the reporter; you are talking to the thousands of readers and viewers the reporter represents, and to clients and referral sources.

Always prepare by writing down the three or four points you want to stress during the interview. Here are some ways to help ensure you are included as prominently as possible in the story:

- **Use quotable phrases.** Reporters are looking for phrases that can make the mundane idea more interesting. The imagery you include in a quote makes it much more likely to be used. To assure that you make the relevant points, develop your three or four points and try to support them with memorable anecdotes or analogies.



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- **Be an interpreter or translator.** Know that your audience doesn't know as much as you do about the topic. Avoid jargon or technical terms. Explain as if you were talking to a jury. Keep it simple. Use the Goldilocks approach to sentence length. Avoid one-word answers, which are too short, and complicated explanations that are too long. Explain yourself fully using short, punchy sentences.
- **Be yourself.** Speak in your usual way.
- **Say only what you want to say.** Do not feel obligated to fill what might seem like awkward pauses in the conversation. If you feel you must speak, talk about one of the points you wanted to make.
- **Know that you are always "on."** Just because a reporter puts down her notebook or turns off his recorder or camera doesn't mean the interview is over. Anything you say to the reporter is fair game. (Note: Many of the most savvy public relations pros avoid trying to go "off-the-record" or onto "background"

with reporters – and there is just too much risk for those who do not talk to the media regularly to try to work with reporters in this way. Don't let your ego take over. If you think you have to use these mechanisms when dealing with the press, it is essential you obtain media skills training or engage/retain a public relations professional with a reputation for crisis communications.)

- **Correct any wrong information.** If you feel the premise of a question is wrong or the reporter summarized your point incorrectly, say so. Repeat your phrasing if that is the best way to phrase it. Don't let the reporter put words into your mouth.
- **Be helpful.** Encourage the reporter to call back if he or she needs any clarification or wants to ensure accuracy of a quote.
- **Be prompt.** Ask about the reporter's deadline and meet it, or decline the interview if you can't. A radio or television reporter may have literally a couple of

minutes to find someone to speak. If you can't help in the given timeframe, say so.

- **Don't ask to review a story before it runs.** But do ask when the story will run.

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