

Ten Tips for Talking to the Press

How to Become a “Go To” Organization for the Media

There are two circumstances where you will talk to the media. One is “reactive,” that is, you are commenting on news made by someone else. You may issue a press release and you might call reporters to offer your reaction. The second is “proactive,” that is, you have created some news that you wish to “pitch” or bring to the reporter’s attention.

Here are ten principles that apply in both cases. By following these principles, you will have more positive outcomes in working with reporters and you will help establish your organization as a reliable, credible and prompt source of information.

1. Respect Deadlines. Always ask when a reporter needs something and get it to him before then. Always return a reporter’s phone call, even if it is just to refer him to someone else. Be available by cell phone 24/7. (That being said, it is okay to ask to call the journalist right back if the interview is unexpected. Write down the points you want to make and practice for a moment.)
2. Know the Outlet that is asking for the interview. Check the website of the station or publication to see if they have a particular point of view. Who is the audience for this station or publication? What do you want them to do or know? (Remember that the reporter is not your audience. Her readers or listeners are.)
3. Check out the reporter. What is she interested in? What is her background and what kind of stories has she written before? (A quick visit to the paper’s website will provide plenty of research.) Don’t be afraid to ask the reporter what the story is about and what kind of input she needs from you.
4. Do not try to communicate more than three important things. Keep your talking points short and simple. Trying to convey too much information increases your chances of confusing the interviewer or saying more than you wanted and leaving it to him to pick your quote.
5. Be specific and give examples. Support your points with specific evidence and a human story. Tell a story that shows you know what you are talking about.
6. Be Truthful and Accurate. If you don’t know the answer, you should say so. If you mislead a reporter or give out inaccurate data, the word will spread among the media that you cannot be trusted. Be sure your statistics, research citations, and legal interpretations are correct. Be sure that stories you have heard second-hand or read in the newspaper really happened as you say they did. You must cite to your sources of authority.

7. Sound like a human being, not an institution. Answer questions with plain language, not jargon or academic-sounding terms. Jargon includes catch phrases that people outside your community or field may not understand.
8. Deal with results, not process. Talk about the results of what you've done, not the process that got you there. Focus on the large numbers of people affected whenever possible.
9. Answer the questions you want to answer, not necessarily the ones you've been asked. You can do this by using bridge phrases like "that's an interesting question, but what's really important here is" "let's get back to your earlier question" Then bring it back to one of your three main points.
10. Assume that everything you say can be quoted.
 - a. Unless you have specifically negotiated a different arrangement, anything you say to a journalist can be included in a story. Therefore, do not say anything you wouldn't want to see in print.
 - b. "On the record" means that anything you say will be attributed to you.
 - c. "Off the record" means that you may be quoted, but it will not be attributed to you. ("Sources inside the White House said ...")
 - d. "On background" means that nothing you say can be quoted (but be careful: it does not mean that the reporter cannot use your statement in a question she poses to another interview subject).
 - e. DANGER! Different people have different understandings of the above. Be sure that before you share any information, you and the journalist understand whether or not you are speaking for attribution. Also, remember that these agreements are not always honored. Please consult experienced media personnel if you decide to use one of these terms.