

TIPS FOR GIVING A MEDIA INTERVIEW

Media interviews present an opportunity for faculty associations to communicate with a large audience. It is a chance to present your messages and the information you believe the public needs to hear.

Before to the interview

- **Opportunity knocks** - When a reporter calls for an interview, first determine the best person to give the interview. Give that person time to get prepared. Develop a strategy with a set of goals of what you would like to accomplish in giving the interview. Consider it an opportunity to get your message out.
- **Don't get caught unprepared** - Don't take on "cold interviews" like the phone call at 8:30 a.m. when you haven't even had time to hang up your coat. If you are cold-called, get preliminary information from the reporter – what is the story about, where will it appear, etc. – and then tell them you will call back soon.
- **Work quickly** – Some issues are more urgent than others, and reporters may be on a tight deadline. Speed in getting out the appropriate statement often matters as much, or more, as what you actually say. But make sure you still take the time to mentally prepare. Remember that everything follows from your first statement, so it must hold up under scrutiny.
- **Set the time** - If possible, schedule the interview for a time that's convenient to you. Ask about deadlines and be prepared to negotiate. Return media calls as quickly as possible.
- **Help select place** - It's your interview, so you should have some input in where it will be held – inside, outside, at your desk, standing, sitting etc. Your comfort level is the issue. But be aware that the cameraperson and reporter have limitations imposed by technology. They can't shoot you with your back to a window because of the lighting problems. But if you do some research, you should be able to have credible input as to where the interview actually takes place. These things can be negotiated.
- **Do a pre-interview interview** - Get the reporter's full name and the media outlet they represent; probe tactfully for the reporter's intentions (this can also be done by someone assisting you) ostensibly to get you better prepared; ask what the interview will focus on; and try to determine what kind of story they want to get out of it for publication or broadcast.
- **Set the agenda** - Define your area of expertise before the interview starts so you're certain the story will coincide with your ability to comment effectively. Establish any limits to your expertise up front.
- **Eye to eye is better** - It isn't always possible, but try to be interviewed in person (as opposed to by phone) as research has shown these stories tend to be more accurate. It also gives you opportunity to give the reporter your facts & figures, key messages, etc., in written form (i.e. news release, background papers, briefing notes, journal article or

statistics).

- **Prepare your key points** - The media interview is an opportunity to tell you association's story which you should encapsulate and summarize in a few key points that you should try to insert into the interview at every appropriate moment:
 - Research your facts
 - Develop your main message
 - Anticipate questions and responses
 - Rehearse your responses

Giving the Interview:

- **Off the record?** - There's no such thing so avoid it. Sometimes off-the-record backgrounder sessions are requested by the reporter, but you must still be very careful in these situations. The information has a way of surfacing in unexpected ways. Reporters are under no obligation to respect "off-the-record" information.
- **Be yourself** - This is very important to effective communication.
- **Be honest** - If you don't know an answer, say so. Promise to get an answer for the reporter if it's at all possible. Always avoid using the phrase "No Comment".
- **Be confident and positive** - Speak in simple, clear sentences. Always keep your goals and key points in mind. You're the expert now; it's your interview!
- **Be polite** - Avoid being rude, hostile or confrontational with a reporter. This detracts from your message. As Mark Twain once said: "Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel".
- **Listen carefully** - This may seem obvious, but sometimes people get so anxious, they don't actually listen to what's being asked. Take some notes during the questions if you think this will help.
- **Condense your answers** - This is especially helpful in TV and radio interviews where they look for summary answers that fit into taped reports – the so-called 15-second 'sound bite'. This also works in print interviews because it helps you to focus on your goals and key points.
- **Avoid jargon (keep it simple)** - This is a corollary of the point above. Journalists are usually not very well informed on what you do or represent. So keep it simple, without talking down to them. Academia already has a reputation for making simple things unnecessarily complex - here's an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you can communicate clearly to a mass audience.
- **Don't limit yourself to questions asked** - To get your key points in you may have to turn a question or two around, or ignore the question entirely to get your key ideas across. For example, you might say: "I think the main issue here is ..." or "I don't think that's the main point". This is acceptable, but don't overuse this technique because you could be seen to be evasive, slippery.

- **Reporters make mistakes too** - Reporters, particularly young ones, often make the mistake of asking two questions at the same time. In this case, answer the question you like better. Don't feel obligated to do the reporter's job for them.
- **Techno-babble** - Sometimes you have to use technical language to get the main points across, especially if it's a research story. That's okay, but explain the technical stuff in simple language with clear analogies.
- **To joke or not to joke?** - Humor is often a very personal thing. Unless you're very accomplished at working an audience, it can backfire. Giving a media interview can be one of those times - especially in an interview on a serious or sad subject. So, try to avoid jokes and quips, especially in TV interviews.
- **Repeat your key points** - At the end of the interview, summarize for the reporter. Be straightforward if you like. "The main points I hope you got out of this interview with me are"

Things to watch for

Reporters will try different techniques to obtain their information. Often, these are standard interview methods taught in journalism schools.

- **Funnel interview** - Starts very generally and informally to get you talking, often about anything but the topic at hand. The questions then get more pointed and specific. If it's an adversarial interview, closed-ended questions will be sprung towards the end.
- **Inverted funnel** - The start is very abrupt and to the point. In an adversarial interview this can be quite a shock, so take a deep breath before you answer. If necessary, ask them to repeat the question to gain some time to think.
- **Closed ended questions** - Take the form of questions like "Don't you agree that the university faculty have a problem here?" The correct technique is to answer by recasting the situation and slipping in your key points. "University faculty has always been leaders in this area and here are three examples of what I mean." And so on. Don't fall into the trap of a leading question.
- **Babbling rambling roses get pricked** - The funnel interview, which seems to be leading nowhere with no particular urgency, often presents lots of rope with which to hang oneself. Once your guard is dropped, this type of interview contains more potential pitfalls than any other type. It's okay to be friendly and talk about all kinds of things, but remember the reporter interviewing you is there to do a job - and everything is ON THE RECORD.
- **Putting words in your mouth** - Reporters are taught to turn an answer around by rephrasing what you just said, sometimes putting a pejorative spin on the answer. Be polite but firm. Simply tell them that's not what you said. Then repeat your main points.
- **Interruptions** - This sometimes happens when reporters get overly aggressive and confrontational. Don't let reporters cut you off and interrupt your answer. It's rude. Keep

your cool and calmly say something like, "I'm sorry. You're interrupting me in the middle of my answer. Please show me some courtesy and let me finish." Most of the public will identify with you, not the bullying reporter.

- **Recording devices** - Just be aware that, in addition to TV and radio reporters who must record the interview, many print reporters also record interviews either in person or over the phone. Sometimes they're voice activated and sit inside their shirt pockets. They are not obliged by any law to tell you they're taping. In any case, this isn't something to be feared. They need the tape for accuracy because nobody knows shorthand any more.

Tape recorders are sometimes left running when you think they're off. TV cameramen will sometimes actually put their cameras on the ground and start putting their gear away as though signaling the end of the interview, but the tape is left running in case you say something in an unguarded moment. Unless the reporter explicitly indicates otherwise, always assume you are being recorded.

- **Cutaways** - TV reporters need to do various kinds of 'cutaways' which show them face on listening to the interview subject, or, asking the question they just asked a few minutes ago during the interview. They use this footage to make their stories visually interesting. They might ask a question that seems off the top of their heads during the filming of a cutaway, but treat this as a serious part of the whole interview. Don't end up contradicting what you said when the camera was on you in the first place.
- **Getting the angle** - Also, they may say they need to re-ask a question, with another camera angle or background. They move you around and start all over again. Make sure your answers are consistent.
- **Repeating the question** - Reporters can ask the same question you heard a minute or two before, but with a slightly different twist. Make sure the answer is solid and matches the facts of what you said before.

Looking good on camera

- Be your normal self, don't overact or over enunciate now that you're on camera.
- Look at the interviewer, not the camera.
- Try to minimize movement and gestures (especially if you tend to try to speak with your hands). It's acceptable to use the odd gesture to emphasize a verbal point, but excessive hand movement can be distracting and irritating to the viewer.
- Try to use some voice modulation for emphasis, especially when making the key points that you've prepared in advance.
- Try to avoid flashy jewelry and clothes because they are exaggerated by TV.
- If you suffer from "dry mouth", or think you might, use candies or lozenges and keep one tucked in the corner of your mouth during the interview. Gum is always a bad idea.

- Practice giving succinct answers of no more than 15-20 seconds that encapsulate your main points. Verbal lists can help here - i.e. "To understand this situation it's helpful to remember the following three things ..." It is a good idea to write these down in case you get stuck.
- In television, good visuals are very important and will actually drive the story - campus scenes, photos that reproduce well, people involved in live action, lab scenes, etc. If you help the reporter find the shots they need, you build a more amenable relationship.

After the interview:

- Most reporters won't let you see or read the story before it is printed or broadcast. Often they can't tell when it will be printed, although most TV and radio reporters are working for broadcasts that same day.
- It's permissible to ask the interviewer if they got certain points you were trying to get across at the time of the interview. It's also okay to call afterward and, in a friendly way, ask for a review of the story. Many reporters will be obliging and may even read parts of a story for you.
- You may call the reporter with further information or clarification, especially if the interview left you uneasy in some way.

(Adapted and expanded from "Tips for giving a media interview" courtesy of the University of Waterloo.)