

BASIC MEDIA TIPS

INSIGHT INTO A REPORTER'S WORLD: HOW REPORTERS THINK

Before we get to our initial approach to the media, I am going to give you a little insight into the reporters' world, so that you can hopefully understand them a little better and use them like the very effective tool that the media can be, if you know how to interact with them!

First and foremost, your boss is not that bad! Media management is a cutthroat business and usually only the person with the most abrasive personality is able to rise through the ranks. Management in any business is demanding, but perhaps more so in a newsroom dynamic. I have literally heard news directors or editors tell reporters, "If you do not get the story, don't come back!" and they meant it.

Newsroom managers expect reporters to brave all weathers and all situations to put their story on the air or in print and they are not shy about telling them so! News is a fickle business and is the original "That was yesterday; what have you done for me today" business. That's because every day is different and it is like starting from scratch every morning, and every day is a race against the clock to make sure the story hits air by news time (usually three times a day) or by print deadline.

Reporters are always acting under time constraints, meaning that they want everything now and they don't care what you have to do to make that happen. That is why I say that you need to make yourself available in order to take full advantage of every media opportunity.

So now you have a man or woman with a manager climbing all over his or her back with very little time to get what the boss wants done, done! Then you add a third element into the mix. Nearly all reporters that I have met want to either move up the food chain where they are at or want to move to a bigger city to get paid more money. The way to do that is to get the best stories and get them before everyone else! To make a long story short, nearly every reporter that I know is ambitious. Ambition will take you places you wouldn't otherwise go and make you do things you wouldn't otherwise do. They want something from you just like you want them to pick up your story. Always remember that!

Logistics

Another constant in the media is the lack of manpower. Like everything else in this economy, newsrooms in all media have downsized. That means that the reporters and photographers that remain are expected to churn out the same amount of news that they did before, with fewer people and less equipment.

Reporters will often make decisions out of convenience. The person who makes it the easiest for them to do their job will usually be the one whose viewpoint makes air or print. They are working under deadline pressure and a deadline is exactly that: the point at which your story either lives or dies, at least for that day.

Please remember that reporters are not necessarily your friend. They are under pressure from management, have little time to do their job, and may not care about your cause tomorrow!

Why They Ask the Questions That They Do, When They Do

Now, I am going to cover some of this material later, but it is important to explore the reporter mentality a little further now that we are on a roll, especially as it applies to an actual interview itself.

Reporters, in spite of all of the factors we have already discussed, are professionals. They will usually follow a pattern when it comes to an actual interview itself. So to prepare you for the big show, here is how reporters will usually conduct an interview.

Usually, unless it is a breaking news story or they literally have a minute before they have to get back to the newsroom, reporters will open with a little small talk to loosen you up, ask some simple, general questions. Those questions will be followed fact finding, background information, and once you are going they will set you up for the tough questions, almost always saved for last, just in case the person being interviewed gets mad and refuses to talk any more.

This is the reason for following current events and knowing what is going on in your world. Never completely let your guard down when dealing with a reporter. Be cordial, but professional.

THE PRESS RELEASE

The last section was putting the cart before the horse a little bit, but I want you to know the world that you may be jumping into. Now we are going to rewind and start with the basics of getting your message out there: The Press Release.

Newsworthiness

Reporters absolutely hate getting press releases on what is called “vapor;” events or issues that have no meaning or don’t affect anyone but the company or organization trying to push their agenda on everyone else. So every press release that makes it to a TV or radio assignment manager or to a newspaper or magazine editor has to answer the “so what” question.

Your event or issue has to be newsworthy i.e. it has to be worth their time to cover. That is why you have already defined the issue, thought about what you want to say, how to say it, and who is or isn't going to do the talking, because now is the moment of truth and you want to make your press release more appealing and more easily covered than the next guy's.

If it is an event to illustrate our point on a certain issue it needs to be media friendly. If you are sending the release to a television station, there needs to be a visual element to the event. We happen to be lucky because nurse-midwives, for the most part deal with babies, and the women who have them. Babies make a great visual, they are like puppies everyone wants to see them, and if it is a serious issue as are most legislative agendas, most people want to protect babies from whatever we are telling them is threatening their well being.

News organizations will also consider whether the issue or event concerned in the release is helpful to the community. We have already decided that the issue we are stressing is beneficial to the community and figured out why that is, we just have to make sure that is clearly articulated in the release.

The release must also be informative and in a concise way! Reporters and news managers are not giving each release a great deal of time. You must hit them with everything quickly! WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, HOW, and WHY!

Structure

The most important thing and the very first thing that the person who receives the release will look at is the HEADLINE. You have to make this person care about what you are saying, and more importantly keep reading the release! The longer he/she reads the release, the better the chance that they will act upon it.

The headline must either be hard-hitting, poignant, or sensational to keep the readers attention. Reporters and editors may get hundreds of releases a day, depending upon the size of the market, and they might act upon 10. Those aren't very good odds!

The body of the release needs to have all the pertinent facts structured in a concise and easy to read fashion. Who, what, where, when, how, and why all need to be briefly addressed in such a way as to keep the readers attention and convey the message that we have worked so hard to formulate.

Finally, there needs to be a call to action. We want the media to cover our issue or event and we need to tell them how they can easily do that. Always include contact information in conspicuous places. Reporters do not have much time, as we discussed, and they want everything now!

Timing

Creating a great press release is only half the battle. You also have to know the best time of day to get it to them! A basic rule is the earlier the better. 7:30 or 8 a.m. is the optimum time as assignment editors are trying to plan their days. If you can't get it to them at that time, there are certain times of the day when a release will get more consideration than others.

At least for television, you want to avoid the daily staff meetings. This is when the news managers get together with reporters and tell them where they want them to go, and where the reporters think about telling them where they want them to go! Usually the morning meeting will take place between 9 a.m.-10:30.a.m. Releases will sit on the fax machine, and your follow-up phone call, which you should as a rule always make, will be answered on speaker phone in the middle of a crowded meeting by someone who doesn't care at that moment what you are saying. You will be on the defensive and will more than likely not get the consideration that you want or that your story deserves.

The afternoon meeting will usually take place around 2:30 p.m. when there is a shift change of reporters and photographers and reporters who are putting stories together for the late news. Same thing applies; your Your release and your call will get less attention than you want, if any at all. However, if you have to make a choice between interrupting the morning meeting and the afternoon, choose the afternoon, because they will likely have more people on the assignment desk to take your call.

You, and again I am talking about TV, should also work around the stations newscasts. If the station has noon news and you call at 11:56 a.m. you are not going to get any attention, and the attention that you do get you may not want. The decision makers are likely involved with getting the newscast on the air and will not answer the phone or look at a fax. Likewise do not call with a story idea at 5:55 p.m. when the station has a 6 p.m. newscast. If you understand their world, and more importantly let them know that you understand the pressure that they are under, your chances of getting coverage increase exponentially.

Radio and print are different animals from television. When dealing with radio and print mediums, "The earlier, the better" is usually the order of the day. However, radio stations, especially news/talk radio stations do have regularly scheduled newscasts as well. You might want to make a mental note of when those news segments are, especially if it is a station that you happen to listen to often yourself.

Follow-Up

Now you know when to call, but whom do you ask for? I will give you the answer to that, but you need to do a little homework yourself. Notice which reporters at your local TV stations, newspapers, and radio stations, do health care stories, or if it something like domestic violence, which was the theme of our last nurse-midwifery week, which reporters might do that type of

story. Often the newspaper, radio station, or TV station will have a Web site. Most of these sites will have e-mail addresses where you can contact the reporter directly. If you do not have time to investigate which reporters do what kind of story at all of your local stations, maybe your local chapter could assign each member, or group of members, a particular station or newspaper, and you can then compare notes. This may be a more efficient way of doing things.

If you can't find a particular reporter to pitch the story to, try the person who designates which reporters do which stories. When you call a TV station, you want to call the newsroom number. If you call the main number, they will often have an automated system that will give you the option of the newsroom number. If you get the operator or receptionist, tell them you want the newsroom, or the assignment desk to be more specific. Most of the time you will get the assignment editor, or one of them, depending on the size of the city you live in.

Newspapers or magazines often have desks that serve the same function; however, they may call theirs the editorial desk. Radio stations have the same entity, although depending on the size of the station, you may want to the news director, in a small market, or they may have a full-fledged assignment desk, in larger markets.

The key, no matter which of the people you call, is brevity. Get to the point quickly. Most of these people are in a hurry and get tens of these calls a day. If you have to practice a little before you call. Have your pitch narrowed down to your best couple of points. Try to do your talking in 30-seconds or less, because that may be all you get anyway. If you have to call at a time near any of the staff meetings that I mentioned before, you might try something like "Yeah, I need to talk to the assignment editor, or did I catch you in the middle of the (morning/afternoon) meeting?" If they say yes (that you did interrupt), say 'sorry I will call back in 20 minutes.'

Be prepared to answer a couple of questions, if they do like the story you are pitching. Try to anticipate these questions; usually, "how many people might this situation affect?" or any of the "five W's."

If they are interested, ask if you can send any further information, and then do it! You need to have background information available, because reporters like "one-stop-shopping." The easier that you can make their job, the more coverage you are going to get; or the better the chance that you will get coverage in the first place!

If a reporter or assignment editor calls you back and you are not there to receive the call for whatever reason, or if they ask you a question that you do not know the answer to, find the information, AND CALL THEM BACK in a timely fashion. Reporters get a number of calls a day, in most circumstances, if two stories are pitched that they consider of equal value, they will take the one that is made the easiest for them to cover, and where they have gotten the most cooperation.

Along these lines, it is important to make sure that your staff is prepared to receive media attention as well. Make them aware that a reporter/reporters will be calling. Make sure that they understand only designated people are to make any statement to the press and that if these people are not available they should get the reporter's contact information and ask if they are on deadline. The deadline question is key. Do not take too long to get back to them or you may miss an opportunity to express your side of the story.

OFFICE PREPARATION

In-Office "Set"

Now one thing that you might want to think about, is if/when you secure coverage, where do you want to do the interview? Is there a location inside or outside of your office/practice? If you want to do the interview in your office, there are some general things to remember and preparations that you can make rather inexpensively, especially if you want to establish yourself eventually as a "go-to person" when they need opinions on health care issues.

First and foremost, I know that you are all busy people, but you have to make sure that your office is clean, or at least neat in appearance. There needs to be at least a portion that is clear of clutter, something that will look nice on camera. Preferably the "in-office set" needs to be situated away from the window. If a print photographer is taking your picture while shooting toward a window, there will be a huge shadow on your face. If a videographer has to shoot toward a window, the video will likely turn out "blue," and there will be a shadow on your face; either way that is not good.

What you want to remember is that the viewer will likely only see a three-foot area surrounding your head or upper torso during an interview, but that three-foot area can say a lot. You want to appear to be informed, perhaps even scholarly, but friendly and caring at the same time. A good way to do this is the right mix of books and plants. You might buy, or bring from home, a small bookcase, a small table, a houseplant, and maybe a small lamp. The books represent that you are well read. The table holds the small houseplant and lamp that make the space look "warm." The lamp will probably not be on during the interview, but it makes it look like you actually use that space to read the books, which you actually might. Also make the chair that you sit in as comfortable as possible. After all, you want to be comfortable during the interview so that you are relaxed and focused on the points that you would like to get across to the public/reporter.

Again, these materials and the effort to make your own in-office "set" are designed to portray you in the best light possible and to make the media's job of giving you coverage as easy as possible.

Personal Appearance

The way you want to dress for the interview is your decision, but there are a few suggestions that will make you appear the way in which you have intended, and they are different for men and women.

Men will generally want to dress conservatively. Your lab coat is always great, but a blue or gray suit is the norm if you are caught without it. If you want to wear something bright, make it the tie, red is always good, but not too wild a pattern. Also, for television, do not wear ties or clothes with stripes that are too small or are too close together. They will cause an effect that makes them take on a life of their own, or become “electric.” Examples of patterns to avoid are checks, hounds tooth, or other complicated patterns.

Many media people suggest an off-white or blue dress shirt. However, I have always found that a white dress shirt will do just fine. It also will give a TV videographer something to “white balance” off of. A “white balance” is a reading that a video camera needs to measure the amount of light, or certain types of light, that are present in the room. I don’t know if you have ever seen a TV report where the person appeared to be “blue” or maybe even some other color, but that is likely a result of a bad “white balance.” You might even suggest that the photographer use your white shirt to white balance. They will think that you are a media veteran!

The suggestions for women are similar. However, I will say that you might want to look at pictures that you have around the house and notice which ones you thought you looked the best in and what colors you were wearing at the time. That being said, there are a few guidelines to remember.

Solid fairly bright colors are usually best. White or cream ensembles may appear too busy and may cause problems for the photographer trying to take your picture. Blues are usually a good thing to wear; again, dress fairly conservatively. Wild prints are not a good idea; even if you look good in them, the viewer/reader might be distracted by what you have on, and not hear the important information that you are saying.

Jewelry should also be kept fairly simple. Basic is better. Earrings should not be too large, or dangle/move too much while you are speaking. They will almost always distract the viewer and it will take away from your message.

Make-up should be kept simple. Your everyday make-up will do.

Your appearance should be neat and at least fairly conservative. Hair should be combed and well groomed. Even if your personal style may not be as well kept, remember that the image that you project on-camera reflects on everyone in your practice, and for our purposes,

everyone in your profession. Once your image or words are out there, there is no taking it back. It is like trying to unring a bell: it can't be done!

Reference Material

As I said earlier, it is always a good idea to have reference material on hand for the reporters. Please have all relevant statistics to the material that you are going to cover and make sure that you have spare copies for them to take with them. Reporters try to do their best to stay informed, but giving them more information will help them ask you better informed questions, and will make it easier for them to write their stories when they get back to their offices. They will remember the fact that you made their job easier, and will be more likely to contact you in the future should they need an expert in your field.

If they support your point of view, you might also consider having copies of other articles that have been done on the subject, even ones from other cities, if they provide a glimpse of the "big picture" of the issue that you are discussing. If these articles are favorable to your cause, they might even influence the track that this reporter will take in writing your story.

If you have photos that will in any way help the story to be tilted in your favor, please have copies of those available in electronic format (at least have an electronic photo of yourself). If you work in a small practice that does not have its own PR personnel, I strongly urge you to go out and buy a digital camera. They are coming down in price and they allow you to e-mail photos to reporters, especially print reporters who need them more than TV reporters generally do.

They also give a visual example of what you are talking about. It is not always easier for the viewer or reader to get a clear picture of what you are saying. If you can provide a visual "guide," particularly if that photo supports what you want to say in favorable way, you make the reporter's job easier and you give emphasis and support to the point that you are trying to get across. If you are in a larger practice or hospital, your media relations person can/will probably do this for you.

THE INTERVIEW

Staying On Message

The key now is to stay on message. In other words, we don't want the conversation to bounce around and stray from the information that we feel is important enough that we went through all of this trouble in the first place!

We want to select a few main points to stress and keep hitting them at every opportunity during the interview. Generally, you don't want these points to number more than four. Your message should also be simple and easily understood. I know that you are thinking that some of the issues that we deal with are pretty complex, like "trying to fix the American health care system." That is why we have done the homework beforehand to pick out three or four things that we feel need to be recognized and how we want to tell others about it.

You might want to have these main points organized into what are called "talking points," which is really just a fancy name for making a list of the four main things you want to say. It may help to have these in front of you during the interview. However, I would not necessarily share anything that you have written down with the reporter.

The way to create this list is to ask yourself questions:

- What do people need to know or care about in order to become engaged in the issue?
- What obstacles or misconceptions do I need to overcome to get people engaged?
- What needs to happen, or what do people need to do to impact the issue?
- If people did those things, how would things be different?

Also, if you have opponents on the issue, have counterpoints ready. Know what their likely response to your statements might be and be ready to dismantle those arguments. Reporters rarely convey only one side of an argument and should not tell only one side of a story in order to let the public make an informed decision. Fortunately, you have already asked these questions by the time the reporter comes knocking, so you are ready to go with your talking points.

You keep the conversation flowing towards these points by using what we call "bridges." For instance: when the reporter asks a question that is off message, you say, "That is a really good question, but what we really need to be talking about is...." There is also "Before we can get to that point we have to consider...." These techniques allow you to make the most of the limited amount of time that you will have to get your message out.

You have to make sure that these points are concise and that they will be easily recalled both by the reporter when putting the story together and by the viewer/reader. "Sound bites" are phrases/sentences that seem to capture the essence of what needs to be said in a concise, all-encompassing manner. Reporters choose these sentences because they illustrate the problem or solution in a nutshell and/or they support the story that they want to write. Give the reporters as many "sound bites" as you can in support of your goals. Practice them beforehand if you can. An interview is not merely a conversation, although you want to make it as conversational as possible. An interview is an opportunity for you to use the media as a tool to get your message out there to the people who need to hear it!

Staying On Guard

Now that we are staying on message, we also want to stay on our guard, especially if it is a controversial issue that we are discussing, or could be discussing, which you will already know because you have been following current events.

The first thing that you need to know, and if you take only one thing from this discussion about interviews away from here today, it is:

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN OFF-THE-RECORD STATEMENT WHEN YOU ARE TALKING TO A REPORTER!

When you make supposedly “off-the-record” statements, you put both yourself and the reporter in a bad place. Once you have said something, it is in play! It cannot be taken back. If you are ever tempted to start a sentence with a phrase like, “I really shouldn’t say this,” **DON’T SAY IT!** You put your reputation and the direction of your cause/message in the hands of someone else. These statements will almost always come back to haunt you. Even though you may be talking to the reporter one-on-one, your purpose and his/hers is for that information to be shared with as many people as possible. If that information is pertinent to the discussion of your particular issue, the reporter has an obligation to put that information in the story. If you do not want it there, do not give it to him/her!

Also, if you are near a microphone, always assume that it is on and that others hear what you are saying. Even if you are just testing the microphone, assume that it is something that the reporter might use.

In addition, never speculate; if you do not know the answer to a particular question, tell the reporters that you will find out and get back to them, and then do it! Always get back to them with the information. If you speculate and are wrong, you may leave yourself open to legal action, and if wrong, will cause the audience to wonder what else in your message might be incorrect. You damage your credibility far more by speculating than you will by saying that you don’t know but will find out.

This situation would be a good spot for a “bridge” back to your original points. Say something like: “I can’t speak to that (or don’t know the answer to that), but the thing to remember is...”

Always remember that the reporters have a job to do and need the information that they asked about. Get back to them with the information.

Don’t fall victim to the desire to fill “dead-air” space. People usually get themselves into trouble by saying something they don’t necessarily want to say, but feel compelled to say something

because there is an uncomfortable moment of silence. It is the reporter's job to keep the conversation moving.

Do not lose your temper with reporters. Remember, they will ALWAYS get the last word. They decide which quotes to use on air or in publication. Stay cool and continue to present your side of the story, while hopefully winning the reporters over by using reason.

However, do make sure to speak up. If the reporter misstates something or has a fact wrong, politely and tactfully correct the mistake.

Body Language

There are certain things to remember as far as your mannerisms go during an interview as well. For instance, make sure where the reporter wants you to look during the interview — at him/her or at the camera (if it is TV).

Keep hand gestures to a minimum and if you must make a gesture, keep it within an imaginary "box" ranging from your chin to the sternum and no wider than the inside of your arms.

Please do not rock from side-to-side or fidget in your chair. It will make the viewer uncomfortable. Remember, how you say it can be as important as what you say. You will be more effective if you at least look confident and comfortable.

Follow Up

What happens after the interview is also important. At the very least, you (or your PR person) should always write (or e-mail) a "Thank You" note to the reporter and possibly to the assignment editor as well. This is classy and may help them to keep you in mind when looking for a comment on similar subjects.

You might also try offering other story ideas, once the story you were just interviewed for has been broadcast or published. They might find related stories interesting now that their mind is open to receiving information on your subject matter. They will probably not do back-to-back stories with you, but shortly down the line they might. It is important to at least make the offer.

You also will want to review the story to critique yourself by asking:

- Was I on message?
- Did I get my point across?
- Did I rebut any counterpoints?
- Was the piece accurate/fair?

If the story turns out to be factually wrong, screaming at the reporter will likely not do much good. Calmly and tactfully point out the mistake and ask him or her for a correction. If the reporter refuses to acknowledge the mistake or is openly hostile, you might want to take the matter to his/her supervisor, usually an editor or news director. This, however, should only be done if it is a serious mistake or if the reporter obviously had his or her own agenda to serve. Going over the reporter's head will likely sour your relationship and you may burn a bridge that can't be rebuilt. Make sure that the mistake is worth risking this.