

4 Powerful Tips For Handling a Media Interview

By Tom Fuszard

On occasion you may be asked to comment for a story. The reporter could be seeking additional information on a topic or reporting on something that occurred at your firm. While a crisis requires special handling, an occasional phone interview is something you can master. These pointers will help make your interview go smoothly.

Know your facts - Chances are the reporter will ask about routine matters. Try to imagine the types of questions you'll be asked, and compose answers. (Also, when the reporter calls, have your assistant gather some idea of what will be covered.) Notes and other necessary information should be at your fingertips. The conversation may be relatively brief--perhaps 10 to 15 minutes--so make sure you can find the pertinent details quickly.

Start and remain positive - Even if you think the reporter will take an adversarial position, begin the conversation in a friendly manner. Answering the phone with, "Oh, hi, how are you?" or "Yes, I heard you'd be calling" should set a positive tone. No need to get too friendly--some reporters may resent that, especially if they don't know you--but you can take advantage of the contact to potentially change a negative perception.

Maintain your composure during the interview, even if it appears that you're being badgered or boxed into a corner. Don't be alarmed by a business-like demeanor on the reporter's part. The reporter is simply doing his or her job. Part of that job is to remain detached. Answer the questions thoroughly, and have the reporter clarify or restate any questions you do not understand.

Compose your thoughts before speaking - The reporter will probably record the conversation for convenience and accuracy. Print reporters sometimes clean up or paraphrase a comment that is less than perfect. Unfortunately, quotes for broadcast may contain your verbal tics. (Listen carefully to interviews with athletes.) Practicing your answers in advance helps, but you may still be a bit nervous during the interview. Before answering a question, pause for a few seconds to compose yourself and your answer. Be sure to speak clearly and at a moderate pace. (See below for additional hints.)

End on a high note - Thank the reporter for the opportunity to present your side of the issue. If the conversation went well, you may be contacted in the future as similar stories develop. Being recognized as a willing subject may garner you and your firm additional, valuable exposure later. Calls from the media can seem intimidating at first. They shouldn't. With sufficient preparation and practice, you will deliver thoughtful comments smoothly and confidently.

Additional tips to help you prepare:

Record and review your comments to improve your delivery. Just as it's a good idea to video tape a speech so you can enhance your presentation skills, recording verbal comments will help you improve your vocal delivery. If you don't have a short speech at hand, grab a newspaper or magazine, and start reading one of the articles. Upon play back, note your speed. Was it natural sounding? Also, did you enunciate each word properly? You may notice, for example, that you rush through certain words, missing letters and sometimes syllables.

Common mistakes include "probbly", "twenny", "gonna" and "somethin". Focus on those words you have particular difficulty with. Next, try this without prepared text. Have someone ask you a question- -any topic will do--and record a one-minute reply. Listen for any filler words ("um," "ah", "well..." , and such) and unusual pauses. Practice until you can deliver a smooth, confident response.