

What do you say to a reporter?

A primer for handling interviews professionally

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooley

For the majority of reporters, news consists of 3 major elements:

- ✂ Action
- ✂ Conflict or Contrast
- ✂ Emotion

When a reporter calls, what do they want?

Generally, they are seeking one of the following items:

- ✂ **Information:** The reporter is seeking the straightforward facts about a policy, event or program. They may not be interested in quoting you. However, it is important that you are the 'correct' person to provide that information.
- ✂ **Confirmation:** The reporter has heard something and is calling to confirm their information. They may want to quote you. Again, ensure you are the 'correct' person, and that it is appropriate to release that information.
- ✂ **Reaction:** The reporter is 'specifically' looking to 'you' or your group for a comment on an event or issue affecting the community. It might be a straightforward explanation, or as a reaction to some unforeseen issue.

When might you expect a reporters call?

Often you can expect a call from the media in some of these instances:

- ✂ A major announcement has been made and now reporters need a local or topical angle or reaction from you or your group.
- ✂ Reporters will call if they need more explanations of a new decision, policy or a new or newsworthy program.
- ✂ Reporters may be looking for parallels or linkages to an announcement by another organization or company, possibly in the same field as yours.
- ✂ Reporters may be seeking reaction to a negative statement or action by another party who is critical to your company or organization.
- ✂ It may be the anniversary of an event or incident that reporter may want to update.
- ✂ A published report, commission's findings, etc. has just been released and reporters want reactions or explanations from you.
- ✂ A 'news' scoop or exclusive affecting you, your company, or organization has just come out. Media from other outlets may soon be on the phone or on your doorstep.

What do you do when they call?

My suggestion would be there are a number of steps that would allow you to comment with confidence, while providing useful information. This makes the reporter's job easier and may also help you get portrayed in a better light.

It is important to remain calm and remember to present yourself, your company or your group in the best light.

Before you begin, keep these points in mind:

- ✂ **ALWAYS ASSUME** you are being recorded or quoted. **There is no ‘OFF-the record’ in real life.** That works in movies. If you don’t want it reported or don’t want to see it in print or the 6 o’clock news, then don’t say it!
- ✂ Make a note of the reporter’s full name and the media outlet they represent. That way you can get back to them with additional or more current information should you find out after they have left. If you find an error, let them know. Often, they will thank you and make the change prior to publication. Reporters for the most part do not want to report inaccurate information.
- ✂ If you don’t have the complete answer, don’t answer the question. It’s ok to politely say you will get back to the reporter with the details. Ask them what their deadline is and work with them. Get back to them ASAP and give them an accurate and concise answer. This is not a time to bluff or try to fake it! Tell the truth as you know it or keep quiet.
- ✂ If you realize you are the wrong person to be interviewed, or your company or organization has a designated spokesperson, refer the reporter to the correct person. Alert the designated person, but don’t promise the reporter you’ll have that person get back to them. Tell them you’ll pass on their request to the correct person and give the reporter the correct name and contact information for their own follow up.
- ✂ There are ways to answer the ‘tricky’ and provocative questions. Learn them and be well prepared. This can make or break your interview. The best way to prepare is to think about how you would respond if interviewed – well in advance of being so.

Getting ready...

Being fully prepared mentally and strategically for a meeting with the media serves you and the reporter well. It is vital that you appreciate the fact that an interview is unlike any other communication experience you may encounter. The reporter is paid to ask you questions. Your responsibility or challenge is to convey your position or the position of your group in the most positive light possible. The two objectives are not always synonymous or in sync.

Being prepared in advance with 2 or 3 succinct, well-focused messages (sometimes called positioning statements) can be the key to a successful interview.

Keeping your message simple, personal and emotional will give you a better chance of getting your message across to the media in a positive manner.

Try this precision test...

- ✂ In TEN words or less, give 3 reasons why your message will make a difference to the average reader. How does it affect their income, security or quality of life?
- ✂ Is your language simple, short, without confusing jargon or shoptalk, and without acronyms? are the numbers you use rounded out?
- ✂ Can you give a specific, visual example to illustrate your point? Is there an appropriate metaphor, which will describe or enhance your actions?

Learn how to build on successful responses...

One method I've been taught is to use a three-step answer. Using less than 10 seconds per answer adds power and credibility to your response. It also increases the chance of being accurately and fully reported in context.

- ✂ **STEP ONE:** Introduce a key fact by positioning yourself with a short, factual point. This helps focus on a unique quality of the program or policy. Action words such as “first, only, and new,” can help to illustrate this point.
- ✂ **STEP TWO:** Technical support, which builds on the information in the first answer using factual, technical, scientific support, strengthens your point. You might use words like, “tests, research, studies, evidence, reports, etc.”
- ✂ **STEP THREE:** Public support can now be built on the information in the preceding two answers, with a reference to support the initiative or call to action. Key words might include, “public demand, clear need, partnership.”

Setting the ground rules...

Prior to an interview, it is important for both parties to understand the ground rule. Understanding and setting these ground rules will help in your media relations.

It is not appropriate to request a copy of the reporter's story before publication or broadcast. I'd suggest saying, “Please feel free to call back if anything I've said seems unclear or confusing to you.”

Remember, don't say it if you don't want it used. Please don't ask the reporter not to use your comment because you've had second thoughts.

It is, however, ok to correct errors-in-fact, but try to make sure the facts are correct in the first place, at the time of the interview. As I've already stated, if you don't have the complete answer or the facts you need are not readily available, arrange to call the reporter back with the correct information.

Never ask a reporter to pass on your information to other reporters. Remember it is a highly competitive business out there!

Understanding the commonly used terminology can help you avoid mistakes. Reporters are looking for unique news value, backed by solid facts, attributed to a credible named source. If you can fulfill that requirement, you will increase your chances of being in the 'news.

ON THE RECORD: Everything you say can be used in the story or piece. It should be attributed to you by name, title, and department as applicable.

OFF THE RECORD: Assume there is no such thing! If you don't want the information made public, they WHY are you talking about it to a reporter? Safer to avoid answering questions that will backfire, or cause you, your company or organization embarrassment.

NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION: This generally means the information is made public, but not the specific source of the information. You might however find them referring to a ‘senior official or officer’ unless you outline the ground rules carefully.

BACKGROUNDER: In media jargon a ‘backgrounder’ will give detailed overviews and objectives of the issue under scrutiny. The ‘backgrounder’ focus is to better inform the media of a complex issue. These are done for various reasons and to several reporters or media outlets at the same time. They may require input from specialized staff, if the material is highly complex.

They are ON THE RECORD but can be a mix of designated spokesperson and ‘not for attribution’ officials or staff.

Handling the different questioning styles...

Most of the time you will find reporters asking straightforward questions. Once in a while you may encounter more difficult questions. In this case **SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION**, means keeping focused on your answers – your key messages – NOT – the reporter’s questions. Here are a few examples and techniques for responding successfully:

☞ Friendly style: conversational, easy, lulling, soft

Recommended response: Stick to your key messages. Don’t wander or ramble with your answer. Avoid getting sucked into a conversation and losing focus. This is when you might inadvertently say something you will regret. Remember what you are there for?

☞ FIGHTING STYLE: Aggressive, abrasive, probing, rapid-fire, and loud.

Recommended response: Wait 2-3 seconds before you answer. Breathe and relax. Remember that you are in control. Confine your answers to 10 seconds or less and don’t volunteer additional information. Don’t argue, run away or hang up. Above all, stay calm, stay cool and keep focused on your key messages.

☞ DOUBLE NEGATIVES STYLE: ‘either/or questions, both negative, i.e., is it a bad policy or just bad planning?’

Recommended response: **IGNORE** both questions. Move back to your key messages instead. use bridging statements such as, “the **REAL** issue here is...”

☞ PERSONAL OPINION STYLE: the reporter is looking for a conflict, contrast or emotional response

Recommended response: Avoid personal opinions. Bridge back to your key statements or message. Use a bridge statement like, “It is not a question of personal opinion. It is an issue of fact. The fact in this case is...”

☞ HYPOTHETICAL STYLE: Questions call for a conjecture, guess or speculative answer or statement.

Recommended response: Stick with the facts. Again, bridge back to your key message. use something like, “I feel the facts are more important than speculation at this point. And the facts in this matter are...”

✂ **DEAD AIR STYLE: This is a good one. A long pause is deliberately left between questions which ‘invites you to fill the dead air.’**

Recommended response: Run from the temptation to randomly elaborate on your answer. Keep your answers short and succinct. Wait for the next question or use the three-step method I’ve already outlined to build on your answer in 10 seconds or less.

✂ **GOING FISHING STYLE: Questions referring to ambiguous reports or unsubstantiated data or ‘facts.’**

Recommended response: Politely challenge the question and ask for details about the date, and the source of the information. Correct errors in your question. If you find the details surprising, or uncertain, say so! Avoid speculation. I’d suggest saying something like, “I think it would help both of us if I took the time to check the accuracy and timeliness of this information.

Remember when you are answering a question to avoid repeating a negative question in your answer – it can be taken ‘out of context’ in a quote. Respond in the positive!

For example, “I disagree this program is not working...in fact...”
Better, “The fact is this program is working...”

Bridging tips...

Here are a few examples to help you in bridging from an irrelevant or hostile question to your key points or messages. Your primary goal is to communicate your message and facts in a direct, factual and focused manner.

“Let’s look at this in the proper context. This program will...”

“With respect, let’s deal with the facts. The facts show that...”

“The real issue is what the public really wants. This program gives people...”

- ✂ Don’t ignore a legitimate, but hard question.
- ✂ If you don’t know the answer, say so, and bridge back to your key message.
- ✂ If you aren’t in possession of a specific fact, tell the reporter you will find the answer and will get back to them ASAP.
- ✂ BE cautious of saying, ‘we will look into an issue.’ The very fact of ‘looking into’ could be a story in itself. Be careful!
- ✂ If legal, privacy or personal reasons prevent you from comment, say so, and bridge back to your key message.
- ✂ Avoid the phrase ‘no comment’... it is trite, over done, and can be news in itself! “Officials refused to comment...”
- ✂ Be calm and sincere when you answer. Don’t lie, hedge or bluff – ever!

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