

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

MEDIA TIPS

WHEN YOU GET A CALL FROM A REPORTER

Always take the call, or return it if you receive a message. Even if you know that you are unable to answer the question, you are considered a “source” even if you refer the reporter to someone else.

If the reporter is sounding you out with a pre-interview, try to find out the substance of the story. You can simply ask the reporter what the focus of the story will be and what you are being asked to contribute. You can tailor your responses to be most useful and quotable.

If the subject is one better handled by another staff person, or another organization, refer the reporter. You do not want to provide questionable or possibly outdated information on a subject out of your territory—the reporter will never revisit you.

If you are able to comment, establish your expertise with the issue, focusing on the breadth of your knowledge and practical experience, and most importantly, concrete examples.

For example, if you are asked to comment on a story about fundraising for community-based non-profits, you can explain, “I’m John Smith, the executive director for Legal Services of Yourtown. My organization provides legal services to low-income people and we serve more than 1,500 clients each year. I have been in this field for 12 years, and have worked extensively on fundraising efforts from dinners to direct mail appeals.”

IF YOU’RE ASKED FOR A COMMENT

Pick an appropriate strategy, depending on the media’s audience.

Is the audience the general public, policy leaders, experts, or activists? Pick an appropriate facet of the issue to address. This will keep the interview focused.

Know your own agenda.

Going into any interview, think of three points you want to make. Find appropriate opportunities to make these points during the interview. Even if you are not asked these questions about your points directly, use the reporter’s questions as a segue to make your points.

Take your time and choose your words carefully.

While you might feel that you are under incredible time pressure, a few seconds only seem long to *you*. If you jump at the question nervously, you will not be clear or concise.

Answer questions one at a time.

If the reporter asks several questions, jot them down and try to answer them. You shouldn’t feel you have to answer every question, especially

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ones that are off-topic. Don't be afraid to ask the reporter to repeat a question, even if it is a TV or radio interview.

Don't answer "yes" or "no" alone.

If the reporter asks, "Is the mayor doing an adequate job on your issue?" Start the answer with "The mayor has done a great disservice by not considering . . ." That will make your answer a "sound bite." If you answer, "No, he isn't," the reporter might paraphrase you, but will not quote you.

If you don't have an answer, don't give one.

Either tell the reporter you'll find out the answer and call back, or refer the reporter to someone who does know, either within your organization or at another group.

If the interview is a live broadcast, if pressed you can say you don't know, but it's better to bridge to a message statement that you're prepared to deliver.

If a question is outside the scope of the discussion or too controversial to address, you should deflect it by bridging to a prepared message that you want to deliver. Experienced interviewees do this all the time

Never say that you have "no comment."

Groups usually know what their sensitive issues are, and what questions would be touchy. Prepare answers for tough questions in advance. When you are caught off-guard, and really don't have a comment prepared, tell the reporter you will fax a written statement.

During a live broadcast or "ambush" interview, recycle a message point. "As we have said before, our organization is committed to (or interested in) . . ."

Be quotable.

Some spokespeople are more helpful than quotable. This means they provide background information that is more educational than it is memorable. Try to speak in memorable sound bites that sum up your messages in a few brief sentences. Break down technical language or complicated concepts into well-crafted press lines.

Ask the reporter to rephrase unclear questions.

If the reporter continues to be vague, say "I'm not sure what you mean, but . . ." and use the opportunity to make one of your own message points.

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Don't go on background or off the record.

If you don't want anyone to know you said something, it's better not to tell it to a reporter. Consider anything you say in front of reporter fair game for use.

Say the full name of your group when you refer to it.

If you use an acronym, and the acronym doesn't stand for anything, you miss the opportunity to get the full name in print. Work the name of the group into the interview two or three times.

Be as specific as possible in your answers.

Both reporters and audiences like human stories. If you know a personal story or example, and it is illustrative—and short—use it. Use lists of examples, rather than over-arching concepts, as much as possible.

Be animated and pithy in your answers.

Reporters are interested in passionate people who care about issues. Indecision and fence-sitting don't make for effective comments. While not every line will be a zinger, pepper your interview with clever comments.

If you are dealing with numbers or complicated data, offer to fax the reporter a copy.

Numbers are the easiest sort of information to botch. Zeroes get left off or added, percentages are misrepresented. It is always wise to have a reporter work from a hard copy of your data.

If you are on a talk show with guests from the opposition, find out in advance about the other guests and who they represent.

It is important to know who and what you are up against. A bit of background research will allow you to stress the strengths of your arguments by comparing your policies and track record to that of the other guests.

Don't quarrel with reporters or other guests.

If you appear hotheaded, you lose credibility. Remain calm, and make your point forcefully, but not hysterically. If the reporter or a guest continues to be belligerent, say that you are not there to argue, but rather to help people understand the issues.

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Make sure you have a glass of water nearby during an interview.

This may seem insignificant, but people get nervous during interviews and dry up. If your speaking voice is not clear—and you are worried about how you sound—you won't be an effective advocate. Also a dry mouth will make you appear nervous.

FOR TAPED TV OR RADIO

If you make a mistake, correct it by saying the entire statement again.

If you misspeak, stop, regroup, and start the statement again from the beginning of the point. The material will be edited, but the tape is edited on breaths—rarely on individual words. You want a clean, clear version of your entire point. Don't worry about using too much of the reporter's tape or video.

Specific TV tips

The camera sees everything.

Don't fidget, put your hands on your face, chew gum, play with buttons, tie pins, or earrings.

Don't nod to everything that is said.

While you might nod to denote understanding, it will appear that you are agreeing or worse, bouncing.

Be mindful of the microphone on your lapel.

It is sensitive and will pick up most sounds. Be especially aware during breaks if you are speaking to a colleague or are saying something private.

AFTERWARD

Establish a rapport with reporters by following up good interviews or good stories with a note.

This is not pandering. You can send a publication or fact sheet with a note saying, "Enjoyed talking with you" or "I thought the story was well-done and that you might be interested in this report (article, pamphlet, fact sheet)."

If you feel you've been slighted or misrepresented, tell reporter.

While letters to the editor can be useful, it's always constructive to rehash an interview with the reporter. Don't be overly-sensitive or thin-skinned—just present your case. If you think a retraction is appropriate, ask the reporter to discuss it with an editor and get back to you. If you get no relief, arrange a meeting with the reporter and the editor.