

WHAT REPORTERS REALLY WANT

by Karen Friedman

There is hardly anything more intimidating than a reporter standing in front of you, arm outstretched with a microphone two inches from your mouth, a camera pointed in your direction and a bright light shining in your eyes. The perspiration is forming on your brow, your mouth is starting to dry and you're sure the reporter can hear your heart beating. Let's face it; any intelligent, coherent person could become a rambling nervous wreck.

As a television news reporter for nearly twenty years, I never really heard anyone's heart beating, but I saw a lot of sweating, stammering and rambling. Contrary to the popular belief that most reporters are out to get you, I often felt sorry for these people. They had no one to turn to for help. More importantly, they knew their subject so well, but under the pressure of the moment, could not effectively communicate their message.

Interviews should be an opportunity to share, educate and inform. Reporters want information. They want you to help them tell your story. They want facts and they want honest answers. Understanding how the media works and what the different mediums need, is your first step to becoming media savvy.

A reporter's job is to break down very complex issues into informative short stories that audiences can relate to and understand. Television reporters need pictures to go with their stories and sometimes the availability of those pictures dictates how the story is written.

So why not maximize your effectiveness? Spend a few minutes learning how reporters think and what they need, so you can work with them. There are no guarantees. But knowledge and understanding are powerful tools.

Informed Interviewees

Reporters want factual, accurate and reliable information. Don't talk if you don't know the subject. Instead, get the right answers or find the right person to provide those answers.

Direct Concise Soundbites

Keep your answers focused and to the point. State your main point first and then back it up with an explanation. Reporters always welcome history and background to help them understand the story, but there is limited time to include all of those details in a short interview.

Know Their Needs

Television needs visuals. Radio needs interviews. Think in those terms. If you are talking to a reporter about a tractor in the field, conduct the interview in front of that tractor where they can see it, rather than in an office, where they can only imagine it. If you're holding a news conference or event, make sure the media has room to take pictures. Provide a mailbox for microphones, set an agenda and limit the number of spokespeople.

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Accessibility

Reporters are observers. If you want a reporter to do a story about your company, make your facility and employees available to that reporter. Know what the reporter needs and set it up ahead of time.

Deadlines

What is news today isn't always news tomorrow. Reporters usually need information five minutes ago. Be sensitive to the reporter's deadline and try to accommodate them.

Know Where To Look

Look at the person who is talking to you. If you're not sure where to look, please ask.

Speak Their Language

Don't talk technical. Don't use big words. Speak simply and conversationally. If the audience can't understand you, what's the point?

Stand or Sit Still

Do not rock, swing, sway or bounce. Stand straight or sit still. Watching a head bob in and out of frame is very distracting.

What does it mean to me?

Reporters keep the reader or viewer in mind. What do they care about? To give your message meaning, try to put yourself in the viewer's shoes.

Phone Calls

It is rude not to return phone calls. Ignoring the reporter makes you look like you have something to hide, even if you don't. Call the reporter back. You don't have to do an interview on the spot.

Don't Produce The Story

Try to refrain from telling the reporter how to do their job. You can provide information to guide the reporter, but ultimately, they will write the story. The reporter does not work for you.

Mistakes

If you realize you mis-spoke, call the reporter and correct the information. The reporter will appreciate your help.

The reporter is a liaison between the public and you. If the reporter doesn't completely understand what you're saying, they will not clearly convey your message. So, the next time you find a microphone just inches from your face, remember, you're the expert. Reporters want your help no matter how loudly your heart is beating.

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