



Media Relations: The How To's of Working with the News

INTRODUCTION

Why work with the news? Because the news media is the most powerful medium to advance your message and public health goal.

- The goal is not just to be 'on the news' but to advance your message and public health goals through the news
- If you cannot advance your message, then pass on 'being on the news'

WHEN A REPORTER CALLS: Media preparedness

Know your role. The designated media spokesperson or persons is part of an overall strategy. Know who is responsible for what. Are you the designated spokesperson, or one of them to speak with the news? If it's you, know how to work with the news, if it's not you; know where to direct the news media. Are you someone who can refer reporter requests to the designated person?

Spanish language: make sure someone bi-lingual and bi-cultural can communicate the correct message to the Latino community.

Respond immediately! Even if you're not the officially designated spokesperson, the reporter doesn't know that. Call right back, find out what reporter needs, and get it to the appropriate person who can advance the message and goal. Or, forward the reporter's message to the designated spokesperson. Do not delay and miss the opportunity.

Ask reporter what is his/her deadline. Reporters have to make a deadline and will go with what they have, even if you haven't gotten back to them, which may skew the story away from your goals and message.

Ask what the story is. You don't want your 10 second sound bite or quote to end up in a story you have nothing to do with. At the outset, determine whether you're the correct person to speak to this issue by asking in the beginning about the focus of the story.

Ask how reporter got your name and who they've already talked with. You may be able to refer them to someone else to help develop and complete the story.

Consider it an opportunity to advance your issue.

- When the news asks you to respond to breaking news, even if it's a crisis or bad news, make lemonade out of lemons by using it as an opportunity to advance and control your message.
- So, make sure you're prepared with a focused message, that public health is on the same page and not sending mixed messages.



LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION: Interviewing with a reporter

Clear Message-know your points well and be clear. If asked about something you don't feel helps you advance your goal, say something like, "that's not really important, what is important is" or, "that's not really the issue here. The real issue is"

You are the expert. The reporter is not the expert. Stick to your agenda not the reporter's.

Talking points-it helps to have brief bulleted talking points written down. It's fine to use a 'cheat sheet' to help stay focused and prevent going off on a tangent.

Eye Contact-make direct eye contact with the reporter. Don't look at the camera lens or around the room. This will make you appear unsure of your messages.

When talking with a reporter, you are always 'on'. Never let your guard down, reporters are always reporting, even if the camera and microphone are turned off. An interview is not a chat or conversation.

Sound bites and quotes. Make your statements catchy, correct, and concise. Be aware that a TV/radio reporter may use much of the info you impart in the narrative of the story (or voice over), but only 10 seconds of you actually speaking (or SOT sound on tape). This SOT is called a sound bite in broadcasting. In print, it's a quote. A bite-size piece of what you said. So, get as much bang for your buck in those 10 seconds by making it catchy, correct and concise.

Famous sound bites:

"Your enemy is not surrounding your country; your enemy is ruling your country."

President George Bush, January 2003

The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it's God's gift to Humanity."

President George Bush, January 2003.

No-no's in talking with the news media

- **Saying too much.** You make your point and then keep going and make a lesser point, which the reporter makes a big deal and turns the story into something you hadn't intended.
- **Stray from your area of expertise.** Under pressure from the reporter to comment on something you are not familiar with, you say something not right, get quoted and you get in trouble. Just say 'I don't know.' Then refer them to someone who does know. Better to say, 'I don't know, than say, 'no comment', which has a negative 'bad guy' connotation, like you're hiding something.
- **Relax too much.** You are having a nice chat and provide some info that you did not want to become public. Solution: maintain a professional distance in interviews and always keep your objective in mind
- **Fear of silence.** There's a pause and rather than waiting for the next question, you fill in the gap and provide info that you hadn't intended. Don't be afraid of silence.



PROACTIVE News making

Proactive news making is proactively controlling the story and knocking on the reporter's door to advance your public health message and goal:

- Pitching a story
- Placing an ad
- Setting up a meeting with the newspaper editorial board for an editorial
- Submitting an Opinion piece or Op-ed, letter to the editor, or article.
- Calling a TV interview or radio talk show

Making it newsworthy

- Compelling? - conflict and controversy make good stories for reporters. Need hero and villain (hero you, villain smallpox). Facts must be combined with compelling stories to move people.
- Human Interest - does the story affect lots of people? Is there a human face to the story? Why should the viewer, listener, reader care?
- What's the local angle? People care about their local community.
- Anniversary or holiday angle?
- Pictures, sounds, movement, visuals

SMALL VS. LARGE MARKET NEWS

Small market news

- Often more rural area with specific types of news media and needs
- Local, neighborhood, community newspapers publish weekly or monthly, instead of daily, so know their deadline.
- Small newspapers may not have available reporter to cover your story so you can often write the article and the paper will publish as is. Or, they'll publish news release as is. Also, you can provide photos to small papers
- You may be able to land a regular health column in a community newspaper or regular participation in a talk show in a small market radio station.
- Radio station may be small with few staff.
- Small markets may not have a TV station. If they do however, may be more likely to cover your story or grant you an interview segment during a morning show



Large market news

- TV station will want compelling, newsworthy story or won't cover
- Radio news more likely to cover your newsworthy story because of bigger staffs
- Radio stations will have phone in programs that you can phone into when discussing your issue
- Newspapers may have different editions depending on geographic regions, i.e. 'Metro Edition', or 'North County Edition'
- Newspapers have Opinion Editors - you can submit Op-ed pieces or letters to the editor