

What To Do When the Media Calls

Sometimes you will expect the media to call you, for example, in response to a press release you have circulated, or an event in which you are involved. Usually, however, they will call you unexpectedly in response to something that has happened in your community or that has statewide importance: a high profile sexual assault, a piece of legislation, the release of sexual assault statistics or a related report, etc.

1. Relax. Don't panic. Breathe.
2. Never ignore a media call. If you don't respond to a media call, they will ignore you next time. If you really feel that you cannot talk to them, direct them to someone you trust.
3. Unless, the media person calling you is on a tight deadline, never feel that you have to speak to the media immediately or unprepared. If you are unprepared, ask them if it is okay to call them back in ten, fifteen or twenty minutes. If you really need longer, ask them when their deadline is. You may be able to delay several hours, or days, but only if absolutely necessary. It's obviously best to not delay at all, but do be as prepared as possible rather than try to "wing it" extemporaneously.
4. How do you know when you are unprepared?
 - a. You haven't had a chance to recently review/think about the issue you are being asked to comment upon.
 - b. You feel you may have forgotten (or don't know) a few important facts that are pertinent to the issue.
 - c. You cannot cite two or three powerful statistics/facts to back your claims.
 - d. You haven't thought about what your angle is.
 - e. You do not know yet what "Your Quote" is going to be.
 - f. You haven't thought about what your opponents (if any) are going to say.
 - g. You haven't thought about what tough questions a good reporter will ask you (or strong points the opposition may raise), and what your responses may be.
5. If you have to spend ten or twenty minutes before speaking with the reporter, use it well.
 - a. Quickly review the facts of the issue.
 - b. Consult your files, your co-workers, use the internet.
 - c. Make a short bullet-pointed list of ideas or facts you want to cover in the interview. Use your crib notes during the interview.
 - d. Separate out two or three of your most powerful facts or ideas.
 - e. One of these will be used as the basis for "Your Quote"
 - f. Think about what are one or two of the toughest questions the reporter may ask, and possible answers
 - g. Make sure that you will be uninterrupted during the interview. Close your door.
6. What is "Your Quote" and how to prepare for it? If you are lucky, a reporter will use one quote from you (perhaps two) over the course of your ten or twenty minute interview. They will be listening for the most interesting thing you have to say. Why let the reporter decide what that quote will be, when you can often largely make that decision for them. How do you do that?

- a. Before speaking with the reporter – or if you are confident, *while* you are speaking to the reporter – construct a short, concise, one or two sentence quote that sums up your opinion on the issue. Sentences that get quoted are: challenging, poignant, punchy, funny, sassy, gutsy, biting, moving.
- b. “Your Quote” may raise a point that no one has considered
- c. The safer you play it, the more guarded, the more general, the more you equivocate, the more likely you will not be quoted at all.
- d. “Your Quote” must stand out from the rest of what you are saying.
- e. It is often emotive rather than educational or intellectual.
- f. It uses strong adjectives and adverbs. There is no “good” or “bad,” but rather “brilliant” or “devastating.”
- g. It functions as a stand alone sentence (or two). If separated from the rest of what you have said, it must be completely understandable. In other words, try to avoid: he, she, it, they, that, etc. Substitute them with proper names. You don’t want the reporter to have to insert a name in brackets into your quote, because it wasn’t clear who or what you were referencing.
- h. You usually want to lead up to “Your Quote,” and then spring it like a punch-line, a summation, and encapsulation.
- i. Then stop momentarily, and give it some time. Fight the urge to fill up silence with more talk. That is a very hard thing to do, and requires conscious thought.

7. DON’T’S

- a. Don’t assume the reporter knows anything about the topic, or has done a bit of research.
- b. That being said, don’t spend your time educating. You may have to explain some things to the reporter, but your job is not to teach them, your job is to get quoted saying something significant.
- c. The best type of interview speech is emotive but sprinkled with a few powerful facts/statistics. Fight the urge to recite a litany of facts and statistics.
- d. Don’t ramble. Don’t give the reporter a smorgasbord of things from which to choose. The more time you spend talking, the more likely it is that the reporter will quote you saying something you didn’t want quoted (or not quote you at all), than what you planned. Answer questions in only a few sentences. Then force yourself to stop. An interview is not a conversation. The point of a conversation is to keep it going – which is not the point of an interview.
- e. Speak in short sentences. Long sentences rarely get quoted.
- f. Don’t use weak language. Avoid: some, somewhat, maybe, possibly, probably, basically, hoping, perhaps, trying, we think, etc. Do not equivocate. Speak boldly.
- g. As a representative of a SASP you hold more power than you think. Public servants and elected officials have cause to be frightened of what you may say. Use your power carefully, but don’t be afraid to use it.

- h. We are trained to use very careful language in the presence of a sexual assault victim. However, the same language when used with the press will be quite different. They are two very different audiences.
- i. Don't use technical jargon or acronyms.
- j. Don't speak too fast. A reporter will be typing or writing your responses as you speak (if they are not audio recording you). However, don't slow down too much for them, as this will hobble your delivery, and actually cause you to change what you would like to say – usually to its detriment. If a reporter is interviewing you over the phone, and you can hear them typing your responses, fight the urge to slow down too much to match their typing speed.
- k. Don't lie. A reporter will find you out, and you will lose all credibility, and may be publicly embarrassed.
- l. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell the reporter so. They will still respect you. It's better to admit what you don't know, than to try to dance around the answer. You can always offer to get back to them with the answer.
- m. Don't feel that you have to answer every question. If you feel very uncomfortable answering something, say so, and refuse to. However, avoid saying "No comment."
- n. In extreme cases it may be necessary to avoid an interview entirely, if the intent of the story is to make you or your agency look bad. The best way to kill a story is to cut off its oxygen. In such cases, it's better to release an explanatory statement rather than face a hostile reporter.

8. DO's

- a. During the interview, jot down things you want to add as you go along.
- b. If the reporter is not asking you the questions that you want to answer, try to steer your answers into an area you wish to go. Do not give a reporter total control over the direction of an interview. If you haven't had a chance to drop "Your Quote" yet, now is the time to work it in.
- c. Respond to negative questions with positive answers.
- d. If you are responding to questions regarding a perpetrator, remember the presumption of innocence. They are "alleged" of a crime until they are convicted.
- e. Feel free to ask the reporter questions, for example, who they are planning to interview besides you.
 - i. If the reporter has already interviewed someone with an opposing viewpoint, ask the reporter if you can reply to some of their comments.
 - ii. If the reporter is planning to interview someone with an opposing viewpoint, then craft some of your responses as to predict what points your opposition may raise.
- f. Feel free to call the reporter up minutes or hours after an interview to correct something you said, or to give them new information.
- g. Feel free to e-mail or fax the reporter some information that may be useful.

- h. Refer the reporter to other individuals that you feel will bolster your position.
- i. Oftentimes, a reporter will end an interview by asking you if you want to add anything. Now is your chance to raise important points that have not been covered as to yet.
- j. If there is a substantial error in the published story, don't hesitate to contact the reporter or paper immediately for a printed correction.