

# Media Relations Basics

*"It is always a risk to speak to the press: they are likely to report what you say."* — Hubert H. Humphrey

## Introduction

With the speed of information technology and the dissemination of information that is sometimes well researched (and sometimes not) talking to a reporter can instill fear in the most seasoned speaker or administrator.

As people of faith continue to be in the crosshairs of controversy whether over a social issue or some kind of malfeasance, it becomes important for church leaders to think through a response before the recording begins.

## The Interview Request

When a reporter calls, find out as much as you can before you answer any questions. Do not start off with "no comment". In fact, **NEVER** say "no comment." Think about when you hear the phrase come out of the mouth of a political leader or an attorney – it sounds like there is something to hide whether there is or not.

Even if it is likely to be a confrontational interview, don't allow yourself to develop a "victim" mentality. If you are in control, it is your interview as much as the reporter's. Only provide the information asked for by the reporter if it is a delicate situation.

Some suggested questions would include:

1. **What is your name again? Can you spell that for me?** - This isn't rude. Remember, they called YOU. This gives you info you need to do a search for background if you have time.
2. **What news outlet are you reporting for?** (if they haven't already told you) – This should give you an idea of the angle they may take in their questioning and, if you are able, you can "google" the media outlet and make sure the reporter is legitimate if you have reason to doubt.
3. **What is your deadline?** – If they insist it is immediate, you can say something like "I'm not prepared to speak with you right now." If they give you a time, whether five minutes or

## Words of Wisdom

*from the blog of Margaret McGann of 2M Communications*

### **DO**

1. Be aware of the reporter's audience.
2. Be friendly and polite.
3. Be honest.
4. Be helpful.
5. Be patient. Good media relations take time and effort.
6. Be accurate. Every name, fact and figure must be right.
7. Remember, a reporter works for his employer, not yours.
8. Be prompt.
9. Be fair.
10. Be thorough.

### **DON'T**

1. Use jargon.
  2. Lie. Ever.
  3. Say no comment.
  4. Lose your temper.
  5. Expect miracles.
  6. Demand.
  7. Assume you have any control over the editorial content of a story.
  8. Exaggerate the importance of your news.
  9. Blame a reporter for his company's policies.
  10. Give up.
- [\(http://2mcommunications.wordpress.com/2010/02/08/media-training-cheat-sheet/\)](http://2mcommunications.wordpress.com/2010/02/08/media-training-cheat-sheet/)

three days, take down their info and get back to them after you get a little more information. Just 10 minutes can give you the time you need to calmly think through what you need to say and/or get the information you need so you can speak authoritatively.

4. **Where can I call you back?** - Again, this isn't rude. They called you. This will also give you a moment to collect your thoughts and gather any data you may need. And call back when you say you will.
5. **Can you tell me a little about your story?** - You aren't asking for all the content, but it gives you a frame of reference for your answers.
6. **Tell the truth.** Even if it isn't good news, you need to tell the truth because it will come out sooner or later. Just don't say "no comment"!
7. **Other options rather than "no comment" can include –**
  - a. I don't know.
  - b. Let me try to find out. (You need to make sure you follow up whether you get them the information requested or not.)

***Never say "no comment."***

## **General interview advice**

The following advice is from Jim Cameron, a public relations professional who gives some great food for thought.

- Know the points you want to get across in the interview. Build a bridge of words from the reporter's question to your messages... and deliver them several times during the interview.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know the answer to a question but instead offer to find the answer and get back to the reporter before their deadline. Never respond to questions based on unfamiliar facts.
- Don't be rushed into answering. Don't feel obliged to fill "dead air" after a tricky question. Just pause, think... and then answer.
- Avoid professional jargon. Keep your message simple, but not condescending.
- Find out as much as you can about the reporter and his/her story before you agree to be interviewed. Have they covered your business and its issues before? Who else are they talking to for this story? Do you really want to be in that mix? You can always politely decline an interview. Nobody can force you to talk if you don't wish to.
- On TV, always dress your part, projecting a cool, clean-cut professional image.
- Don't look into the camera. Instead, look at whomever is talking. Avoid the temptation to look at the monitor or acknowledge other distractions out of camera range. And remember: you are always potentially on camera, even if someone else is talking. TV Director's love "reaction shots" of your expression or body language when someone else is verbally skewering you.
- Project your messages with enthusiasm. That attitude is contagious. And if you're not excited about your message, the reporter and audience never will be.

*Jim Cameron is president of Cameron Communications Inc. (<http://www.mediatrainer.tv/>)*

## If the interview is by phone...

- Establish an "interview atmosphere" by isolating yourself with the telephone as much as possible. Close the door and turn over extraneous papers on your desk.
- Review your message points and other relevant notes. Keep them in front of you during the interview, along with scratch paper to take additional notes.
- Since you can't see the face of the person at the other end of the phone, occasionally ask the reporter for feedback on your comments to ensure his/her understanding.

Some material above is from *Fleisher-Hillard Media Training Manual for the American Probation and Parole Association* – 26 pages - found on the Internet at [http://www.appa-net.org/eweb/Resources/National\\_Branding/AFORCE\\_MediaTrainingManual.pdf](http://www.appa-net.org/eweb/Resources/National_Branding/AFORCE_MediaTrainingManual.pdf)

As a review – remember the **ABCs of interviewing** as used by Carol Saynisch, PR trainer for the U.S. military and NATO forces...

- A. Answer/acknowledge the question;
- B. Bridge with a statement to what you really want to talk about ("what I really want you to remember is..." "But the most important thing I'm about to tell you is... "even, "but here's the thing...");
- C. Communicate your message or additional information on a topic more conducive to furthering your own ends. In your own words, reflect the master message including current policies on the topic. Do not cede your power to the questioner. If necessary, insert any of your own info that the reporter may not get to on normal questioning. The reporter may be satisfied enough to go in that direction, carrying your message along with it.

Under no circumstances do you allow anyone to put words in your mouth by repeating anything contained in a leading question. Don't waste time on denying, or repeating negative words the reporter may have used to frame the question. Start fresh with a new answer, always as positive as possible and as informative as possible.

"No comment" is a lost opportunity to communicate with your core audience through the proxy a reporter provides. Think of the reporter as the stand in...the eyes and ears for your constituency....but one who may need background to understand full context of a situation.