



## **PUBLIC RELATIONS 101: TIPS, HINTS, STRATEGIES. . . AND WARNINGS**

**"There's something about reading a story in the newspaper that gives it an air of authenticity"**  
Marlo Thomas, *That Girl*

Lawyers and law marketers agree that public relations can be a productive way to enhance an individual or company's professional reputation. Although many companies have public relations or public affairs assistance available (either in-house or with an outside public relations agency), increasing your media exposure is most easily accomplished by developing your own personal media relationships. If you are interested in adding public relations to your marketing mix, the following hints should help place you on the short list of attorneys regularly consulted.

Before deciding to embark upon a personal PR program, it is important to remember that the ability to control the content of the message decreases its credibility. Public relations enhances the reputation of the quoted individual by connecting it to the credibility of the publication, but places the content of the message at the mercy of the reporter. This risk is unavoidable. To control the content, you must pay for the privilege -- through *advertising* which, as we all know, is perceived as less trustworthy.

Further, anyone who regularly deals with the media has learned that he or she occasionally will be misquoted, unflatteringly quoted, or not quoted at all (even after a lengthy interview). Media attention is never entirely positive; if the reporter fails to include the warts, the story becomes suspect, a "puff piece." Experts remind those who had just received negative publicity that, although their world currently revolves around this story; few unaffected people notice or care, and even fewer will remember the story next week. As long as an organization's overall media coverage weighs more heavily toward the positive side, it should keep doing it.

## MEDIA HINTS

When dealing with the media, certain hints apply equally well during an interview regarding a specific case or matter or in response to a reporter's solicitation for assistance on a particular topic. It is no secret that the attorneys who are regularly quoted have worked hard to earn that position by making the reporters' jobs easier. You can do it too by understanding what reporters need and making it a priority to help fulfill them.

### Attitudes

Some prevalent attitudes about the media should be discarded in the interest of using the press to your advantage:

- **The press is not "out to get you."** That attitude is self-defeating and most often not true.
- **Better information will come from you than from your opponent.** The press is likely to get the information they seek *somewhere*; better it be from you, with at least a chance to shape ("spin") the story, or to get your company's perspective.
- **Reporters are professionals; most are responsible.** Distorted or inaccurate stories most often result from lack of information, which in turn stems from lack of time to gather it or refusal of an important source to furnish relevant facts or opinion.
- **An interview with a reporter is like a business transaction**, in which both sides have objectives and agendas. The mass media is an extremely cost-effective vehicle to reach your customers, clients and other key audiences with positive messages about our organization. An interview is therefore *not* a one-way street in which a reporter obtains all the benefits and totally controls the information elicited and transmitted.
- **Deal with the press only when it is to your advantage to do so** (or to your disadvantage *not* to do so). You have no obligation to talk to the media. The decision should be made strictly on the basis of self- or company-interest. Typically, this means that you *should* deal with the press -- to broaden favorable awareness of you or your company, or to get your side of a difficult story out to the public.

## GENERAL PRE-INTERVIEW INFORMATION: What to do when a reporter calls

- **Always return reporters' calls and meet their deadlines.** It is vital to respect and be responsive to reporters' (usually *very* short) deadlines. Reporters remember those who accommodate their tight schedules: always ask what the reporter's deadline is and *meet* it. Ensure that your secretary also determines the deadline of any reporter who calls and reports the message in a timely manner. The reporter typically will do the story anyway, failing to return the call promptly merely misses some good opportunities: the chance to be quoted as an expert; get your side's perspective into a negative story; or earn points with the reporter for future consideration. Distorted or inaccurate stories most often result from lack of information, which stems from lack of time to gather it or refusal of an important source to furnish relevant facts or opinion.
- **Always ascertain the reporter's subject and deadline.** If appropriate, you can defer an immediate answer by promising to get back to the reporter within a specified (pre-deadline) time with the information sought. In the interim -- prepare your response, gather your thoughts/information, and *set your agenda* (decide what you want to accomplish, the points you want to make in the interview, and how you'll fit mentions of the company into the conversation).
- **Know what you want to accomplish in the interview,** whether it's hostile or friendly -- communicating the three or four key points you want in the story (or want to make to try to *prevent* a story). Resolve and prepare to take control and lead the interview.
- **Preparation is key.** A media interview is no different than moot court; advance preparation improves the presentation of the material dramatically. The key to obtaining maximum advantage from an interview lies in pre-interview preparation: *preparing yourself to make your points*. If you receive a call from a reporter, feel free to ask what he or she specifically would like to know and arrange a later time for the interview, so you can collect your thoughts and plan for the interview.
- **The goal is for your printed comments to accurately reflect your feelings.** This will require careful planning and preparation so the reporter has no ammunition that could prove embarrassing. The reporter has the final edit of your comments, so your comments must heighten the chance that you will be proud of the statements attributed to you. Presuming that you are interested in having your comments in the press reflect well on yourself and your company, if you are uncomfortable with the subject to be discussed, if possible, politely decline the interview.

## THE INTERVIEW:

### Dealing with the print media (*after you have prepared*)

#### DO's

- **Always be truthful.** Obviously.
- **Respond to questions with the conclusions first**, then give facts/examples/anecdotes/statistics/pertinent personal experiences/reasons.
- **"Bridge" to the points you want to make.** Move the conversation from answering the reporter's questions to the points you want to make (i.e. positive ones about the company) using "bridge" phrases such as "but what this *really* means is . . ." or "but what is *really* important is . . ."
- **Don't guess or evade.** Say "I don't know, but I'll find out and get you the information," rather than guess at or evade an answer. Then furnish the promised information, within the reporter's deadline.
- **Personalize your answer**, where possible. Use anecdotes and examples from your company's experience to illustrate your points.
- **Help the reporter use your best points.** "Star" a point you'd really like to see covered by prefacing your answer with a phrase like "what is *really* important on this subject is..."
- **Speak in plain English, not legalese.** Use colorful, quotable, understandable language and be as succinct as possible, keeping in mind the publication's readers. Unfamiliar (to the lay person) Latin phrases are particularly inappropriate; they look remarkably pretentious in a printed quote. Remember that you are usually trying to communicate to a general audience through a third person (the reporter). If technical language is absolutely necessary, define your terms.
- **Assume reporters do not understand legal issues or language.** Explain and be patient without being condescending. Let the reporters know that you are available for clarification of technical information if necessary. Although reporters tend to learn quickly, this may be a reporter's first story on a particular legal issue; he or she may need lots of help.
- **Choose your words carefully!** Reporters are professionals; most try to report stories fairly, but they may not be able to resist using a particularly good comment. Even when the context and your vocal inflection shows that you are obviously joking, those same remarks can be surprisingly embarrassing when excerpted....

## Don'ts:

- **Do not say "no comment."** It is prudent to respond substantively to most media inquiries. Failing to respond to their calls rarely kills a story; it simply misses the opportunity to have the reader understand your perspective. If you really can't respond to a question, explain why (e.g. confidentiality issues, matter being litigated), if that is the case. A response of "We've just learned of this matter and are looking into it" may be better than refusing to comment, especially if the reporter continues to cover the story in the future. Further, readers take "no comment" as an admission of the worst possible conclusion, and you will sound evasive and uncooperative.
- **Do not go "off the record."** Reporters have different personal definitions of "off the record." With some, your quote may turn up "unattributed" in the same article, or may be used by the reporter to gain a quote from another interviewee. Presume that *everything* you say will be seen in print, unless you have a long, established relationship with the reporter. (Then it *might* be off the record.) Regardless of what the reporter says, there are no guarantees.
- **Do not repeat a reporter's negative language in your answer** -- even to deny it. The reporter's question will not appear in print; but your answer will, and the negative wording may remain in the reader's mind, identified with you or your client. (Like responding to the old jape, "No, I do not still beat my wife.")
- **Do not respond with a simple "yes" or "no."** This isn't a cross-examination; you are talking to explain and to communicate particular positive messages about yourself or your company.
- **Do not criticize your peers or colleagues** -- it looks unseemly in print.
- **Do not speculate or respond to hypothetical questions** or third-party quotes you haven't heard. The quote or presumption provided by the reporter may not be accurate or even have occurred. Some reporters use the third-party "quote" or "fact" as a technique to provoke an interesting answer.
- **Do not lie, lose your temper, argue or "fence" with the reporter.** The reporter or editor has the final cut and can set the context to make you look foolish. Further, appearing angry or argumentative in print will often turn off a reader.
- **Do not ask to review a story before it appears in print.** Instead, offer to be available if the reporter has further questions or wants to check details for accuracy. Your request will almost always be refused; the question may be considered an effort to control the news and therefore insulting. Further, you might make the reporter wonder if there is particular sensitivity about the subject and probe further.

- **Do not relax when the reporter indicates the interview is over** (e.g. "that should wrap things up.") The interview is not over until the reporter *leaves*. Some of the best and most regrettable (by the interviewee) quotes have been obtained during the reporter/interviewee's walk to the elevator.
- **Let's be careful out there.** You do not have to answer every question. Negative comments sell papers and reporters are well trained to elicit those comments. (For example, "Wow that's terrific. But, off the record, if you could change *one little thing*, what would it be?") Guess what single remark will see print? Do not rise to the bait; you do not have to respond to every question.
- **Develop your own personal media network.** Most reporters are assigned to a particular "beat" *i.e.*, they write stories about only certain areas or industries (e.g. banking, manufacturing, health care, real estate). It can be beneficial for you to meet the reporters who cover your area(s) and cultivate a personal relationship with them. You will find them to be overwhelmingly bright, energetic, hardworking and interesting. Identify their areas by the stories they write and invite them to lunch. Stay in touch. Compliment them on a job well done and do not always expect to be quoted when called.
- **Make yourself useful.** Reporters are *always* looking for interesting story ideas. They will be especially grateful if you can provide a hot tip regarding trends, new issues, or exclusive "scoops" in your area or industry. If a story is your idea, you will likely be the attorney quoted therein.
- **Remember, you're all in this together.** With some effort, there will be many opportunities to demonstrate that your company is a terrific, interesting place to work with high-quality products. Always be upbeat, positive, optimistic, and enthusiastic about the company, its products and its future; do not express any doubts, fears or skepticism, even when "invited" to do so, on this subject. It is in your best interests to show your organization in the most positive light.

## Interviews Regarding A Particular Case or Matter.

- **Have a main point to make.** Identify your point, make it up front, and reiterate that point periodically throughout the rest of the interview. *You* may also control the interview; you need not let the reporter control you. Enter the interview knowing your purpose for it and politely keep yourself and the reporter on point.
- **Make your point in a positive, concise, complete sentence.** If repeated occasionally, this increases the chance that your point will be the one quoted.
- **Keep it simple.** Prepare in advance short, straightforward replies to the questions you anticipate being asked. Avoid simple "yes" or "no" answers, yet keep your replies to two or three sentences. ***BE QUOTABLE.***
- **Answer each question directly.** If you are unable to explain yourself completely, say something like, "I prefer not to comment because. . . ."

Seeing you quoted in the media creates the clear image of high-quality technical skill in the minds of clients and prospects, as you are anointed with the credibility of the publication. With a little effort, you can become regularly quoted by the media in legal, business or niche industry publications, helping accelerate your business-development efforts.