

## MAKING ALLIES WITH THE MEDIA

### WHAT A JOURNALIST NEEDS

Journalists need you to give them information and quotes with which to write their stories. You need journalists to get your messages and accurate facts out to the public. By understanding journalists' needs and helping them do their job, you can make them your allies. What do journalists need?

**News** What's *new*, unique, and unexpected. What do you have tell the media that has not yet been reported?

**Accurate Information** Precision makes journalists respected and credible. Come to your interview prepared with accurate facts, numbers and details.

**Simplification** Broadcast news must explain complex issues briefly. Even print stories are becoming shorter these days. When necessary, use a condensed Rocket Model: 1. Direct Answer, 2. Example, 3. Sum up what your issue means to the audience.

**Good Quotes** Vivid details, colorful anecdotes, and word pictures are like gold to a reporter. Prepare good quotes in advance, and say them clearly in the interview.

**The 3Cs: Conflict, Crisis, Catastrophe** Drama sells. It draws people because it affects us emotionally. You don't want to sell bad news – but you can be an informed source explaining how to resolve a crisis, or provide new insights into a controversy. To promote good news, explain how your issue is going to benefit the audience, or avert a catastrophe.

**The Fourth "C" – Celebrity:** Whenever high-ranking officials visit a country, the fact of the visit is newsworthy, so come prepared with a message for the media. Even humble project workers can tap the celebrity factor, for example when visiting a remote rural area. Inform the local rural radio stations, who may want to interview you.

### THINK LIKE A JOURNALIST

A journalist approaches any story with the following elements in mind. Help shape their story by giving them what they are looking for:

## **An Angle**

Some reporters start researching an issue with the approach, or angle, already dictated by an editor. Before an interview, you should ask a reporter what angle he/she is taking, and tailor your information to his/her needs. They may not tell you about a negative angle – but you may get some insight based on the answer. If you don't have the opportunity to ask, put yourself in the reporter's shoes: What angle will grab and hold their audience's attention?

## **A Strong Lead**

While working on a story, a reporter searches for the most startling detail, compelling quote or emotional image as the opener, or *lead*. If you can come up with a good lead, you've helped the journalist and helped yourself – because you have placed your perspective at the start of the story.

## **A Good Ending**

Journalists struggle to write that last paragraph. Deliver your best clincher at the end of the interview. Make it something that looks towards the future, or that references an upcoming event connected with the story. This means the audience will hear *your* summing up at the end of the article.

## **A Peg**

When a major story breaks, the media immediately searches for related stories. Look for opportunities to link your message to the news of the day. Don't wait for them to find you, call up the media and offer your story if it relates to a topical issue or anniversary. For example, World AIDS Day may allow you to speak on a new AIDS project recently launched... Earth Day will have the media searching for related environmental stories... Women's History month here in the United States makes reporters more open to running stories about women in development. In addition, local weather catastrophes can be pegged to global climate change issues. Quite often, a journalist may not realize the agreed topic of your interview is related to a more newsworthy issue. Go ahead and introduce your peg.

## **GROUND RULES FOR MEETING THE MEDIA**

### **On the Record/Off the Record and In Between**

- **On the record:** Assume that whenever you speak to a journalist, you are *on the record*. That means your words will be aired or quoted and you will be identified.
- **On background:** You can be quoted or paraphrased, but will not be named. Before you speak, agree with the reporter exactly how your words will be attributed, for example, as "an expert familiar with the details."
- **On deep background:** The information you give can be used by the journalist, but without quotes and no attribution.

- **Off the record:** Information is provided strictly for the journalist's better understanding of the issues; it is not for publication.

#### **Remember:**

- ***Not all journalists follow these rules.*** In many countries, journalists ignore, or are not taught to honor on/off the record rules. If in doubt, consider yourself on the record.
- Any confidentiality with a journalist must be made clear ***before you speak***. You can never offer information, and then say "oh, that's off the record."
- Only go on background or off the record with a journalist ***you know and trust***.
- Background/off the record are tools for cultivating relationships and building trust with individual journalists you respect and want to work with.

#### **Ask for the interview topic in advance**

When you agree to an interview, ask what topics will be discussed and what angle the interviewer plans to take. Don't bring up topics you **won't** talk about. If they come up during the interview, decline and explain your reasons why. In countries with well-developed media, *do not request written questions in advance*. It shows lack of trust and conveys your inexperience with the media. In some developing countries, journalists do not mind giving questions in advance. If in doubt, ask if it is their practice.

#### **Pre-interview conversation**

Before a broadcast interview, whether taped or live, the interviewer may ask casual questions. Use this opportunity to present interesting information on what you want to talk about, so the interviewer can ask questions about that issue – if it is truly interesting. You should *always* assume a microphone or a camera is on. Anything you say before or after the official interview can be used.

#### **Fact checks/Quote checks**

Never demand to read and approve a journalist's story before publication. Instead, offer to be available for a *fact or quote check*. The journalist will then call you before the story runs to confirm your quotes and facts are accurate.

#### **Respect their deadlines**

If a story is not ready on time, it gets dropped and the journalist's reputation suffers. Ask about journalists' deadlines in advance of an interview. Return calls promptly, and deliver any background material as promised. You'll win their professional respect, and get better coverage.

#### **Build mutual trust**

By giving a journalist all that they need to write a good story, you become a reliable source. When a journalist trusts you, he or she will be less likely to surprise you with a negative story. They may even tip you off if bad news is headed your way.

## **Provide Supporting Material:**

- *Print reporters* tend to need more information than broadcast journalists. Bring a fact sheet, and a few pages of relevant background. Don't, however, bring piles of material. They will be less likely to read *any* of it if there is too much.
- *Radio reporters* need *sounds* to take their listeners into the story. If they can't go to the site of the story, offer any video tapes that might have the sounds they want. Even the voice of another colleague will offer some variety.
- *TV* is driven by *pictures*. Facilitate camera crews getting to the site, or offer footage from your video library if you've got it. Suggest doing interviews out of the office with a background connected to the story, for example by a beach for a story on water pollution. Remember, you are part of the picture, so to dress appropriately.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, BECOMING A "SOURCE"**

The best way to make allies with the media is to cultivate ongoing relationships of mutual trust. This serves journalists well, and serves their 'sources' well too. If you have interesting information and can package it in a way that is easy for them to use, you help them make news, and they will want to come back to you again and again. If a journalist gets your story out to the public, then they are furthering your organization's strategic communications goals. So treat each encounter with a journalist as the beginning of a potential long-term relationship.

### **After an interview, invite follow-up**

Make sure the journalist has your card, and ask for theirs. Ask what kinds of stories they are currently looking for, and offer to be available for future interviews. Suggest other newsworthy topics on which you could be an informed source. After the interview airs or the story is printed: send them a quick e-mail of appreciation. They will be pleased you read or tuned in to their report.

### **Become a quick-quote expert**

When working on a story, journalists seek to include several informed opinions. Let them know you are available for quick quotes on any stories they write on your topic areas. They will call you up and just ask you for a sentence or two. Don't be pressured to give a quote right away on the telephone if you are not prepared. Tell the journalist you will call back, then spend a few minutes crafting just the right quote for the audience.

### **Be available to speak "on background" or off the record**

This gives journalists inside information which they use to figure out what is really going on. For example, in developing countries, economic reporters value background information from development bank experts. These relationships are like intellectual property for a reporter. You should only go on background or off the record with a

journalist you trust. Build that trust by starting with background information that would not be damaging if you were quoted directly, to see what they do with it. Be wary though, because for a really good scoop, a journalist may not honor your confidence. Never tell a journalist something that would be disastrous if it appeared in print with your name attached.

### **Make the exchange mutual**

Journalists are often excellent sources of information. If you are not in a formal interview context, but having a casual conversation, ask them questions, inquire about their own opinions and knowledge. What they know may be a valuable asset to your own work. If you genuinely appreciate their insights, they will be more inclined to treat your own perspective with respect.

### **Be friendly and respectful**

It's a simple and often underappreciated fact that if a journalist likes you, he/she will be more likely to give you favorable coverage. Be friendly, learn their names, the outlets they work for, and treat them as professionals.

### **Be clear about your boundaries**

If journalists raise topics on which you can't speak, be clear with them that these are out of bounds. Watch out for the "We are friends now, so just between you and me..." approach. If you are not specifically off the record with someone you trust, be wary. But don't blame them for trying. That's their job.

### **Know when to say "No"**

If you believe a journalist has deliberately misrepresented you in a story, you are under no obligation to agree to future interviews. See *media troubleshooting* on how to handle this. Don't, however, threaten to ban a journalist *before* an interview as a warning of what will happen if you don't like the story. Not only will that set the interview off on a combative path, but it will betray an unprofessional attitude towards the media.

### **Some helpful strategies for building relationships:**

#### **Informal monthly media breakfasts**

Invite key journalists covering the issues of your organization. Prepare a short presentation on a topic you think they will find newsworthy as a starting point, but invite questions on a wide range of topics. This gives journalists a chance to write about your organization even if you're not "breaking" news, especially on slow news days... and more importantly, it signals that you and your organization are open and friendly to the media.

### **Invite journalists to conferences and seminars**

If you are sponsoring or organizing workshops or seminars, extend invitations to key journalists. Offer to be interviewed yourself. Note that participants should be told if journalists are attending a seminar, as their presence does mean the event is “on the record.” If you can’t open an event to the media, a closing press conference should be held.

### **Write editorials, commentaries, and opinion pieces**

Get to know editors of major newspapers, and when there is a news peg to your organization’s work, offer to write an opinion piece for the editorial page. It’s a great way to raise your organization’s public profile, and establish yourself as an expert

### **Reward good reporting, but don’t play favorites**

While you may develop relationships of trust with some journalists, it is important to maintain fairness in dealing with the media. If you only give access to a select few, the rest will resent you. Make sure major news stories are announced widely with press releases and that press conferences are open to all.

## **INTERVIEW PREPARATION**

Would you give a speech to an audience of 100 people without sitting down beforehand and preparing notes on your topic? Of course not. Yet most people walk into a media interview without any preparation at all. But in a media interview, you may well reach thousands of people, perhaps millions – so if you would prepare to give a speech to 100, how much more important is it to prepare for the media?

The mistake most people make is in thinking that their job in a media interview is to just answer the questions the journalist asks. They think the journalist is in charge. If they don’t get their message across well, they blame the journalist for not asking the right questions! In fact it is up to you, the interview subject, to take control in an interview, and guide the conversation towards your message and the crucial information you want to impart to the audience.

### **How to prepare:**

In advance of the interview, ask the journalist:

- Name of the news outlet
- Who is the audience?
- In what section - news, feature, business, etc – your story will appear
- Topic of the interview

- The journalist's name and specialty
- The angle the journalist is taking for the story
- Who else is the journalist interviewing for the story?
- If for broadcast, will it be live or taped?
- If live, how long will the interview be? If taped, how long will the finished product be?
- If for a panel, who are the other guests?

## Draw your M.A.P.

1. What is the **message** you have to deliver? Write it down. Make sure it is concise and free of jargon. Think of two or three quotes that encapsulate your main message. Practice saying them out loud.
2. What does the **audience** care about in connection with your message? How does your information impact their lives and what they care about? Write it down.
3. What **specific proof** do you have – examples, stories, analogies, vivid details – that will convey your message to this audience? Write them down. Flesh out five or six specific examples that provide a clear picture of your message.
4. Imagine you are the interviewer. Write down the most likely *and* the most difficult questions you may be asked. Prepare answers for each question following the rocket model.
5. For high profile interviews, rehearse answering the questions with a colleague or communications officer playing the role of journalist. If possible, tape the mock interview so you can critique yourself.
6. To improve: after the interview is over, ask for a copy of the tape or story. Check to see if your main message came across clearly. Did they use the quotes you wanted? Are you being concise and authoritative? Do you look and sound relaxed yet confident?

## MEDIA TROUBLE SHOOTING

**You are misquoted or quoted out of context** You can minimize the possibility of being misquoted by using a small tape recorder during your interviews. Journalists are apt to be more careful with accuracy when they know their conversation will be on tape. If an error appears, telephone the reporter first. If he/she won't fix the problem, then call the editor. Explain the misquote and ask for a printed correction or retraction if the mistake is serious. If the misquote completely misleads the public, you ask they print your letter to the editor that presents your case accurately, If no corrective measures are taken and the story is very damaging, you can take legal action, though in many developing countries, this is not an option. But you can decline further interviews from a journalist who deliberately and repeatedly misquotes. Bear in mind carelessness and poor communication account for most misquotes. Give them the benefit of the doubt.

**You are faced with a “True and Damaging” question** Answer by showing your understanding and concern for those adversely affected by your organization's actions or neglect. Empathize. Then talk about measures you are taking to put the situation right. Take responsibility for the unintended results without admitting blame--unless you are authorized to do so. Keep your body language open. Focus on solutions.

**You expect an “ambush” interview** You go to a closed-door meeting. The press is outside, waiting to surround you, but the time is not right to answer all questions. If you are authorized to speak, and you can guess what the main question is, prepare a concise answer beforehand that contains the main message you want to deliver at that moment. When the ambush hits, deliver your prepared answer no matter what questions are hurled at you. If you can, tell the media when there will be more information forthcoming, then walk away. Since the media gathered there will use whatever you say during an ambush, a short, polished answer gives them less to choose from, and will get your message across.

**You don't know the answer – but you should** A journalist asks a question about a problem in a project that you have never heard about. It's tempting to bluff. Instead, say “I'm not familiar with the precise details of this issue, and I would be glad to get back to you with that information.” On a live broadcast, you can say “ I'm not familiar with the details, but what I can tell you about our work in this area in general ...” and explain your goals or directives.