

# Developing Positive Community Identity Through the Media

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One of the keys to promoting your community in a positive manner through the media is to master the art of giving an interview. Will you be active or passive during an interview? Will you simply answer the questions from the interviewer, or will you share your story? According to Carol Guaccero, a communications expert, although reporters love facts, figures, and statistics, "an interview is not an intellectual exercise; it is an opportunity to deliver specific messages to specific audiences through the filter of a reporter." The statistics give your story backbone, but you must bring it to life.

When giving an interview, you must be prepared. The reporter should not have to pull the story out of you. Most reporters want to write your story, however, the reporter is merely the filter. You must gear your interview to your audience – most likely the people in your community.

When working with the print media in smaller markets, reporter turnover is often a problem. You are constantly repeating background information. The better packaged your story is, the more likely that the reporter will get it right. Most reporters write at an eighth grade level. Be sure to use vivid language that provides quotes. In many cases, the reporter already has the story written when s/he contacts you. Most likely, the reporter only has a few questions and may ultimately use one or two sentences in the story. This is where the quote or analogy comes in.

In preparing for the interview, you need to anticipate the questions. Be ready with your "push button" responses, i.e. your automatic response to an expected question. This gives consistency to your story, especially if you have to repeat the interview for different media types. Be sure not to repeat negative information that may be included in a question from a reporter. In a situation where you are faced with responding to negative information, you should briefly respond to the negative question and transition immediately into a positive statement about your subject. Use a "flag" when responding to negative questions, for example, preface your response with "what I want the public to know is..." and then personalize the message with positive information.

It is critically important that you remain poised at all times. It is very difficult not to get flustered when faced with tough questions during a live interview. The ability to remain poised comes from being prepared, anticipating tough questions, and having responses at the ready. According to Ms. Guaccero, "Reporters are not kind



or gentle in today's day and age. They are more like interrogators." If a reporter springs a question on you that is unexpected, you have the right to be upset, but you cannot let it show. You still have to respond or it will look as if you are ducking the question, regardless of whether it is on point or not. You can, however, answer the question briefly and go immediately back to your message.

In some cases, you may deal with the same reporter over and over again. You may think s/he is your friend – reporters are not your friends! Anything you say is fair game to a reporter and there is no such thing as "off the record." If you don't want to see something in print or on the radio or television, don't say it, period. Reporters have a job to do and anything you say can and most likely will be used during an interview.

If you are caught unprepared and say something inaccurate or unflattering, stay calm and be honest. Try to explain yourself and correct the misinformation. The bottom line is, the truth is not as juicy as a potential scandal and if you are perceived as being honest, often times the story will die more quickly. Never let a situation fester in the media. If there is something that needs to be addressed, do it quickly and move on. "Rules have changed in working with the media ... there are no rules," said Ms. Guaccero.

Most interviews today are conducted over the telephone. When contacted by a reporter for an interview, it is always best to take their information and return the call. This gives you time to gather your thoughts, prepare for anticipated questions, collect any



in your answer. No matter how upset or emotional you get during an interview, never use profanity. It is unprofessional and it is likely that your profanity will be the only thing that is printed or shown on television. This is not the image you want to leave with your constituents.

Finally, it is important that in a larger office, one person be designated to speak to the media if at all possible. This ensures that your message is consistent and reporters know who to ask for. It also reduces the possibility that someone else on staff will be put in an uncomfortable position that will reflect badly on your city or town. When giving a presentation, it is also important to ask whether there is press in the room. Most reporters wear press credentials, but not always. Your remarks may change if you know there is press in the room.

Working with the media is an important part of making your community attractive to the rest of the world. If you are prepared ahead of time, it will pay dividends. Just remember, the more interviews you do, the better you will become at handling yourself and your message. ■

information you may need, and primarily to compose your thoughts so that you are calm when you do the interview. Don't just do the interview "on the fly" because they happened to catch you on the phone. Every reporter is on a deadline. Ask when the deadline is and be sure to return the call in sufficient time so that the reporter can make the deadline.

When you are talking with the reporter over the telephone, stand up! Have your notes in front of you and have a watch or clock close by. It is unnecessary to talk to a reporter longer than ten minutes on most subjects. Don't finish the interview and then linger on the phone to "chat" with the reporter. The interview is not over and this is where most mistakes are made. You relax and start sharing anecdotal information that will likely also show up in the story.

Interviewers have different styles of questioning their subjects. The "machine gunner" will throw a myriad of questions at you all at once hoping to confuse you and catch you off guard. Stay calm, choose the question you want to answer and answer it – and then STOP TALKING! The "interrupter" will ask you a question and before you can get the entire answer out, will interrupt with another question. Stop them nicely and say something like, "please allow me to complete my point."

The "paraphraser" will repeat your answer back to you, but not exactly in the same manner that you answered it. Be sure to correct the response before moving on. Finally, the "dart thrower" will throw inflammatory language at you hoping you will repeat it back