When Media Call

Tips & techniques for working with reporters

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Media as messenger

- Reporters aren't your ultimate audience
- Know who your audience is
- What’s important/connects with audience
About reporters

- Professionals – neither friend nor foe
- Aren’t necessarily out to help or hurt you
- Focus on what interests their audience
- Don’t care about making you look good
- Ask tough questions
- Are more often generalists than specialists
- Live by tight deadlines
What reporters expect

- Reliable news sources
- Objective expertise
- Context, perspective, translation
Calls will come

- Sooner or later
  - Your work will catch a reporter’s eye
  - You’ll be called because of your expertise
  - Reporters will seek research-based info
  - Or you’ll be part of breaking news or controversy

- You need to be ready
Interviews are opportunities

- To reach many people
- To convey your message; explain your research
- To share information with public

**Remember**

- Even the best are challenging
- Most are informational, not confrontational
- Can be fun; are always work
When a reporter calls, ask …

- Reporter’s name, who they work for
- Who their audience is (lifestyle, business, general; local, national)
- What the story is about
- What they want from you/your role
  - Determine if you can help
  - Or suggest someone who can
- When they need it – deadlines
- Reporter’s knowledge of subject
Interview format

- Phone or in person
- TV crew coming to campus
- Call-in radio show
- Local or national media
Preparation is key

- Great interviews don’t just happen
- Never wing it – do your homework
- Is this controversial; what will critics say
- Gather background for reporters
- Think visual – photos, video, graphics
Buy some time

- It’s OK to say you can’t talk this minute
- Arrange a time to call back in 15 minutes
- Use time to prep – key points, background, etc.
- Call back prepared
Your message – know it, hone it

- You can’t tell ’em everything
- Honing message takes discipline
- What do you want people to know
- If you don’t know key messages, your audience won’t
Rule of threes

- Identify three main points
- Three sentences for each point
  - If they’re long sentences, keep refining
- Anticipate/answer three scariest questions for each point
Short and simple

- Use simple, everyday language
- Ditch the jargon, university-speak
- Practice short answers
  - Say it aloud, never memorize
- Imagine telling your mom in 30 seconds
Make it memorable

- How does this affect your audience
  - Head, heart or pocketbook
- Use 'real life' anecdotes or examples
- Develop descriptive phrases or word pictures
  - “Molecular locksmith” (genetics)
  - “Catching bugs” (detecting software glitches)
Interview tips

- Lead with your main points
- Follow up with background if time allows
- Answer concisely, then stop
- ‘Dead air’ is not your problem
During the interview

- Keep your cool, be professional, pleasant
- Actively listen to the reporter’s questions while focusing on conveying your message
- Interviews are more than just answering questions
- Strategies help manage interview
- Guide discussion back to key points
Bridging/redirecting

- Answer briefly
- Quickly transition to your point
- Examples:
  - “Yes and years of research show ...”
  - “True, however ...”
  - “No and that’s because ...”
Refocusing/reframing

- Recasts difficult/inaccurate questions and helps refocus interview’s direction
- Examples:
  - “The larger question is …”
  - “Our first concern is always …”
  - “The real issue is …”
  - “It’s important to point out …”
  - “Let’s remember the primary focus must be …”
Rules to remember

- Tell the truth
  - That doesn’t mean telling all you know
  - Use your judgment
- You're always on the record
- "No comment" is a comment
  - If you don’t know, say so
  - If you can’t answer, explain why
- The interview is never over
Potential pitfalls

- Stick to facts; don't speculate
  - Stay with what you know even if it disappoints reporter
- Don't let them put words in your mouth
- Don’t bite on loaded questions
- Correct inaccuracies, never repeat them
Are you getting through?

- Never assume reporter understands
- Ask questions to determine if reporter “gets it”
- Offer to clarify or further explain
  - Provide written background information
  - Offer to answer follow-up questions
Remember ...

- Successful interviews don’t just happen
- Don’t be afraid; be ready
- You won’t ace every one; you’ll improve your odds
- You must know your message
Campus communicators

- Campus communicators handle media regularly
- If there’s a crisis, controversy, concerns or you just need help

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Thank you