

Leland Communications

Mike Wallace on Line Two

Five tips for talking to newspeople

At some point in your career, you may get a call from a news reporter. How you respond depends on many factors: whether the reporter works in broadcast or print, for example, or who the audience will be. But some principles apply to almost any news interview.

As with any relationship, it will help if each party knows what the other expects and needs. While you can't control how reporters will act, you can improve your relationships with them by making your own role clear, as well as by anticipating their needs and expectations, by respecting their work, and by trying to help them do their jobs. Here are 5 tips to keep in mind when you get a message that a reporter called.

1. Respect their deadlines.

Like lawyers, reporters have filing deadlines and are likely to run with whatever they have when their deadline comes. If you want your perspective included in the story, or if you just want your name in the paper, make sure you talk with the reporter in time.

Thus, you should return the call as soon as you can, even if just to say you can't talk right then. Ask what the deadline is and be aware of it. Not only does that help the reporter and ensure your viewpoint is represented, it also lets reporters know you care about their responsibilities and respect the job they do.

Even if the story is not breaking news, your prompt reply is good for your relationship with the reporter, who is probably calling other sources for quotes too, and will keep calling around until somebody responds. Even if you won't have time to be interviewed before the deadline, you can steer the reporter to other sources, building your reputation for helpfulness.

2. Clarify their goals

In addition to confirming deadlines, find out if any other limitations or demands apply to the story, and find out what the reporter might be looking for. Is your case the focus of the piece, for example, or is it merely part of a

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larger story on the issue? A general discussion about the topic will give you an idea where the reporter thinks the story is going, so you can emphasize points you want to make and refute those you hope won't appear in print.

You may find that the reporter has not yet decided where to go with the story and that your expertise in the area can help him or her figure that out. Legal-affairs stories almost always provide a reporter with two opposing sides, each with an articulate advocate. Some reporters will be satisfied quoting the lawyers for each side, presenting the opposing opinions as black and white. But most will appreciate your help in educating them, so they can figure out where in the gray area the truth lies.

3. Clarify your role

Although a general discussion about the topic is an excellent way to nurture your relationship with the reporter, you also need to clarify whether the reporter intends to quote you. Don't rely on terms such as *off the record*, *not for attribution*, or *deep background*; although you can find those terms defined in dictionaries and in style books, such as those of the Associated Press and *The New York Times*, the definitions aren't even clear, let alone consistent. Instead, use your own words to say clearly on what terms you're willing to be quoted: by name, by generic attribution (be specific: e.g., "a lawyer close to the case," or "a Bakersfield trial lawyer"), as background with NO attribution, or not at all.

4. Concede what you can

Although the best way to establish credibility is to be right, admitting you're wrong is a close second. Thus, it is a good idea to tell the reporter what the other side's strong arguments are -- as long as you have a countervailing (*not* contrary) argument for your side: "They're right when they say we could have done X, and maybe we should have, but the more important issue, which this case really revolves around, is Y." In the black-and-white context of legal argument, the reporter is looking for the gray areas; if you not only acknowledge those gray areas, but also help the reporter to understand them, both your candor and your helpfulness make you more trustworthy.

5. Say only what you mean to say

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The biggest mistake that a news source can make is to talk without thinking. Take your time. Indeed, ask the reporter for time: tell him or her you want to think about the questions and call back. When you do call back, know what you want to say and have a list of “talking points” to repeat and emphasize. Phrase those talking points as sound bites: easy to understand, short, and memorable.

No matter what question the reporter asks, you can answer with one of your talking points. Remember that the reporter is trying to understand the story, not to embarrass you. Bring the interview back to the point you want to make by saying something like, “The thing you need to remember is . . .,” or “That’s a good question, but the real question is . . .” In fact, it’s a good idea to introduce your talking points with a phrase like that every time, to make sure the reporter pays attention and remembers what you said.

Finally, not only can you tell a reporter you’ll call back later after you’ve checked with your client or researched an issue, you don’t have to answer a tough question at all. If you don’t know the answer, of course, you should say so. But even if you just don’t want to answer, you can always deflect the question and repeat one of your talking points. They can’t quote what you don’t say.