

HANDLING THE MEDIA – THE BASICS



Contents

2. Top Tips for dealing with media interest
3. When the press or media come knocking
6. The interview
7. Telling your story in an interview – some pointers
8. Useful things to say to a reporter

Top Tips for dealing with media interest

Setting the scene

First of all, it's helpful to understand what journalists want when they are working on a story.

- **Access.** It's always useful to have a contact email or phone number available with someone able to respond promptly to a call or email. Being unavailable for comment is hardly ever a good idea. There's usually something you can say unless you are restricted by ongoing legal proceedings or something similar.
- **Angles.** These are what make a story interesting to a readership or audience. These are often controversial to stand any chance of a story being used. There's stiff competition to capture audiences so the most dramatic or sensational side of something will get a reporter's interest. It's best, then, not to take it personally if you are confronted with what you see as a misrepresentation of your organisation's work.
- **Good copy.** If you are given the chance to respond or comment on a controversial story about your organisation it's often useful to reply through a short, written statement. If you want what you say to be used it needs to be 50-200 words or fewer in length. So, keep it short and make your point early on taking care to address the question(s) as best you can. That's your best chance of being reported fairly and accurately.
- **Contacts.** If it's an issue that your organisation specialises in you may be approached to comment. Don't feel obliged to do so. If there's another organisation that's better able to do it and you feel confident they'd be interest in doing so pass the reporter on to them. And as a courtesy let the other organisation know you've done this.
- **Facts and figures.** These can be useful for setting an issue in context and it's a good idea to have an up-to-date bank of these in case you need them. They may not get used, of course, but they do help reporters to see or understand the fuller picture.
- **Real cases/personal stories.** These help to bring a story 'alive' because it helps people to relate to what may well be a very complicated story or policy issue. Again, it's worth building up a bank of these (with the proper consent of the people concerned) to pass on to media organisations on the hunt for them.

When the press or media come knocking

DON'T panic!

- Getting a phone call or email with a lot of very pointed questions can induce panic. Resist the temptation to let this happen to you and follow the simple steps below to help you stay in control of the situation.

Answer the story then answer the question

- The first thing to do is listen. Let the reporter give their version of what they may have heard as fully as possible. Try not to interrupt and make notes you can look at later.
- Why let them talk through all of their points initially?
 - First of all, it often un-nerves them to be met with attentive silence (they might even ask if you are still there. To which the standard reply is a cheery: "Yes. I am listening").
 - Second, it keeps you in control.
 - Third, it gives you time to understand the basic story and to ask follow-up questions about what they know, how they are planning to tackle the story, who else they might be speaking to and when they think they will run the story.
 - Finally, it gets you off on the right foot with the reporter. They can see they are dealing with a professional who understands and respects what they do. This improves your chances of being fairly and accurately reported by them.
- Once you have the basic story this will help you to deal with that in any statement or interview you agree to give in response.

Time to prepare

- Reporters will often have short deadlines, but you should always ask for time to prepare. Sometimes coming late in the day is a deliberate tactic by reporters to put the pressure on.
- If you are speaking on the phone tell the reporter that you will have to check what they have told you and that you will get back to them.
- If they have contacted you by email reply with a simple and polite message to say you will come back to them once you've checked the information they have given.

- In either case always check the deadline and make sure you get back to them with your response by then. If it's not possible to meet their deadline it's OK to say so and to explain why – especially for a charity with a small staff team. This may buy you more time. But there will be times when this is not an option because of the nature of the story.
- Generally, if it's a bad news story or a crisis situation it's best to prepare a short, written statement of between 50-200 words. Remember to answer the story and (if you can) include information that answers the question(s).
- Your aim here should be to try to give the reporter something they can actually use. So, long context-setting, rambling statements will be unlikely to be used. Only a few words of what you say will be included in anything that is published or broadcast. So, you need to make every word count. Keeping it short will give you the best chance of doing that.

Never talk down and no jargon

- Avoid being defensive. And don't ever be patronising rude, dismissive or lie to reporters. It creates the impression (or confirms the view some of them may have) that you are guilty of something.
- If a reporter asks a 'stupid' question it isn't generally because they are stupid or haven't done their research (although that is possible). It will usually be because they are asking the kind of question that ordinary, less well-informed people are likely to ask. So, be helpful, patient and kind. It will show and it will pay off in the long-term.
- Avoid jargon and technical phrases. If you can use ordinary, relatable language to describe what your charity is doing you will help to create a favourable impression in any report that is published or broadcast.

Tricky questions and elephant traps

- If a journalist tells you they are asking you a question just because it is "interesting" you will know they are not being straight with you. Good journalists usually already know the answer to the question they are asking – they simply want you to confirm what they have already been told. Many bad journalists often also know the answer to the question they are asking you. Good or bad, don't underestimate them.
- Journalists employ well-established techniques to get you to give them the best possible angle for their stories. Sometimes these techniques are meant to get you to say something you don't want to. Mostly they are designed to give you the opportunity to get your point across clearly and simply.
- Typical examples of this technique are:
 - Would you care to comment on...?
 - Isn't it true that if these proposals are implemented they will have drastic consequences for...?
 - It is rumoured that.....

- So does this mean that...?
- Some people might say...
- So what you are saying is...?
- The situation is terrible. Don't you agree?
- This argument just ignores the concerns people have about this issue, doesn't it?
- You say you care about people's concerns over the issue, but your words suggest that you don't care at all do you?
- Who's to blame for this?
- We've had a letter from a reader claiming that... Would you like to comment?

OK to say 'I don't know' but not 'no comment'

- If it turns out that your charity isn't the right organisation to respond to a press query it's OK to refer a reporter on to the right one. Let them know that you've done this, of course.
- If you don't immediately know the answer to a question about your charity it's OK to say, 'I don't know' and then offer to check and get back to the reporter by an agreed deadline.
- Saying 'no comment' never looks good and should be reserved for the police interview room on TV detective dramas. There's always something you can say in response to a claim or allegation unless there are legal or other procedural reasons for not doing so. In which case it's OK to say "We can't comment on this because of an ongoing court case/an internal investigation/process".

The interview

If you agree to do an interview the tips below will help you. They apply mostly to TV interviews. But if you follow them for other media interviews you will not go far wrong.

- Be brief and to the point. An answer that is too long may be edited and lose its meaning. Worse it may take on the opposite of what you mean.
- Stay calm and keep your temper, even if the interviewer tries to provoke you. It may make great copy, listening or viewing, but it won't help your cause.
- Expect the unexpected. Trick questions are part of the business. Just answer them as honestly as you can and if you don't know the answer, say so.
- Be patient with the technicalities. Better still ignore any recording equipment or notebooks altogether and concentrate on getting your message across.
- Don't try to be word perfect. Avoid "Um", "Er" and "you know" if you can, but a slight hesitation before replying shows you are thinking about the answer.
- Don't waffle. When you have finished what you are saying, stop. Don't talk for the sake of it. Sometimes journalists will pause after you have finished speaking in order to pressure you into saying more.
- Be careful never to talk down to the interviewer. Treat them as an equal at all times – never patronise.
- Don't talk too quickly. Relax, take your time and speak distinctly. Don't mumble or slur your words.
- Avoid technical terms, professional jargon and organisation slang. Figures and statistics should be kept to a minimum but if you must use figures round them off.
- Make your point(s) at the beginning.
- Stick to your own subject. Don't waste time on digressions or things you just don't know about.
- Jump on untruths. Interrupt if necessary.
- Be positive throughout.
- Never say: "No comment. I am unable to confirm or deny."
- Make it interesting by giving examples.

Telling your story in an interview – some pointers

- **Have Something to Say**

- Write down three points you'd like to make in any interview.
- Have three more points in reserve in case the interview runs over, or you get more time to say something else.
- Don't just stick to the Frequently Asked Questions. Include the questions you DON'T want to answer. If you tackle those straightforwardly and confidently your credibility will be high.
- Always think about whether you are best person for whichever opportunity is on offer. Do you come across well on TV/ radio or are you more comfortable sitting down with a print or web journalist and having a long chat?
- If you are the best person to speak make sure you are available. There's nothing worse than offering yourself to the media and then being 'in meetings' or worse 'on holiday'.
- You don't have to say 'yes' to everything you asked to do. Remember that you want to make sure you are getting your message across to the right people and not just getting your message out. So always check who reads, listens to or watches a particular media outlet that has invited you to be interviewed or to speak about the issue in question.

Useful things to say to a reporter

If you want to actively engage with a reporter, the news desk or the Forward Planning desk here are some useful things to say:

- I have got a story for you. Have you got time to talk now?
- You know you were looking for some facts and figures on...? Well I have got them for you.
- I know an expert who can give you an off-the-record/on-the-record background briefing on...
- You know you were looking for a contact number for...? Well here it is.
- I hear you are doing a story/feature on... Do you need help with some pictures/background/a case study/facts and figures?
- Do you want to meet for a coffee so that I can tell you more about...?
- I am calling to let you know about something that is coming up next week/later this month/later this year.
- Hello, is that the picture desk? I just thought you'd like to know about a good picture story that's coming up.
- Forward Planning? I have got a possible story for you. Have you got time to talk now?