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Tips for Working with the Media

Arizona Nutrition Network



Introduction

When it comes to successful media relations, guidelines exist to provide key insight but there are exceptions to every rule. The following document provides some of the basics. Before speaking with a media outlet, check with your organization regarding any media relations policies or protocols that need to be followed when dealing with reporters or news outlets.

Before the Interview

Know the general direction, length of the story and when it will run.

Ask the interviewer the general direction or angle that they want to pursue for the story, and find out if you can provide background materials for more in-depth information. Whether it's a print, television or radio interview, ask the length of the story to find out if it will run that day or if it is a feature story that allows more time for details and graphics. Also ask the reporter if he/she knows when the story is expected to appear in print, on the radio or on television.

Know who will conduct the interview.

Ask who the interviewer will be and if the reporter will be interviewing others on the topic. Become familiar with their interviewing style and the type of stories they have covered. The person who calls you for a print interview will most likely be the person conducting the interview. On the contrary, the person who calls you for a television or radio interview typically will not be doing the interview.

Say what you want to say, not what the interviewer tries to get you to say.

Go into an interview with prepared notes on the topic. If a reporter calls and needs an immediate response, ask if you can call them back within a convenient timeframe to meet their deadline. During that time, prepare your response. Remember to call back as soon as possible as reporters work within tight deadlines.

Develop three or four key points about the interview topic.

The less you say, the more they'll remember, so identify the issues and subjects that you want them to remember in advance of the interview. Write down key points and practice them aloud. Don't memorize them, know them and be able to expand upon them.

Preparing for a Media Interview

Remember the 3Cs principle:

- **Clear** – Write down the point of your viewpoint/service. Think of examples that illustrate how your viewpoint/service relates to the average person. Use stories

and common terms. Avoid industry jargon. Don't say "ambulatory" when you can say "walk-in" or "outpatient." Don't use abbreviations not commonly known and used such as "ADHS," instead say "Arizona Department of Health Services."

- **Concise** – Preparation is the key. Think of three or four key points you want to make during the interview. Without repeating yourself, make sure to bring relevant questions back to your key points. Also think of the types of questions you may be asked. Practice your comments and answers out loud. This will help you keep your answers brief and to the point. Use percentages sparingly. Say "nearly two out of three" instead of "65.5" percent.
- **Confident** – Have confidence in your own knowledge. You know your subject better than the reporter. Sit down beforehand and list all the advantages and any possible disadvantages regarding the interview topic.

Be prepared with the 5Ws and 1H

Reporters want the most important news first. They are trained to immediately get the "5Ws and 1H" – who, what, when, where, why and how.

Other tips

- "On the record" – Remember, you are always "on the record" and anything you say can be used in the story.
- Think visual – Whether the story is for television, radio or print, provide visuals such as graphs and charts or for radio, paint visuals with your words.
- Give examples – A good example can be worth a thousand words. Use a descriptive example or anecdote to back up every assertion.
- Use analogies – Analogies are another good way to "ring a bell" in the audience's mind. Relate abstract terms and dimensions to everyday things.
- Give advice – People love to be "in the know." Therefore, where possible give the audience a few hot tips on how to get the best out of something or how to avoid disaster. Be careful not to talk down to the reporter or audience.
- Anticipate questions – Be prepared and don't worry too much about being asked a surprise question. The reporter will not supply you with questions in advance.
- You're the expert – The reporter is looking to you for your expertise and you must educate the reporter. Reporters know a little bit about a lot of things. Provide handouts and key points about your organization or campaign, including fact sheets, diagrams and product brochures.
- Body language – Actively listen to the reporter's questions. Lean forward and use your hands to communicate.

- Be direct – If you do not know the answer or cannot release the information, tell the reporter and explain why.
- Be conversational – Talk the way you would talk to a friend or family member about the subject avoiding jargon and complicated phrases.
- Don't defend – At least not in such a way to make you sound defensive.
- Don't ask for a copy of the story – For television, set your VCR or ask a friend or family member to tape the segment. Look in the newspaper and clip your article. There are also broadcast and print clipping services available that can get you the story for a fee.

It's your opportunity

Every interview presents a golden opportunity to communicate your position to a large number of people. In thoroughly preparing prior to the interview, you are determining the messages you want the audience to know through the media.

Television

(tips for doing a sit-down interview in the studio)

- Arrive early.
- Meet with the producer to discuss the line of questioning prior to going on camera. In most cases, you will not meet the reporter until a few minutes before you go on camera.
- Let them know your general philosophy but don't give too much away.
- Be careful about what you say at all times. Microphones are all around, and they may be live.
- Expect to feel a bit nervous.
- Check yourself in the mirror just before going on. If makeup is offered, accept it.
- Don't get sidetracked – ignore distractions.
- Concentrate on looking at the reporter or whoever is speaking. Don't look at yourself in another TV monitor while you're on the air.
- Answer direct with "yes" or "no," "that's true," or "that's not true," or other appropriate phrases then add additional information. This will show that you are sincere and do not evade issues. It also will keep you on track and help you to avoid rambling answers.

- If you must make a negative statement, end on a positive note.
- Humanize yourself – talk about people, not percentages.
- Smile when appropriate.
- Use first names.
- Be informal and conversational. Use short words and simple sentences.
- If you are interrupted by the host or another guest:
- Stop and listen to the question or what is being said. Then respond to it, while coming back to your answer before the interruption, if appropriate.

Do's:

- Sit with legs together or crossed at the ankle
- Sit up straight and lean slightly forward in chair
- Use moderate (but not too broad) gestures
- Look interested, smile when appropriate
- Hold your head level

Don'ts:

- Don't guess
- Don't fold your arms or make fists
- Don't fiddle with papers, pen, pencil, clothing, jewelry or hair
- Don't slouch, rock or swivel in chair
- Don't be overly casual/gesture wildly
- Don't frown or smirk
- Don't wear white, shiny fabrics, small patterns, big or noisy jewelry

Radio

- Stick to two or three themes or positive points.
- Use anecdotes and analogies. Good radio communicators paint “word pictures.”
- Be prepared for a small studio and many distractions. Ignore them, stay alert, keep your mind on the topic and your eye on the host.
- Avoid pauses when answering questions in live radio interviews. Silence on the radio suggests confusion. It's okay if there's a pause after your answer; then it's the host's responsibility.
- It's okay to refer to notes, but do not read directly from them if possible. Be careful not to rattle the pages, as radio microphones are sensitive.

- Remember that all the sincerity and enthusiasm that you are trying to communicate must come through your voice.
- Use the host's first name occasionally. In a call in show, use callers' first names.
- Smile. It will come through in your voice, even over the radio.

Print

- Face-to-face or telephone interviews offer great opportunities. A face-to-face interview at your office allows the reporter to experience your work environment. If the reporter wants to do an in-person interview, ask if they are bringing a photographer.
- Do your homework before the interview. Print reporters can do a more in-depth story and will need more details.
- If you are asked several questions at once, identify the question you are answering.
- Don't ask to see the story and/or photo before it is published, but tactfully suggest that you would be glad to confirm facts and figures.
- Don't get upset if your quotes don't appear. Space is limited and reporters generally talk to more than one source.
- Provide brief answers and speak slowly so the reporter can absorb and understand what you are saying.
- Be prepared for a longer interview than was requested.
- Try to get relevant facts and statistics beforehand. It will help you and will give the reporter an additional source.
- Take time to educate the reporter. He or she isn't as knowledgeable on the subject as you are.
- Don't say "no comment" or go "off the record." Either give a complete answer or say "I don't know but I will find out and get right back to you."