

MEDIA RELATIONS 101

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MEGAN NEHER

A seasoned public relations professional with 25 years of experience, Megan Neher handles a variety of communications and marketing needs for her clients. From managing corporate communications for an international Fortune 500 company to providing public relations guidance to organizations, Megan's experience crosses a number of market sectors. Since 2003, she has owned Megan Neher Public Relations, an award-winning Kansas City-based boutique PR firm specializing in strategic planning, media relations and social marketing content for a variety of consumer and nonprofit clients.



Propelling many of her clients into the national spotlight, MNPR's campaigns have earned several industry awards, and in 2020, Kansas City International Association of Business Communicators (KCIABC) named Megan Communicator of the Year. She conducts formal media training for clients as well as impromptu, on-the-spot lessons.

Megan's career began as a newspaper reporter covering business, real estate and politics. She earned a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Journalism from Kansas State University, and recently earned a Master's degree in Integrated Marketing Communications from the University of Kansas.

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UNDERSTAND HOW THE MEDIA WORKS

Working with the news media can be easy if you prepare and know a few ground rules. With practice and understanding, you can manage your message, create buzz for your organization, turnaround a crisis and/or enhance your reputation. Of course the opposite is true as well. A bad interview or negative news coverage can translate to lost opportunities and permanent damage to you and to your organization.

The tips, tricks and lessons in this booklet will help you understand what makes reporters tick and how you can work effectively alongside them. You'll learn techniques to better control the interview, perform at your best, and build skills to strengthen your overall communications.

Nothing can guarantee success with the news media. However, if you put into practice what you learn in this booklet and participate in a media training, you will be equipped to master your next interview.



WHO ARE JOURNALISTS?

They are NOT:

- ✓ The enemy
- ✓ Always looking for a negative story or trying for “gotcha” moments
- ✓ Pushy jerks

They ARE:

- ✓ On deadline
- ✓ Not always aware of your topic
- ✓ Trying to do their job

The media like and trust:

- Sources who are open, transparent
- Genuine, compassionate
- Underdogs
- People who take responsibility
- Risk takers/individualists
- Good storytellers

The media dislike and don't trust:

- People who are secretive
- Those who brag and self-promote themselves or their organization
- People who blame others or trash their competitors
- Cowards/Conformists
- Those who are hard to quote



UNDERSTAND THE STORY ANGLE

First contact:

When a journalist first contacts you, remember two things: You ARE on the record the minute you pick up the phone and you will want to buy yourself some time.

- Ask the reporter for their deadline and details on the story angle. Let them know you are happy to help with the story, but need some time to gather a few details. Even if it is only 15 minutes, take the time to gather your thoughts before you return the call.
- If you determine you are unable to help with the story, provide a reason why. It could be your expertise or organization is not the right fit for the story angle and maybe there is a better story angle you can suggest to them. (or provide another resource)
- Always thank the reporter for thinking of you.

Note: If you've sent out a news release suggesting reporters cover a story, you should be available for interviews at the time of the release distribution.

Do your research:

Find out as much as you can about the story, the reporter, the story angle, and any history or previous coverage this reporter has produced about this topic.

Must know:

- Reporter's deadline
- Topics to discuss
- Your part in the story
- Reporter's knowledge/feelings so far
- Reporter's background/technique
- The medium (TV, radio, print, web)
- The format (in-person, Zoom, live, taped, feature, investigation)
- Video or photo opportunities

BEFORE YOU START THE INTERVIEW

Develop a plan:

If you could write the story, what would it say? What would the headline be? Think about the audience and try to put yourself into the media outlets' position when thinking through your headline.

- Identify the audience.
- Write key messages that are customized to the story angle. Keep it positive.
- Use the Media Interview Worksheet to help identify key talking points and potential soundbites.
- Find supporting information/examples.
- Set limits – what can't or won't you say?
- Identify video opportunities or photos to help tell the story.



Control the message:

Now it's your turn to be the reporter. It's helpful to anticipate the questions before the interview and develop refined responses.

- Where are you vulnerable?
- What are the obvious questions? What are the questions you DON'T want to be asked?
Inevitably, you will be asked a question you don't want asked, so how will you answer it? Be prepared and don't be caught off-guard.
- Plan and prepare specific answers and practice saying the answers aloud. Don't memorize specific wording or bring printed materials to an interview, but written messaging can help as you practice and allow your messaging to become more natural with each repetition.

Working with Newspaper Reporters

All journalists are looking to break the big story – newspapers, TV and radio and online reporters. They want the new, unusual or controversial and they want it first. This means they want to beat the competition. And who's the competition? Each other; no matter the medium.

Newspaper interviews:

Details – Print reporters generally take more time for interviews and they can easily conduct it on the phone. They also need a lot of details. Don't assume a print reporter knows everything about your organization. They may have gotten the assignment five minutes before they called you.

Background – Newspapers do a nice job of putting a story angle into perspective, and building a story out. For example, a story on a new homeless shelter opening could evolve into a more in-depth look at the homeless population and recent growth triggering the need for a new shelter.

Quotes – Newspaper reporters want meaty, interesting quotes and typically need two to three for each story. This is where practicing your messaging will pay off!

Photos – Unfortunately, staff reductions at newspapers mean they don't have as many staff photographers as they once did, so you may be asked to submit a photo or two. They are looking for professional photos that are not promotional. Also, newspapers have an online version, so photos are typically needed.

Digital version – Newspapers and most print publications have a digital version. Most of the time, this is more widely viewed than the printed version of the publication.



THE DOs AND DON'Ts TO MAXIMIZE YOUR APPEARANCE ON TV

Handling the Interview:

- ✓ In a TV interview, look at the reporter and not the camera. You are having a conversation with the reporter, so ignore the camera.
- ✓ Make eye contact and talk naturally with the interviewer. Look down if you need to adjust your train of thought.
- ✓ Stand still. If you are sitting, avoid a chair that rocks or spins.
- ✓ Briefly restate the question in your answer to create a complete answer and to reinforce you understood what is being asked.
- ✓ Place the most important points at the beginning of each answer.
- ✓ Complete, concise answers are key – soundbites are typically 12-seconds or less. (Newspaper quotes are one to two sentences.)
- ✓ Use confident, assertive body language. (stand or sit up tall, controlled hand movements)
- ✓ Avoid filler words (um, ah, so) as much as possible. Again, practicing out loud will help.



THE DOs AND DON'Ts TO MAXIMIZE YOUR APPEARANCE ON TV

Your “look” for TV:

- Wear solid-color clothing. Stripes, plaids or other designs are distracting. Avoid large, jangling or reflective jewelry. In general, classic clothing with simple lines and plain patterns look best.
- Dress for the occasion. For in-studio interviews, you should be more formal. For segments shot on locations like a construction site, factory or kitchen, you can be more casual.
- Be cognizant about logoed shirts. A small logo on the lapel is acceptable but a large logo on an apron or that covers the whole shirt has been considered advertising from some TV stations and asked to be removed.



Post COVID-19 protocols:

Prior to COVID-19, all interviews were conducted in-person. As we navigate the post-COVID-19 media relations world, it is yet to be determined how TV stations will conduct interviews. For online interviews (Zoom, Skype, etc.) please note the following:

- Check your internet connectivity, and if possible hard wire to the internet rather than relying on a wireless connection.
- Check your audio or wear an external mic to ensure the reporter can hear you clearly during the interview.
- Dress for the occasion. Just because you're at home doesn't mean you should look unprofessional for a TV interview.
- View your surroundings for the interview to ensure it appears professional. Look at what is behind you, hanging on the wall or on your desk so you know what will “show up” on the screen during the interview.
- Prepare for the interview by notifying your staff or family members who might be at home during the interview to ensure you are not interrupted.

THE DOs AND DON'Ts TO MAXIMIZE YOUR APPEARANCE ON TV

Handling the Interview:

What you say – Talk clearly in short phrases. Remember, your answers will be edited down to short soundbites so avoid long-winded answers. You also will do a better job of getting your message across the viewer. Speak with increased energy and at a slightly higher volume than you would if you were having a normal conversation. Be animated.

Eye Contact – Good eye contact is essential in communication and will be evident during an interview. Continually looking away can make you appear to be deceptive. Look at the reporter during the interview. On occasions, TV stations will only send a photographer for the interview, and questions will be asked through an earpiece by an anchor back in the studio. In that case, you will look directly at the camera.

Glasses – Avoid wearing sunglasses during a TV interview. If possible, try not to wear glasses at all.

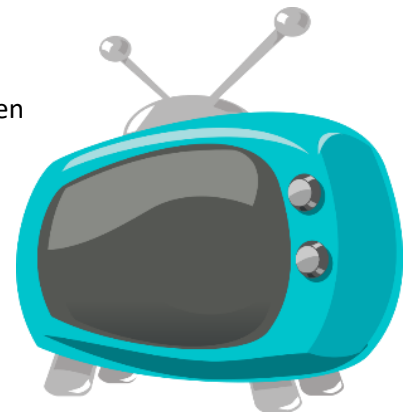
Facial Expressions – Avoid frowning and fake smiles. Keep an open/pleasant face even when you don't think you're on camera. Be animated and energized on camera.

Posture – It's important to be relaxed and not appear stiff on camera. When standing, don't shift back and forth from leg to leg. Plant your feet evenly. When sitting, lean forward slightly in your chair.

Gestures – Be natural. Use your normal gestures on camera to help you be yourself.

Location – Most of the time, TV reporters look to you for guidance on the location for the interview. Have a few ideas in mind before the crew arrives. Remember, they are always looking for something visual with lots of action or demonstrations. However, they will never want something that is staged so they can only shoot actual "action." For example, if you were to tell a news crew that you could get some employees to pretend to load a truck for their news story, they couldn't shoot this because it wasn't actually happening.

Live TV vs. taped – Ask in advance if the interview will be taped or live. In a taped (or edited) story, it's okay to stop and start over again but try not to do this repeatedly.



RECOGNIZE WHAT MAKES A QUOTE OR A SOUNDBITE

Creating a good soundbite:

Selling vs. Storytelling

Don't sell your products or services. Reporters want a unique perspective on a topic or someone to educate them about the broader industry. Of course, all of this has to have a timely element. Reporters are looking to teach the viewers something compelling, uncover a truth or dispel a myth, or "break news first." It is always important to give examples about how or why something is significant and how your product or service has made a positive impact.

Illustrations – Paint a picture for your audience with vivid language. *"It's like you're in the cockpit of the plane — your engine's burning, smoke's filling the cabin, it's filled with a bunch of people that are fighting with each other about who's responsible, you have terrorists on the plane and people want you to come out of the cockpit and put them in jail. And you have to land the plane. That terrifying core objective in a crisis is to make sure you first put out the fire."*

- Timothy Geithner, Secretary of Treasury, describing trying to stabilize the economy, 2009.

Personal Experiences – Talk about what you've seen, heard or felt or what others have seen, heard and felt. "I remember as a kid, every holiday my family traveled to the mountains and we stayed in my grandparents' cabin... "

Specific Examples – Bring the ideas down to a level your audience can relate to with specifics. If you give an example or tell a story, people are more likely to remember what you said.

Cliché's – Can make for a good soundbite, but be careful not to overuse them. "It ain't over 'til..."

One-Liners – These can become memorable to an audience or community. Maybe there's a way to combine a cliché here: "It ain't over 'til we have dug up the last scoop of contaminated soil."

Absolutes – If you can say something is the "first-of-its-kind," the "best," or the "worst," without stretching the truth much, the media is more likely to quote you. The media loves perspective. It's more soundbite worthy if you say: "In all my 25 years in business, we've never had a bigger turnout for our community volunteer program."

Proportional Numbers – Simplify numbers by rounding, using percentages or saying 4 out of 5 people. Listening to numbers during a TV interview is difficult to digest so use minimally and for dramatic effect.

Analogies – These comparisons make ideas and concepts easy to understand. For example: "just like a tree, a community has roots. The stronger you build those roots, the stronger the community will get."

BECOME AN EXPERT SPOKESPERSON WHEN YOU FOLLOW THESE PRO TIPS

Get in the moment. Relax, close your eyes and take three deep breaths. Focus on clearing your mind. Then visualize a moment in the past where you felt confident and motivated. Capture this moment in your mind and anchor those feelings. You can do this!

Answering the Questions:

As important as it is to think about answering the questions correctly, there are a few techniques a pro can use to guide the interview. Reporters will know you're an expert when you do these:

You're the expert – You know your organization better than anyone. Reporters know a little about a lot of things, but unless they have a focused beat, their knowledge on any given subject is not very deep. Also, depending on the market you are in, many reporters are young or fresh out of college and just getting started in their career.

Tell the truth – Never lie or mislead. Also don't volunteer potentially damaging information if you are not asked.

Admit what you don't know – If you don't know the answer to a question, simply say so and offer to get back to them with the correct information. Always make sure to follow through.

Clarify unclear questions – Don't answer a question that you don't understand. Either rephrase it yourself or ask for clarification.

Hook 'em – You can influence the next question by ending with a statement that begs for a follow-up "But that's just one of the reasons we've been successful."

Avoid jargon and acronyms – You may use it every day in your industry, but it's a foreign language to your audience and probably the reporter. Find easy-to-understand terms for the interview.

Before publication – Don't expect a reporter to show you a story before publication. You can ask them to repeat a point you have made to ensure it was understood or to verify that your quote is accurate.

Pause before you answer – Reporters will fire off questions quickly. Their speech patterns may be intense and fast. Do not get drawn into mirroring these patterns. In these situations, calmly wait a couple of seconds before answering each question to give yourself time to think about what you want to say. It can also make you seem less "canned."

Your name - Make sure the reporter has your name and title correct. Spell it for the reporter and ask them to repeat it back.

BEST PRACTICES FOR STAYING ON MESSAGE

Learn the technique of bridging:

A bridge is a verbal method to get from the question asked to the “must air” message you want to make. Sometimes the bridges are easy to make. Other times it takes a little more creativity. The goal is to briefly answer the question posed and then make a smooth transition to some of the bridge examples listed below. See technique method here:

Bridging:

- ✓ **Briefly answer or acknowledge positively the question.**
- ✓ **Then bridge.**
- ✓ **Deliver positive ‘on topic’ messages with supporting information and examples.**

Possible Bridges:

“But...”

“The more important issue is...”

“You may also want to know...”

“Let me put that in perspective...”

“There’s another way to look at that...”

“Another question you might want to consider is...”

“While I understand your concerns about... we can’t lose sight of the fact that...”

“Our real focus in dealing with this situation is ...”

“I believe the main issue here is ...”

“What I think people need to understand is ...”

“Even more to the point...”

TECHNIQUES FOR ANSWERING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Most journalists are not looking to trip you up or get a “gotcha” moment on record. But they are trying to uncover as much information about the subject matter that they can. During an interview, you may find yourself confronted with one or more of the following reporter techniques of interviewing. Be on your guard because if you fall into one of these traps, you will not be happy with the outcome.

Negative Words in the Question – Don’t repeat the reporter’s negative language, even to deny it. For example, to the question “Are you still burying all of your chemical garbage in that cesspool behind the plant?” Don’t start your answer with a denial: “It is not true that we are burying chemical garbage in a cesspool behind our plant.” That only reinforces the negative words. Instead, go straight to the positive. “I believe you are asking about our system for handling hazardous waste. We have an excellent program...”

Off the Record – To be safe, don’t say anything to a reporter you don’t want to read in the paper, hear on the radio or see on TV. Don’t assume that your causal chat with a reporter while the camera person is setting up is off the record. It’s not. Unless you specifically ask “are we off the record,” or tell the reporter “what I am about to tell you is off record, and only for background,” you are not off the record.

Words in your mouth – “So what you’re saying is...” or “wouldn’t you say that...” Don’t accept their words. Come up with your own. “What I’m saying is...” Reporters may do this in an effort to make sense of or simplify a long, boring unintelligible statement. Make sure you are being clear enough.

Speculation/Hypothetical Questions – Stick to what you know and don’t make guesses about the future. Speculative questions can be dangerous. Your answers can make a situation appear worse than it really is—and if you guess badly, your wrong answers can damage your credibility. Be firm. “I’m not going to speculate on...”

Right not to answer – Even if reporters know you can’t or don’t want to talk about a particular issue, they will likely ask anyway. It’s their job. Don’t get angry. Don’t say “no comment.” Tell them *why* you can’t or don’t want to answer. Some reporters will ask the same question but in different ways. Hold your ground and stick with the same reply. “I can’t respond to any questions about personnel issues,” or “I can’t talk about pending litigation,” or “We aren’t releasing that information until we’ve contacted the family.”

TECHNIQUES FOR ANSWERING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Beware of these potential traps too:

Criticizing Others – It's never a good idea to blame another person or organization (and it's especially bad taste to talk badly about the competition). You end up looking petty while the media turns your casual comment into a major controversy.

No Comment – Never say “no comment.” Find a friendlier way to say it or explain why you can't or don't want to talk to the reporter or can't speak about a specific topic. “I'm so sorry, I wish I could answer your questions, but I'm unable to because it's a [FILL IN THE BLANK] matter.”

Anger/Defensiveness – Be very careful. It NEVER pays to lose your temper with the media. Losing your cool on camera will hit social media faster than you can say “I'm sorry,” and once it's out there, it can't be taken back. Remember, asking hard questions are what reporters are paid to do. Don't take it personally.

Yes or No – Don't feel trapped into giving a yes or no answer. If you feel like a reporter is demanding a response, it might be appropriate to say: “The answer is not that simple...” and then bridge to a key message.

Silence – Do NOT feel obligated to fill silences. You might end up saying something you don't want to. It's up to the reporter to keep the interview going.

The Interview's Over – Just because you think the interview is over doesn't mean the microphone isn't still on or the reporter isn't taking mental notes.

False Facts – The reporter, either accidentally or on purpose, may include an incorrect fact or statistic in the question. You must correct it or you are in essence confirming it. Sometimes this may be a fishing expedition to get you to release information that is proprietary. “Employees of your company have been guilty of sexual harassment on several occasions, so what do you have to say this time?” If you let that first part of the question go unchallenged, your audience will assume that is true.



POSITIVE NEWS COVERAGE HAS TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON AUDIENCES

Evaluate and measure benefits your future media interviews:

Were there any questions you didn't anticipate? (make note of them for future interviews on a similar topic)

Did you continually bridge back to your messages?

How many times did you score your messages?

Were your answers brief and clear?

Did you work to get your most important information first in your answers?

Did you fall into any traps?

Were you friendly? Boring? Defensive? Arrogant?

Did you sound interested and concerned about your topic?



Review Coverage:

Was the story fair?
(fairness in the media means that various viewpoints will be reflected)

What was the overall tone of the story?

What soundbites/quotes were chosen? Were you happy with them?

Whether TV or radio, how did you look and/or sound?

Did you accomplish your objectives? Why or why not?

What did you learn? What surprised you?

What will you do differently next time?

POSITIVE NEWS COVERAGE HAS TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON AUDIENCES

Evaluate and measure benefits your future media interviews:

If you were unhappy with a story, share your concerns with the reporter. But first, consider the story and be fair. Are you looking at it from only your viewpoint? Or can you be objective and understand a reporter is presenting other viewpoints and not just yours? Contacting his or her editor/producer is a last resort.

Give positive feedback to reporters if merited. Like the rest of us, they usually only hear complaints. They will also think about you as a contact for future stories!

Are you monitoring feedback on social media? Is it good/bad? Most reporters (or the media outlet) will post their stories on more than one social media platform. The comments on the story can provide you with interesting insight from the general public.

