



## Media Interviews Can be a Picnic

*The short menu of smart interview tips*

*By Jean Van Rensselar*

These tips are written for the benefit of both the journalist and you because the bottom line is that you are each dependent on the other for a successful outcome. You provide the best ingredients and the journalist makes the culinary masterpiece. You and the journalist are not adversaries.

This article assumes a phone interview, since that's the norm. Most journalists no longer interview sources in person unless there is some compelling reason (much of what follows also applies to in-person, print, and broadcast interviews).

The most important thing to remember is that every time you speak with a journalist, the reputations of both you and your company are on the line. From the second you take the call to the second you disconnect, consider that EVERYTHING you say is on the record.

### Take 10 Minutes to Prepare

- Verify the interview day, time (and time zone), approximate length, who is going to call, the phone numbers, and the subject.
- Ask the interviewer if there's a list of possible questions you can review beforehand. If not, try to anticipate some of the questions and prepare answers.
- Go online and find out what you can about the publication. If it's a magazine, look for a recent issue.
- If your company has a messaging guide, memorize it.

### Be Quotable

When you are only one of several sources for an article, your goal is to be quoted. Otherwise, all you're doing is supplying background information without getting any credit. The longer your response to a question, the more likely it will become a quote.

Toward that end, prepare 2-3 interesting anecdotes or illustrations for the points you want to make. For example, if the article is on computer keyboards and you explain how the idea for a new design came to you at Target while you were toy shopping with your daughter, you'll probably earn a quote.

Journalists tend to quote when the source says something that they can't paraphrase well. For example, no one is going to quote you if you say, "In 2009, gross profits in our industry rose 2 1/4 percent." But they might quote you if you say, "No one expected our industry's profits to rise this much in 2009; I thought I'd have to downsize my vacation this year, but I just returned from a week in Italy."

## Be Nice

The vast majority of interviewers just want interesting information. That's it. They aren't hoping to trap or intimidate you. So approach the interview as you would a friendly, but professional conversation. Your interview goal is to be helpful while putting your company in the best possible light, not to advance anyone's agenda – either your own or the journalist's.

Stay positive – this means that if a journalist asks a negative question, respond with a positive statement. For example, if they ask "Why is your industry in such turmoil?" Respond with "This is a real opportunity for fast growth companies like ours to break out of the pack."

Don't aggressively promote your company or its products and services – you'll lose the interviewer. Remember that publicity is not the same as advertising.

If the article comes out and you see a mistake – be charitable. Sometimes errors occur after the story left the journalist's hands. The best way to handle this is to send the journalist an email (written record) pointing out the error and supplying correct information. Then, unless the error is extremely damaging, leave it alone. If you are too aggressive (i.e. demand a correction – which no one will see anyway) everyone in the newsroom will find out and they'll call someone else next time. Don't burn media bridges.

## Keep it Simple

Avoid industry jargon and explain everything in the simplest possible terms. This will also increase your chances of being quoted. Lengthy, detailed explanations will unnecessarily complicate the interview and eat up time that would be better spent on other topics. If you know ahead of time that the discussion is going to involve complex information, be prepared with examples and anecdotes that will simply illustrate the subject.

Keep off-topic conversation to a minimum. If you sense that the interview is losing focus, do what you can to bring it back on track. A great way to do that is to agree to a time limit ahead of time – say 30 minutes. That way, you can always run over if you want, but you have an excuse to rein things in. "That's interesting, but I have a meeting in 10 minutes and we need to stick to the subject."

Eliminate all interruptions – this is for your benefit as well as the journalist's. You want to stay focused and every interruption makes it more difficult to do that.

## Be Interesting

Experts are always interesting – be an expert. Take advantage of your natural enthusiasm for your area of expertise. Nothing is too dry or too nerdy as long as the journalist can understand what you're saying and it's relevant.

## Be Helpful

Supply the interviewer with as much hard copy beforehand as possible – items such as:

- Your company's marketing materials
- An FAQ page
- A list of statistics
- A sheet of bulleted facts (citing sources) that you researched and prepared in advance
- Relevant press releases
- Relevant graphics

Email this info ahead of time. Journalists REALLY appreciate this and anything else that makes their job easier. If you don't have a MediaRoom on your website, consider adding one. Aside from providing background information about your company, the mere fact that you have one sends a message of professionalism from the start.

## Be Smart

Don't joke or make cynical or sarcastic comments. Avoid anything that could possibly be misinterpreted. Pay attention to where the interview is going. As with everything else in life, you stay in control when you're prepared, levelheaded, direct, honest, and focused. Expend energy controlling your responses, not the journalist's questions. Here are some strategies.

### Flagging

To be sure that the interviewer notes your main points, preface the most important information with phrases such as:

- "What's important to remember..."
- "Let me be clear..."

### Creating Structure

As long as you stay on topic, interviewers will pay attention if you begin with phrases such as:

- "Let me make this easy for you, there are three issues here..."
- "There are really only four stakeholders..."

### Bridging

To diffuse pointed questions, provide a short answer and then use a bridging phrase such as the following:

- "The much larger issue is..."
- "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think what you're really asking is..."

### Blocking

While saying "No comment" is a bad idea, it's OK to refuse to answer a question as long as you explain why. Use a phrase such as:

- "It's our policy not to discuss..."
- "This is outside my area of expertise."

If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification. Don't hesitate to say, "I don't know" or "I'll look into it and get back to you." It's much better to do that than go on the record with something that is inaccurate or not what you intended to say.

Some interviewers use silence to draw out sources. If this happens and you've made your point, don't continue talking. If you don't like the way the interview is going, use a little silence yourself to communicate that.

## Before You Part

Make your final comment clear and concise, reemphasizing your main point. If you think you've failed to get your message out, say so, "I think we've missed the critical issue, which is..."

Discuss graphics – will they be taking pictures for the story, do they want you to supply your own, etc. If the publication will be taking pictures, ask if you can have copies after the story runs – most publications are willing to do this and it's a great way to build your graphics portfolio.

Ask when and where the story will run - in the publication's print *and* online versions? Ask if you can preview the article before it runs. Chances are 95 percent that the answer will be no. Some people think it's rude to even ask, but my feeling is that it's a legitimate question and worth the possible payoff.

Finally, don't forget to send a thank-you note or email. If this is your first interview with this journalist, you want this to be the basis of a lasting relationship. Once the article is published, say thanks again.

Make a note of the journalist's contact information and don't hesitate to send an email later if you have something else they may be interested in.

## About the Author

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