

Guidelines for Working with News Media



UCSF Public Affairs handles media relations for the university. It is staffed with experienced public relations officers, most of whom have advanced degrees in journalism and previous journalism experience. Below is a list of tips for handling media calls, but please feel free to reach out to Public Affairs for assistance at any time, at 415-502-NEWS (2-6397).

There are five easy-to-remember points in dealing with reporters:

- **Be Prepared:** Prepare your message, focusing on the top three points you want the reporter to walk away with, and make sure you say them.
- **Be Concise:** Keep in mind that the average TV soundbite is 5 to 8 seconds. Print reporters have more space, but will quote you more accurately if you speak in full, short sentences.
- **Be Confident:** You are the expert.
- **Be Candid:** Be sincere and forthcoming.
- **Be Cooperative:** Remember a reporter is only doing his or her job. If a reporter is asking difficult questions, return to your three main points to get your message across. BUT, answer their question or tell them you either don't know or don't want to comment on it.

Unless you are a seasoned media veteran (and often, even then), it's not advisable to take an unexpected interview without collecting your thoughts. If a reporter calls, there are some simple steps you can take to make sure the interview goes smoothly:

- Ask the reporter if you can call back in 5-10 minutes (or as much time as you need). Ask for his or her **name**, the name of the **media outlet**, a **contact number** and **email**. If you are comfortable with the reporter, outlet and topic, take that time to focus on the topic at hand.
- If you aren't sure for any reason, tell the reporter you are in the middle of something and tell them you'll have the News Office set up the interview. We can contact the reporter, get more information, make sure you're the best expert, help arrange the interview, and handle follow up.
- You can call News Services for advice at any time about how to manage an interview. We can help you with a "Mini Media Training" over the telephone or in person, to help you think through your main points. This is a good idea if you know the interview is likely to be about a controversial topic.

Additional Suggestions

- Speak simply but in complete sentences, especially for radio and TV. Rephrase your answer to include the question in it.
- Be positive: Don't repeat negative words in the reporter's question. Present your information in positive

terms.

- Be responsive: News is time driven. Reporters are usually on hard deadlines and often need a reply within minutes. Whenever possible, respond quickly to calls from reporters or News Services when we call with an inquiry from a reporter.
- Keep in mind that news is action oriented. Reporters care most about who, what, why, when and where. They want the story quickly, but they also need the context. It is up to you to supply the facts AND the context to help make the story as accurate as possible.
- Be comfortable. Adjust your surroundings to make yourself feel at ease during the interview. Then relax. It really can be fun.
- Expect what you say to be reported. There is no "off the record." You can ask to be off the record, but it doesn't always work. Everything you say is fair game, even when you are in a social situation with a reporter. Also, don't assume that when an interview appears to be over that it is. What you say after the interview can be reported, as well.
- Speak to your neighbor. Avoid jargon or scientific terminology. Speak in short sentences. Do use examples and anecdotes. Stories about people and experiences enliven reporting.
- Answer the question that is asked. The reporter's job is to think of what questions the general public would have, so avoiding their question can make readers confused or unclear, and possibly cause the reporter to get the story wrong. That said, it's best not to elaborate unless it is necessary for a complete answer.
- During pauses, stop talking. Give the reporter time to jot notes or ask the next question.
- Never guess; never lie. If you don't have the answer, tell the reporter you don't know, or say you will get back to him or her with the answer. Be sure to do so.
- Try to avoid "No comment." If you can't make a comment, say why. "I would rather not comment because I am not an expert on this subject." "I don't know the answer to that question."
- Don't ask to see the story in advance: most reporters either are not permitted to do that, don't have time for edits, or both. If it's very complex or the reporter doesn't seem to have understood, you can ask if they can share your quotes with you. Be aware that that can come across as condescending or insulting: the reporter is a professional, too.

Being Misquoted

In most cases, if you follow those tips, you will be quoted accurately. Many times, misquotes could have avoided it by engaging Public Affairs early in the process, to better understand the story or outlet (there are some we don't advise working with), or by simply slowing down in the interview and speaking clearly. That said, it does sometimes happen with the best of reporters.

If you are misquoted you can call News Services and we will discuss it with the reporter. Most reporters are eager to make sure their story is accurate and will work with us to correct errors in the online version. While retractions are seldom given, this also will alert the reporter for future interviews. But don't fuss over minor word changes in a quote. We should only be concerned when your true meaning is significantly changed.

Most reporters will not give you their copy or taped interviews for TV and radio for review. It is useless to ask except in rare cases. Rely on the News Services staff to advise you on when it may be appropriate.

For more information or to contact UCSF Public Affairs, please visit <http://www.ucsf.edu/university-relations>