

Eight Ground Rules When Working With Reporters

Written by Brad Phillips @MrMedia Training

One of our recent media training clients told me he refuses to speak with reporters unless they give him approval of the story before it runs. Another told me her boss surreptitiously tapes records interviews with the media in case the reporter "screws" him. I hear those types of stories more often than you'd think, so today, I'm going to enumerate eight important ground rules you need to know when working with reporters.

1. Don't Go Off-The-Record

Journalists don't agree on what the term "off-the-record" means. One survey found that even journalists working for the same news organization had widely divergent views of what the term actually meant. If journalists themselves can't agree on the definition, you're going to get in trouble if you rely on the term to forge an agreement with a reporter. So banish it from your vocabulary entirely.

2. Never Say No Comment

There is no phrase more damning in a spokesperson's lexicon than "no comment." The public regards a person who utters those words the same way they view a person who shouts "I did it!" into a megaphone in a crowded park. That doesn't mean you have to tell a reporter everything, but it means that you should use the technique of commenting without commenting.

3. You Cannot "Approve" a Story

Many high-powered executives, accustomed to directing subordinates, instruct reporters to send them a draft of their articles before publication. Most reporters will not only reject that request, but will resent that the executive treated them like an employee requiring approval. Journalists have no obligation to share their final story with you, so don't ask.

4. But You Can Offer to Fact Check a Story

Offering to fact check a story is different than requesting to see a story prior to publication. Whereas asking a reporter to see a story in advance suggests a controlling executive, making yourself available to check an article's key facts is usually regarded as helpful. They may call you to review a single fact or email you a key section of the article for review.

5. You Can Request Questions In Advance (sometimes)

PR pros disagree on whether or not it's appropriate to request questions from reporters in advance. I'd avoid asking the major news outlets for the questions, but reporters working for smaller news organizations, soft trade publications, or the entertainment press are often willing to share their questions with you prior to an interview.

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6. You Can Tape the Interview

You may consider taping your raw interviews with reporters, especially if you expect it to be hostile. I generally advise against recording more straightforward interviews, since taping can create a defensive environment before you even get started. Many states require you to notify the other party that you are recording so check the law in your state - or better yet, just tell the reporter you're recording.

7. You Can Limit the Time of The Interview

Limiting the time of an interview can help you prevent the conversation from turning into a harmful fishing expedition. If you believe a reporter is primarily interested in digging for dirt, tell the reporter you'd love to talk, but only have a fifteen minute window available. Although this can be a useful tool in certain situations, make it a rare exception to the rule, not your standard operation procedure.

8. You Can Declare Certain Topics Off-Limits

But I wouldn't. Reporters often disclose such agreements to their audience, and that disclosure will probably make you look guilty. It's far better to receive media training so you can handle any question gracefully, even the unexpected question from "left field."