

10 Basic Tips for Communicating with the Media

[When the media call, refer them to your media liaison. If you talk with them, the following guidelines will help.

REMEMBER: Don't give out any information unless you're sure of your facts! You can always take a message and have someone call them back. Be sure to ask: Are you on deadline? And if so, by when do you need the information?]

1. **Always tell the truth to reporters.** Stick with the basic facts.
2. **Never parrot a reporter's question. Otherwise, the audio or video tape may be edited to sound like you concur whether you do or not.** Suppose the reporter asks, "How are you handling this terrible shock?" Don't respond, "We are handling this terrible shock by...." Instead, respond in your own words to the effect that, "We are continuing our usual schedule, following a morning meeting where we discussed the situation."
3. **Take time to answer each question, thoughtfully, and then be silent. Don't embellish your response and don't respond to pressure to chat about it.** Just because a TV reporter puts a microphone in your face or a radio reporter lets a tape run doesn't mean you have to fill that prolonged silence. Your pauses will be removed in the editing process. If you are standing for the interview, don't back up, even though a microphone looms in front of your face. Plant your feet firmly. If you need space, suggest that everyone sit down.
4. **If a reporter asks several questions at once, say something like, "You've asked me several questions here, where would you like me to begin?" And, if you don't understand a question, say so.** If a reporter interrupts you before you've finished answering a question, pause, let the reporter finish, and then continue your answer. Don't let the reporter get you off track or tell you when you've finished your answer. However, don't go into lengthy detail or run off with the interview either.
5. **Don't assume any chatty comments are "off the record" even if you say they are.** A reporter once reminded me that in every phone conversation he's taking notes like crazy so he'll have filler material. And, even if the reporter says s/he won't use the information, his or her editor can decide otherwise. **Remember: Nothing is off the record!**
6. **Reporters are under constant deadlines, but no deadline is so important that it's worth making an inaccurate statement.** If a reporter says s/he has deadline problems, ask how long you have to get the information, and then try to obtain it within that time.
7. **Never answer with "No comment."** Otherwise, the reporters may indicate that you wouldn't answer questions or may interpret for themselves why you aren't answering. **Instead, say, "I can't share that information with you right now, but I will call you as soon as I can release it."** (And do call them.) **Or say, "I don't know the answer, but I should have it in an hour. Please call me."** If you can't reveal information at all, tell the reporter why. Examples: Relatives of an injured person haven't been notified yet, or revealing the identity of a witness could jeopardize an investigation, etc.
8. **Just because the camera is turned off doesn't mean the microphone is.** Others have learned this the hard way. So, don't say anything to a reporter or camera crew during an interview or afterward that you wouldn't want to see in print or on the evening news.
9. **Whenever possible, provide written background material and detailed contact information.** Make it easy for reporters to grasp the basic facts. And, then let them know they can contact you any time of the day. Reporters often write at odd hours. If they have a question about a fact, you'll want them to contact you for clarification, no matter what time of day.
10. **Remember that reporters are employees doing their job.** When we help them get an accurate story and give them enough background information so they can develop the perspective they need, we build credibility.