



Giving media interviews to print journalists

While talking with a journalist might seem like a less-than-favourable experience for some, it really is a great way of raising awareness of your business. The chances of you having a really bad interview are slim, especially if you prepare well. Based on our experience, we've put together the following tips to help you best prepare for a journalist interview:

- **Prepare**

Whatever you have agreed to be interviewed about, make sure you're up to date on the subject. If you're being interviewed by telephone about a recently issued press release, have that and any other supporting documents to hand. We often advise clients to have three to five key messages they want to make and to come back to those in an interview using the bridging technique (see below).

If it's an interview that has been requested because the journalist knows you're an expert in your field, then it's fine to ask them in advance for a few starter questions and the story angle so you can collect any information you need. This is something we typically do on behalf of our clients so that they are well-briefed, along with some additional information on the journalist, their interests and most recent articles or stories.

Sometimes an interview might not be planned and a journalist may call you up out of the blue. Regardless of their deadline, do not feel under pressure to give the interview there and then. It is perfectly acceptable to politely say that you can't speak to them right now, find out their deadline and then call them back once you've had time to gather some thoughts within that deadline.

- **Keep it simple**

Even if the journalist might have a fair idea of the subject, don't assume they know everything about the subject. Keep it simple and free from technical speak; if you do need to use technical terms, then explain them but don't dumb it down or appear patronising.

It's often a good idea at the outset of the conversation to ask the journalist about their level of knowledge on the subject so that you can gauge your answers.

- **Bring the interview to life**

Be sure to try and find evidence or facts to back up your points to illustrate your point. Not only will it increase understanding for the journalist, but will likely make more insightful copy. You can take inspiration from things you've read, anecdotal evidence or real-life examples from

your own workload. Even if you can't name specific cases, you may be able to talk around the specific issues to highlight your point.

- **Environment**

If you're meeting a journalist face-to-face, do think about the right environment. If the meeting is face-to-face and is a catch-up or general introduction, then a restaurant or coffee shop is likely to be conducive. If it is to discuss a specific case or a technical issue, a meeting room is best.

However, most online and print journalists will opt for a telephone conversation. If so, then find a quiet room (with a strong mobile signal if there is no landline in the room) where you won't get distracted.

- **Remain on message**

Many journalists will allow a story to develop based on what you and others tell them but some will have preconceived ideas as to how they want a story to turn out. With your preparation done and notes in front of you, stick to your key messages and don't be persuaded to say something that doesn't follow your firm's direction.

- **Bridge**

Learning to bring the journalist back to your message is a skill but one that can be achieved if you take the time to think about your answers. Make sure you answer the journalist's question first, then subtly end with phrases like "*another important point is...*", "*it's also important to remember...*" and follow with an appropriate key point you want to reiterate.

- **Off the record**

Assume you are on the record unless told or agreed otherwise. If a journalist calls you and identifies him or herself as such, then you are on the record and liable to be quoted.

So, what is 'off the record'?

The cynical will say that nothing is ever truly off the record. The problem is that there is no agreed definition of exactly what it is. Our basic rule is that if you don't want the world to know something, don't tell a journalist.

Even if the journalist keeps 'off the record' information to him or herself when writing that particular story, they cannot 'unknow' the information and it is not impossible that some time down the line they use it, having forgotten it was off the record.

It is best to set out the terms of the conversation at the start – for example, you may be happy to be quoted unattributably (ie, anonymously), in which case you should even define how the journalist will refer to you, eg "*A lawyer from another City firm said...*", "*An industry insider said...*".

If a journalist says the information he wants is "just for background", you need to understand what that means. It could simply be that they need your help to understand something, and what you tell them will simply be included in their general explanation of the situation without

mentioning you. You might still be quoted separately, but sometimes it is worth just helping in that way to build the relationship with the journalist. It will pay off in the long run.

One approach that works, at least once you have a relationship with the journalist, is to say “Let’s talk off the record and then you tell me what you’d like to quote”. Most journalists will respect that.

Like most things in life, relationships are key. While you need to be a good source of comment and information for them, equally journalists need to prove that they can be trusted to play fair.

- **It’s OK to not know everything**

If you don’t know the answer to a question that has been posed by a journalist, then say so. If you fudge it and you’re wrong, then you risk damaging your credibility with that journalist and as a spokesperson for your firm too.

It’s OK to say to the journalist: “Let me check on that point and I’ll get right back to you.” But you must ensure that you do so ASAP with the details, bearing in mind they’ll probably be on a deadline. Also being prepared to go that extra mile for them will win favour.

- **Don’t ask to see the copy**

There is nothing more annoying to a journalist than when an interviewee asks to see their copy before publication. Our hard-and-fast rule here is simple: don’t ask. Journalists expect to be treated with professional respect and find it offensive when interviewees imply they don’t trust them.

The furthest you should go is to ask at the end of the interview to give an indication of what they intend to quote. This is similar to the suggestion above about having an off-the-record conversation and then agreeing what the journalist can quote.

The onus is on you to be clear and to say only what you would be happy to see in print. However, if the subject is highly technical, then there is nothing wrong with offering to review relevant parts the copy of it will help the journalist by something: *“I appreciate it’s quite a difficult/technical issue, so I am happy if you want to clarify any points with me that you’ve written.”*

If you’re worried that the interviewer hasn’t grasped what you’ve said, ensure you recap at the end of the call and even offer to follow-up with a few thoughts via email for clarity’s sake.

Finally, as with any other business relationship you want to nurture, do ensure you follow-up with the journalist after the conversation by following them on Twitter and adding them on LinkedIn.