

2011 NALP Annual Conference

iConnect:

A Method to Work
with the Press to
Showcase Your
Success



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PREPARING FOR A MEDIA INTERVIEW

WHEN A REPORTER CALLS:

1. Always take a minute to return media calls, or ask someone on your staff to do so, even if simply to say that unfortunately you are too busy to speak with the reporter at this time. (If possible, you can suggest an alternative contact person. If your school has a protocol for responding to the media, follow that protocol.) Respecting a reporter's deadlines goes a long way toward fostering positive relationships with the media.
2. When speaking to the reporter, find out the following information:
 - The reporter's name and affiliation;
 - The reason for the call and what issues will be discussed.
3. Determine if you are the right person to be interviewed. If you believe someone else is a better choice, let the reporter know.
4. Establish the ground rules for the interview and define the topics to be discussed in as much detail as possible.

5. Establish who the audience will be for this particular interview, and how the information will be used.
6. Determine exactly what the reporter needs from you before you proceed, and what else, besides your interview, will be incorporated into the finished product. Will you be quoted? Is the reporter simply seeking background information? Who else is being interviewed? Will this be a feature, or hard news story? When will it run?
7. If the interview is being planned for the future find out:
 - Will the interview be taped, either on camera or on audio?
 - Will you be on camera live?
 - Where will the interview be conducted?
 - How long the interview is expected to last?
8. If the issue is straightforward, and you are comfortable with the subject matter, you can respond to the reporter's questions on the spot. Simply be accurate, truthful, and brief.
9. If the issue to be discussed is more complex, tell the reporter you are tied up, but will be available in say, an hour, and that you will return the call. Ask for the reporter's deadline, and be sure to call back by then. Use that time to prepare, as detailed in the following sections.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW:

1. Prepare three to five points to get your key messages across as briefly as possible (preferably 20 seconds or less). Some questions to ask yourself:
 - What is the issue?
 - What is your involvement in the issue?
 - Why is it important?
 - What is the historical perspective?
2. Gather background information and facts that prove your messages and make them credible. Don't try to "wing it"- be prepared.
3. Think of tough topics and sensitive questions you may be asked, and formulate responses that include your key messages.
4. Know your audience - determine who reads the publication or tunes into the program and tailor your messages for them.
5. Practice. Ask your law school's public relations representative, if you have one, or possibly someone on your staff to help you prepare for the interview.

DURING THE INTERVIEW:

- Remove distractions during the interview.
- Assess the reporter's level of understanding for the issue to be discussed, and brief him or her, if necessary.
- Get your message across. Take the initiative; be prepared to give information, answer questions and go on with the kinds of comments you have practiced.
- Be informative, not conversational. Be aware of the reporter who remains silent, encouraging you to ramble or dilute your original message. Don't feel compelled to fill those silent moments.
- Don't go "off the record." Off the record comments may not be attributed to you directly, but reporters often will use the information to confirm a story with other sources. **If you don't want it printed or broadcast, don't say it.**
- Avoid phrases like "between you and me" and "to be honest with you."
- Correct the journalist's mis-statements. Say something short such as, "to the contrary," than state the situation correctly.
- Don't be bullied by the interviewer. Instead address your responses to the public, especially when being interviewed for radio or television. Remember that you are being judged by your impact on the audience, not the interviewer.
- Feel free to redefine the question. This allows you to address the real issues that underlie the reporter's questions.
- Be brief. Keep your responses to questions clear and concise. Reporters generally are looking for "quotable quotes" which will fill three lines of newsprint or 20 seconds of airtime.
- Answer questions directly if you can answer. Don't say "no comment" or "I can neither confirm nor deny." Instead, explain that you are unable to comment and why.
- Substitute positives for negatives. If the reporter asks a question in the negative, don't repeat it. Instead, when you reply, phrase your response as a positive.
- Avoid negative quotes. These are the ones most likely to end up in the newspaper or on the airways.
- Put the story in perspective with understandable examples.

- Don't answer widely speculative or "hypothetical" questions. Instead you can say, "I'd be happy to answer any questions, but only on the facts as they occurred."
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to get back to the reporter with an answer later. Don't make it up or "wonder aloud" on the record.
- During the interview, work in your three key points, and repeat them as often as possible. You can get your message points into the interview by "dumping and bridging." This technique involves acknowledging the reporter's question, and quickly moving on to the issue you want to discuss by using transitional phrases, such as "yet, and in addition to that..." or "that's an interesting concept, but did you know that..."
- Be aware of tone of voice and body language. Be smiling and sincere and never hostile. Never lecture or argue with reporters they have the last word.
- Be concise, be visual, be truthful and be in charge.

AVOID:

- Legalese
- Citing procedural codes
- Complex terms
- Too many details
- The ambush interview or no-notice calls. Buy time. Ask for an idea of what the reporter wants to talk about. Tell the reporter you need a few minutes to take care of something that needs your attention. Use that time to prepare. Jot down the 10 most difficult questions the reporter might ask you then try to frame positive answers.

SOME "NEVERS":

- Never say "no comment." I can't discuss this because (say why, personnel matter, confidential student information, etc.) but here's what I can tell you, then bridge to your key points.
- Never guarantee anything.
- Never exaggerate.
- Never run from or slam the door on a camera.
- Never slug a camera operator or photographer.

TIPS FOR BUILDING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY REPORTERS:

- Introduce yourself to new key reporters if it is within your role at your law school to do so. Invite them on a tour and arrange for someone to speak with them about how your law school works.
- Find out what type of information reporters will need when covering your department or law school. Try to be as helpful to them as possible, so they can do as good a job as possible.
- Find out their deadlines and honor them.
- Show you are reliable and credible.
- Above all – treat reporters with respect.