



For Safety's Sake...

Meeting the Press: *An Agent's Guide to Media Relations*

Departments of Food Science and Family & Consumer Sciences

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Working with the media begins before the first interview, article or television spot. To be successful, start now to develop relationships, which will serve you well in the future.

Newspapers:

Newspapers concentrate on "breaking" stories. However, you can anticipate certain topics to come up at certain times of the year. (ie: Poultry Safety in November) Reporters are taught to be cynical about most information. Don't take it personal! Some points to consider:

1. Reporters care about NEWS. They want information that is relevant, useful and interesting to their viewers.
2. Most often, reporters Have had little time to learn about the subject matter they are reporting on. They are looking for experts to confirm or dispel the breaking information they plan to report.
3. We know a lot about the subject. We need to communicate clearly in simple terms without being simplistic, explain without being condescending and show why this information is interesting to the public. Reporters do not want to know your life story unless it adds to your credibility to speak on the subject.

When writing fact based news articles, put the most important information at the beginning in case the article is cut due to other late breaking news. Expect all articles to be edited. Short sentences of 15-20 words and short paragraphs with easy words are best. The use of active verbs and personal pronouns such as "I", "you" and "they" are most effective.

Feature articles are longer. These contain a "lead in" that sets the stage for a

story to follow. With a feature you can be more creative. End the article with a "Kicker" that provide the article with a punch.

Magazine Articles:

Magazine articles concentrate on analyzing information rather than "breaking news". Articles usually answer the question "What does this information mean?" and puts associated risks into perspective. Magazine articles often quote a variety of experts who do not necessarily agree on the subject.

Magazines have fewer time constraints than newspapers or television media but the length of the story is critical. Information needs to be short and concise.

Television:

Because they deal with "breaking" news, reporters usually will give very short notice. If you do not feel you have adequate time to collect reliable information on the subject, decline to be interviewed live. If possible suggest a taped interview or a phone interview at a prearranged time.

Television is different in different size cities. In large cities it may be segmented with reporters assigned to deal with certain subject matters. In smaller cities with fewer reporters, the assignment editor decides what stories will be covered and by which reporter. In smaller markets, reporter turnover is high so the assignment editor will be a more consistent contact person.

Television is driven by deadlines based on when the news is aired. Call in early in the morning to get more of the reporter's or assignment editor's attention. The closer to the air time you call the less chance you will have to get your information on the air.

Find out what subjects the newsroom is most interested in. Remember, they do not have the knowledge base on the subject matter and are looking for experts to support or dispute information in breaking stories. Educate them on your areas of expertise and ask them to call you when they need information in your subject matter.

In most cases you will have only about 30 seconds to tell your story. Reporters will tape most interviews and edit it to emphasize the point they want to make. Remember that television is a visual medium and use this to your advantage. Relate your information to practical, every day life using common folks as examples. Limit information to 3-4 key points and, if possible, repeat them at the end of the interview.

Radio:

Most radio spots, today, consist of pretaped interviews and "call in" shows centered around a specific topic. Pretaped interviews allow you to plan your information in advance and if, needed, tape it several times. The station will usually call ahead and request that you talk on a particular subject at an agreed upon time.

A "call in" show requires you to be ready for just about anything. Some stations screen the caller's question prior to talking with the guest. Some callers talk directly to the guest. In order to be as prepared as possible, you will want to inquire if callers will be screened and the format of the show. One disadvantage (or advantage) of a "call in" show is that you will be required to fill in the "dead

space" between callers. Make sure to take some "filler" information that you can provide to the listeners between calls. Don't be afraid to say you don't know or can't answer the caller's question. Ask for a name and phone number and follow up with them after the show.

Some tips for developing Media Savvy:

1. Think ahead about possible areas of interest. Read newspapers, professional magazines and subscribe to news services in your area of expertise to see trends in information. Watch your local television and listen to local radio in order to know what type of format to anticipate. If there is breaking news late in the afternoon, take some information home. Inevitably, you will get a call at home.
2. Build relationships with your local media representatives. Volunteer to do interviews rather than wait to be asked.
3. Know key reporter's names and ask for them specifically.
4. Ask when the deadline is for the story. If necessary, negotiate for an agreed upon time to provide the requested information. Honor that deadline so you will be considered a reliable source of information.
5. Ask who the target audience of the story will be. This will help you target your comments.
6. Report unbiased information. This will increase your reputation as a credible source of information.
7. Request the opportunity to review written material prior to its publication/printing in order to check for accuracy. However, don't be surprised if your request is denied.
8. Give your media representatives feed back on your experiences with them. If you feel you have been misrepresented by the story/article, call and let them know. If you feel an written or "on air" correction is warranted, ask for one.

Resources:

Taking Charge: News Media Relations in the 1990's. Co-sponsored by the National Broiler Council and Southeastern Poultry & Egg Association.

Poised for the Press: Creating Smooth Media Relations. University of Missouri. 1991. VHS.

Materials in the **For Safety's Sake** series were produced by members of a special Food Safety Agent Resource Team and have been peer reviewed by individuals from Family & Consumer Sciences and The Food Science Department at North Carolina State University.

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