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The media is going to do a story on us! (What do we do now?)

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11 Simple Steps for Working with the Press

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A reporter from the local news has just called. He'll be there tomorrow to do a story on your work! Great news! So why are you scared to death?

The media make most people nervous. We know a story can help bring our missions to the attention of thousands of people, but we are afraid of what might happen once the camera is on us.

Relax. An interview with a reporter is just a conversation about your work. The following tips should help that conversation go smoothly and make your news story terrific.

Having Realistic Expectations

Before we dive in to the how-to's, the following 2 disclaimers are required reading:

Realistic Expectations about Public Relations - Disclaimer #1

Being on the news is not a direct link to money and it will NOT bring in big donations. If you are hoping wealthy folks will watch your story and whip out their checkbooks - they will not.

If you are looking to raise funds, the first step should be a comprehensive Community Impact Plan, outlining what your organization intends to accomplish for the community. The next step is to create a plan for overall organizational health and wellness, to ensure you can accomplish what the community needs you to accomplish. From those 2 master plans, it will be important to have a resource development plan (preferably an asset-based plan - for information on creating that plan, [CLICK here](#)) and a Community Engagement plan (for information on creating

that plan, [CLICK here](#)) Your success in sustaining your mission will directly correlate with the extent to which you are thoughtful in planning for both the present and the future.

Once you have created those plans, you will see that public relations will be a part of those efforts. But it is important to be very clear: PR alone is not a magic pill to bring in dollars.

Public Relations is a tool for communicating with the public. It provides credibility for your work, reinforcing a positive image in the minds of those you wish to engage in that work.

TheThe only real magic pill is hard work, strong planning, and a very large bag of resource development and community engagement tools. And public relations should definitely be one of the tools in that bag.

Crisis Public Relations - Disclaimer #2

The type of news story discussed in this article is a feature news story - the type of feel-good story you might see at the end of a ½ hour news show. Feature news is the exact opposite of "crisis" news, when life is skidding downhill fast.

If your organization is facing a crisis, the organization should designate one single spokesperson authorized to speak with the media. That person should be coached by a crisis PR firm and the organization's attorney, and should be in close communications with the board's leadership. Seriously. Do not use this article for that purpose.

With those 2 disclaimers out of the way, you are ready to tackle that interview!

Take Control Before the Interview:

The first step in an interview is to be prepared. Being prepared will eliminate some (not all) of your nervousness, because a big part of why you are nervous is uncertainty. "What do I say if they ask me about _____?"

By doing a little prep work, your sense of uncertainty will be reduced.

1 - Create Realistic Expectations of Results

The most critical part to a successful interview is to know what you want the piece to accomplish. And if you already know the piece won't bring in tons of money, what can you expect the piece to accomplish for your organization?

Put yourself in the viewers' shoes. The story that would pull at your heart, sitting in your living room, is the story of how your organization makes positive change in people's lives. Seeing a story like that would certainly reinforce the credibility of your work..

And that is the very best goal for your media appearance - letting the community know about the critical work you are doing, so that when you DO ask for support of any kind, they have heard about you and are thinking well of you. Keep that goal in mind, and don't let your mind slip and think this piece is about raising money.

2 - In Two Key Points or Less, Why Is this Program Important?

Now lets step out of the viewer's shoes, and let's try on the reporter's shoes. If a reporter does 2 stories a day, five days a week, that's 10 stories in a week, sometimes more. When she arrives at your office, it is likely she has come from another interview where she's had to learn a completely new subject in ten minutes.

If you want the reporter to do a great job for your mission, make it easy for him or her to quickly understand what's important. Don't bury the reporter in a ton of

information, hoping he will find something that strikes his fancy. If you bounce from point to point to point, he will just get lost.

Remember: the final piece may only be 1-2 minutes long!

Choose no more than two key points that illustrate why your work is so important. Not four, or even three. Just two. And one would be even better.

The points should answer this question: What difference is your work making in your community and in the lives of individual people?

Your answer should tug at people's hearts.

"1,000 teens in our community are homeless, and most of them were abused before they ran away. We can only help 20 of them at a time."

You know your most important issues. Focus.

3 - Tell Them a Story

After you have chosen your two critical points, find a story about an individual who has experienced your program. Your program is about changing people's lives; those lives are the story.

Write down this story using only 3-4 sentences, in the following format:

- 1) Here's what the problem / opportunity was
- 2) Here's the situation now
- 3) Engage the public in helping you create change

If the whole story is only be 1-2 minutes long, that doesn't leave a lot of time for a rambling story. It is, however, just enough time to make an impact.

"Mary was 16 when she came here. She and her baby were living in her boyfriend's car. Now Mary has a job and an apartment, and she is going to college. That's the kind of impact the community helps us create."

The important point is the end result for this individual. They were in bad shape; they are now in great shape, thanks to you..

With so little time to tell your story, the 3-4 sentence format "**Problem / Result / Engage**" will stop you from rambling. You will create the sound bite, rather than the station taking your long rambling story and cutting it down themselves! It's just one more way of taking control. (And by the way, this same story works well for your "30 second elevator speech" - the one you use to introduce yourself at networking or other functions.)

4 - Visualize

This is a step that helps many people who get nervous about interviews:

Remember this is just a conversation, nothing special.

This is not a performance you have to rehearse for. An interview is simply a conversational chat.

So visualize yourself chatting with the reporter. It is a casual chat. The camera happens to be there, but it is not focused on you as an individual - it is simply watching the conversation, like a photographer at a charity ball. You and the reporter are both involved in the subject. You are both comfortable. It is the same conversation you have had many times, every time someone wants to know about your work.

Spend some time thinking of the conversation in this way, because truly, that's all it

is.

5 - What to Wear

If you have time to dress for the interview, there are some old stand-by rules for "dressing for the camera."

Wear solids, preferably muted colors - light blue, beige. White will flare up on the screen, and busy stripes / tweeds / herringbones create distracting squiggly effects on the screen.

If you don't have time to dress for the interview - if the tv crew is on their way - don't worry. The important thing will be what you say.

When the Reporter Arrives:

6 - Chat with the Reporter Before the Interview

It is the day of the interview. The cameraman is setting up. This is a great time to begin talking casually with the reporter. Share your key points with him/her, OFF camera. This will warm you both up, bringing the reporter up to speed and allowing you to get to know him/her and to feel comfortable.

Feel free to ask questions yourself at this time. "How much do you know about this issue? What was the last story you just came from? Is this a busy day for you?" Chit chat. Get comfortable.

The reporter may take notes at this time. While you are in this pre-interview conversation, tell the reporter directly: "Be sure to ask me about ____." If he/she doesn't want to look like an idiot when the piece airs, they'll ask.

If there is specific information you want shown in text on the screen, give that to them now. A phone number where people can get information. An address to drop off donations, etc. Then you can forget about it and just enjoy your conversation with the reporter.

Again, you are helping the reporter by providing what he/she needs. Give them good solid information while making their job easier, and the interview should go great!

7 - Turn Off Your Cell Phone / Pager

Don't just set it to buzz, turn it off. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, some buzzers are almost as loud as ringers. But secondly, if you are nervous, the buzz will distract you. It may make you startle mid-sentence, just as you are at your most eloquent. So turn it off. Period.

From the Do-As-I-Say-Not-As-I-Did Department: I had just come from an intense two-hour facilitation, and I was running late for the ½ hour radio interview I was about to do. My mind was still reliving the difficult facilitation, and I was definitely not focused on what I was supposed to be talking about.

It was about 10 minutes into the interview - too late to ask them to re-tape. And my cell phone started to ring - loudly. I was in mid-thought on a serious issue when it happened, and as my mouth continued talking about the issue, here's what my brain was saying:

"Oh geez, you know better than that! I wonder if it's my kid? Are they going to be able to edit out the noise? You're an idiot - I can't believe you left that on! And oh, by the way, what on earth am I talking about?"

To say I got flustered is an understatement. I was lucky - I am used to being interviewed, and this was a subject I had spoken about so often I could wing it until

I got myself re-composed. Listening to the interview afterwards, I managed to pull it off, and they managed to edit out the noise.

But if you don't want to be caught on camera with your mouth saying one thing while your brain is thinking a million other things (most of those things being expletives), turn your cell phone off.

The Interview:

The camera is set up. Your microphone is on. The reporter is standing in front of you, and you are about to start.

8 - Talk to the Reporter, Not the Camera

Remember what you visualized? The conversation, the give and take? You can't do that if you're thinking about the camera. So just talk with the reporter, and ignore the camera. If you look right at the camera and think about the folks at home, you WILL get tongue tied. You will get nervous. You will lose your place. And that's because the camera is not a person.

So just talk to the reporter as if you were at a social gathering. This person wants to know why you care so much about your work and why you are so excited about it. If you think about the conversation in this way, the reporter will start to care about what your group does, and so will the folks at home.

Keep focused on your 2 main points. Tell the reporter why this place means so much to you and to the people whose lives you save every day. Tell him your story. One on one, friend to friend. Forget the guy with the camera.

Towards the end of the conversation, the reporter may ask if there is anything you'd like to add. This is where you can cover the topics on your list, that the reporter didn't ask you. THIS IS NOT THE POINT TO GO OFF TOPIC. Stay with your plan. "Yes, I'd like to tell you a story about a girl we were able to help." With your preparation, you will be ready!

9 - Now You Can Pitch for Support

We've talked about the fact that a media interview is not a great place to focus on money. But there is a difference between focusing on money and asking for it as part of the bigger picture.

In every interview there is a time to ask for support, and that time is now.

You've covered the key points about your organization, and you've told your story. The reporter sympathizes with your group and the great work you do, and so will the public. You've tugged at their hearts.

NOW AND ONLY NOW can you talk about how tough times are, and that you are afraid the center may have to close (or whatever your real need is) and that there is no other organization that does the good work you do, etc.

"It's ironic when we look at the incidence of teen violence nationwide, that if Mary came here today, we're not sure we could help her." Or whatever the real story is.

Now if you ask for money, the story isn't about the money. It's about showing folks the problem and asking for their help.

"Our building is bursting at the seams, and we're not sure we'll be able to continue to serve the community. We are looking to the community to help us raise the \$2million the new building will cost."

So stick to the cause. Stick to the people you help. And talk about imminent need.

You probably won't get the big check you were hoping for. But people will remember your more important message.

10- The Tip No One Tells You

This one tip has saved me time and again.

It is unlikely that your interview will be broadcast live. Most interviews are taped. The tape will be rolling through your whole interview, and the editors will take the few seconds they need to make the story work.

If the interview is being taped, this is one of those rare times in life when you DO get do-overs.

If you feel you are getting tongue tied, stop, take a deep breath, and say to the reporter, while the tape is still rolling, "Let me start again - what was the question?" and then start your thought fresh. This will give you time to come back to your main points, to rephrase that story, to bring the question back to what you need to accomplish, etc.

The cameraman will keep the tape rolling till you're done, and later, back in the newsroom, they will throw away everything but the good stuff. The more articulate you sound, the better the piece will be for them, so it is in both your best interests to do it over and get it right.

11 - Leveraging the Interview

The benefit to being on tv isn't all about that one shot in front of whomever happens to be watching at the time. There are a number of ways to leverage that interview. Before you embark on a formal media campaign for your organization, take some time to brainstorm ways your organization can get further mileage out of your television appearance.

Being interviewed on television is what most organizations wish for. If you remember no other tip, remember that a Human Interest "Interview" is simply a conversation with someone who cares about your community. Relax and have a great conversation!


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