

When a Reporter Calls...

*Tips for talking with the media from the Media relations Office,
Minnesota State University, Mankato**

- *If a reporter reaches you directly:* Obtain the reporter's name, medium and phone number; find out the reporter's deadline; and ask how you can help.
 - If you are listed as one of MSU's experts on the media relations experts list, if the query is about a topic in which you have expertise, and if you feel comfortable responding, do so. Immediately after the interview, call or e-mail the Media Relations Office and describe what happened. We'll follow up to make sure the reporter has all of the information that he or she needs.
 - If you're the keeper of public information that is not protected by the Data Privacy Act (i.e., enrollment figures), provide that information to the reporter. If the reporter asks you for an opinion that you're uncomfortable with, tell him or her that deliberations regarding the issue are continuing.
 - If the query is sensitive or negative, or you suspect it will be negative, tell the reporter that he/she has reached you at a bad time. Ask the reporter to outline the information that he or she seeks; explain that you or someone else will call back soon; then call the MSU Media Relations Office (389-6838). Explain what the reporter told you, your understanding of his or her objective, and any background that you know about the issue. With your help the media relations officer will develop a brief response, and will decide whether you or someone else should return the call.
 - If you're not the appropriate spokesperson, refer the reporter to the MSU Media Relations Office (389-6838).
- *If a reporter leaves a message for you to call back:* Call the Media Relations Office. Explain the reporter's message and any background that you know. You and the media relations officer will develop a brief response and will decide who should call back.

Preparing for the Interview...

- *Be knowledgeable, sincere, compassionate and energetic.* Audiences (especially television viewers) are won or lost by the attitudes of those interviewed.
- *Have a message.* A news story can convey only two or three points effectively. Prepare a single communications objective and two or three secondary points, and make them, regardless of the questions you are asked.

- *Envision your audience.* The reporter is not your audience. He or she is a means for communicating with readers, listeners or viewers. Talk to that audience when preparing your messages.
- *Anticipate tough questions* and formulate responses.
- *If you are asked a question that you prefer not to answer*, bridge to what you want to say, or restate the question and then answer it.
 - “The important thing to remember is that this project has helped thousands of Minnesotans, and will help tens of thousands more.”
 - “If you mean ‘How much impact does this project have?’ The answer is that it has helped thousands of Minnesotans, and it will help tens of thousands more.”
- *Try to see a reporter in person* if you’re discussing a complex topic that requires in-depth explanation.

During the Interview...

- *Use simple language*, and speak in short sentences. Don’t use technical terms and jargon.
- *Be brief*, especially for broadcast media. Newspaper reporters can present more information. Radio and television reporters use sound bites; much of what you say will end up on the cutting room floor.
- *Make your points.* Don’t wait for the reporter to ask about your message. Take the initiative. You’re in charge of the interview. Convey your message, even if it means going beyond the question you’ve been asked.
- *Don’t expound* on a sensitive topic. When you’ve stated your message, stop talking. If the reporter doesn’t respond immediately, be comfortable with the “pregnant pause.” A reporter may create such a pause to encourage you to elaborate, and your off-the-cuff remarks may be the next day’s headlines. Don’t feel that you must fill the silence. It’s the reporter’s turn to speak. If he or she doesn’t understand what you’ve said, he or she will say so.
- *State your position in positive terms.* Reporters sometimes frame questions to bring out the conflict in a story. Don’t repeat negative words or phrases in the reporter’s question. Don’t unintentionally fan controversy.
- *Don’t go “off the record.”* Assume that everything you tell a reporter will be quoted and on the record. (*Reporters’ Rule:* The reporter, not the interviewee, decides what is on and off the record.)

- *Be friendly, but not flippant.* Remember that everything you say can be used in the story.
- *Be honest.* If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
- *Avoid "no comment."* It suggests you are trying to hide something. If you can't answer, say "I can't answer that question, because I wasn't there."

After the interview...

- *Don't ask the reporter to expunge certain quotes* and other information. It could draw additional attention to those points, and it may result in bad feelings and distrust. If you've provided erroneous information, call the reporter and give him or her the correct data.
- *Don't expect to review a story before publication.* A journalist's code of ethics generally doesn't allow that. If you fear the reporter doesn't understand something, repeat the point or ask the reporter if you can clarify in any way. Encourage the reporter to call you for further clarification while he or she is writing the story.
- *If you're misquoted,* try to contact the reporter, not the editor. Don't overreact, especially if the error is minor or not quite the choice of words you would have used. Contact the reporter even if there's no need for a published correction. If not corrected, misinformation could be repeated in another story at a later date.

Taking the Initiative ('Pitching' the Story)...

- *Talk to the Media Relations Office* if you'd like to pitch a story to a reporter. With your help the Media Relations Office will create a pitch that meets the needs and fits the deadlines of the media. What resonates with reporters?
 - *Newsworthiness.* Find out if your project is the only one in the state, and tell the Media Relations Office.
 - *Trends.* Tell us if your story is part of a regional or national trend.
 - *Human interest.* Has your project changed someone's life? Use that person's experience as an example.
- *Don't promise an exclusive* to a reporter or editor when you've already talked to another publication.

Call Us!

- If an event or an activity in your department has the potential to generate publicity – good or bad – consult with your department supervisor, your dean and your vice president, and call Jeff Iseminger or Michael Cooper. With your help, we can define a strategy and a message that will prevent the press from overreacting, and will communicate the truth to the public.

* The media tips outlined here are no substitute for thorough media training. If your job brings you into regular contact with the press, please consider scheduling a media training session with the Media Relations Office. Training sessions are held throughout the year, as needed. Call 389-2523.

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