

Reporters and Editors and Producers – Oh, My!

How to work with media – Getting back to basics

Working with journalists gives attorneys the opportunity to provide accurate and informative updates about the latest issues and trends affecting the legal community. While we are all busy, it is imperative to understand that in today's 24/7 news cycle, reporters are usually working under extremely tight deadlines. When a reporter is seeking a source, it is probably needed a very short time after the initial outreach. They are often writing short articles for online publications and blogs and want to be the first to publish the news. Reporters usually have very little time to research, especially related to [breaking news](#), and rarely have expertise in your exact field.

Here are a few basics to keep in mind once you've been tapped for a media interview:

- Clear conflicts with the firm before agreeing to any interview.
- Understand the nature and target audience of the media outlet.
- Set the ground rules of the interview. Is it on the record? Off the record? On background? Make sure you understand the format before you agree to the interview.
- Ask about the story and interview questions and develop your message points in advance of the interview.
- Will the print reporter record the interview? For [broadcast media](#), is it live or will it be recorded and edited? If it is live, be sure you are comfortable thinking on your feet and responding off the cuff.
- Research the reporter and past coverage of related topics.

Throughout the interview:

- **Be brief and speak slowly.** Keep your answers short (8 to 15 seconds). The interview may take 30 minutes, but only 10-second clips or two- to three-sentence quotes might be used. Talk shows and feature articles allow for longer answers and more quotes.
- **Try to pause briefly before answering.** It gives you time to think while giving the reporter a clean sound bite and time to take notes. It's okay to stop and start over again, even if it's live.
- **Never tell a reporter anything you are not willing to see in print** (even if it's off the record). Be ready to educate the reporter on the case/deal/topic and its significance.
- **Use every question as an opportunity to tell your story.** Instead of a yes or no answer, expand on "why." Talk about what else can still be done, or discuss the impact of that legislation, etc. Use the opportunity to drive your message home.
- **Paint the picture.** Use colorful, descriptive words to paint the picture for the audience.
- **Sharing perspective.** If you are asked a question about a specific side of an argument or position that you and/or the firm don't want to be specifically aligned with, you should



Lisa Altman

Senior Vice President
Public Relations
301.943.9948
laltman@jaffepr.com

craft your response to offer an overview of each side of the argument/position: "On the one hand ... and the other hand ..." Or, "There are those who support this aspect of the argument because they are concerned about ... and there are those who support the other aspect of the argument because it would mean ..." The idea is to outline why this situation is relevant and what the impact is or will be on those to whom it is important without aligning yourself/the firm.

- **You don't have to answer a question just because it was asked.** If you are asked a question that you are not at liberty to answer or if it comes out of left field, it is all right to defer to topics you can discuss. "I can't speak to that point, but what I can tell you is ..." Go on to discuss your main talking points or respond with a question. The idea is to move away from the questions you cannot or do not want to answer by redirecting the conversation.
- **Don't hesitate to set the record straight.** "Bridge" the media interview from the question you don't want to answer to the answer you want to give:
 - I can't speak to that point, but what I can tell you is ...
 - Let's put your question into perspective ...
 - The real issue here is ...
 - That is a very good question, but what is most important to remember is ...
 - Before we move on to another subject, I want to add ...
- **Flag important points:**
 - Even more important is ...
 - There is more to the story, specifically ...
 - The main takeaway is ...
 - If there is one thing your audience/readers should know, that is ...
- **If the audience remembers one thing ...** Know your key messages before the interview. If your target audience sees the story and only remembers one thing about it, what do you want them to remember? This is your key message, and you should use every opportunity during the interview to make that point.
- **Always mention the firm name and ask if the reporter will include it.** Style guidelines vary by publication/broadcast media, but oftentimes, if you ask, they'll oblige.

For more details on preparing for a broadcast interview, read my previous blog, [Broadcast Interviews: Here's a Tip Sheet to Help You Prepare](#). Need assistance with securing and prepping for an interview? Feel free to reach out to [me](mailto:me@laltman@jaffepr.com) at laltman@jaffepr.com.