

No Tricks, Just Treats When Working with Legal Media

Engaging with the media might seem more frightening than a haunted house, but working with journalists doesn't have to be scary. As long as you're adequately prepared, engaging with reporters can be an enjoyable experience that significantly bolsters your firm's brand.

The key is to understand what journalists need and want for their legal news coverage, particularly as the state of the world and media industry continue to rapidly evolve. Notably, in the last seven months, the news has been changing so fast that what was important a few weeks ago – or even a few days ago – may no longer be significant to reporters and editors planning their future coverage.

Developing a Pitch

When pitching an idea to the media, think about what does or does not make a good news story. Reporters receive hundreds of story ideas every day, and sometimes news that you find noteworthy unfortunately isn't going to appeal to a bigger audience (e.g., too routine, too narrow in scope or lack of timeliness). Journalists look for pitches with issues their readers will care about and sources who can provide unique insights and angles into complicated issues. When reaching out to media personnel, think about how your matter, event, lateral hire or firm initiative fits into a larger trend or development, and provide this angle to reporters. Let them know of any distinctive elements or especially complex issues, and then sell them on why the item is relevant to their readers.

Rules of the Interview Process

Once you have secured an interview, set ground rules prior to the meeting or call about whether the conversation will be "on the record," "on background" or "off the record" – and know the difference.

- "On the record" means that the reporter may quote you and include your name and title.
- "On background" means the reporter may use direct quotations but will attribute them to "a source familiar with the matter" or another agreed-upon designation that is clear enough to establish credibility but vague enough that it doesn't reveal your identity.
- "Off the record" means the reporter cannot quote you or use any of the information you provide without verifying it independently. These types of interviews grant sources anonymity and are typically used in connection with particularly sensitive stories. Be very careful, however, in these situations. Despite having your identity protected, the conversation isn't really confidential. The best rule of thumb is to never tell a reporter anything that you are not willing to see in print – no matter what.

Generally, anytime you speak with a reporter, you are speaking on the record unless the



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reporter has agreed to a different arrangement.

After the ground rules are set, it's not a good idea to try to switch them during the interview. That could become too confusing for both you and the reporter in terms of what is public information and what is confidential, which could lead to something being published that you didn't want out in the open. Also, once something is said, it cannot be taken back, and it is fair game to be published. If you absolutely have to say something that should be kept private during an interview, confirm with the reporter before speaking that the upcoming statement is off the record.

Reporters are very unlikely to let you see a story before it publishes, but sometimes they will grant an interviewee quote review privileges if requested before the interview and if the publication schedule permits. But fast, tight deadlines are more of the norm these days, given the high volume of content being pushed out by publications, so not all outlets will be able to grant this request.

Keep in mind, though, that quote review is only used to confirm the accuracy of the quotations that will be attributed to you. It is not meant for re-writing for stylistic purposes and should not be misused as a fail-safe to fix imperfect statements.

Also before an interview, ask the reporter for the overall context of the piece and for specific questions that he or she wants to discuss so you can develop key messages to convey that are on brand with your firm. Repeat, reiterate and restate these talking points throughout the interview to increase the likelihood that your messaging is understood and incorporated into the article.

Conducting the Interview

During an interview, even if you are nervous, make a conscious effort to speak slowly and concisely, and focus on answering just the particular question at hand. Key messages can get lost in too much detail and technical information. It's not the reporter's job to make you look good, but you can make yourself look good by providing clear and thoughtful information.

It's also a good idea to pause briefly to gather your thoughts before answering a question. If you don't know the answer or don't want to or can't respond, be honest. It is okay not to answer every single question and legal reporters understand client confidentiality and permission issues. You can also try to point them to a colleague who is better suited to speak to a particular topic.

On the other hand, journalists look to lawyers for certain knowledge and experience. Reporters need to understand the full picture to write their best coverage, so don't be afraid to educate or set the record straight on particularly complex matters or issues. But also know when to stop, and don't keep talking just to fill silence.

Also, keep in mind that the world is increasingly becoming more digital – especially since most of us are now working from home – and short-form content continues to grow in popularity. Readers are accustomed to scanning feeds and digests for news that is delivered at a glance. When acting as a source for the media, it is valuable to be able to

deliver succinct and pertinent comments for those journalists who do not have the word space for long articles.

Post-Publication

After a story is published, be sure to let the reporter know if you are pleased with the piece and keep in contact to build the relationship. If an article contains factual mistakes or erroneous information, let the reporter know to fix it or print a correction. But recognize that, if there is any debate as to the accuracy of the material, the power over revisions ultimately remains with the journalist and his or her editor or publisher.

The fundamentals of working with the media are the same as they have always been, even with the changes in the world of journalism from the Internet and social media. Understanding these basics will go a long way to securing more media placements, strengthening your public relations initiatives and generating greater success for you and your firm.

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