

# How to Prepare for Media Interviews: Seven Tips for Boosting Your Confidence and Competence

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**L**ights, camera, action. Being interviewed by the media as a legal expert may seem glamorous, but if you don't prepare you could harm your reputation or at the very least fail to establish yourself as a credible source. In this TechnoFeature article, public relations expert Paramjit Mahli explains what reporters want from you and how to give it to them. Specifically, Paramjit's seven tips will put you on the path to media relations success.

## INTRODUCTION

Press interviews require poise, confidence and planning. You can't just wing it — if you care about your reputation. By nature, lawyers crave control. However, in media interviews lawyers must understand and accept that while they can control what comes out of their mouths, they cannot control the interview process, questions asked, interviewer's sensibility, or the story angle. Follow these tips to use the media to your advantage.

## THE RISKS OF AMATEUR HOUR IN YOUR MEDIA RELATIONS

Good publicity is literally something you can't buy. Law firms of all sizes realize this, and have become increasingly eager to incorporate public relations into their business development and marketing objectives. However, these efforts often fall short. For

example, many smaller law firms have office managers handling public relations. Larger firms often have their marketing managers handle this task.

Given today's economy, looking for short cuts is understandable but a mistake. A half baked approach to any form of business development will yield half baked results. Nowhere can such an approach hurt a firm more than when one of its lawyers talks to reporters without the proper training. Rookie mistakes include:

- Expecting to see the story before it goes to print.
- Trying to restrict the reporter's questions.
- Listing questions the lawyer will not answer.
- Setting a time limit on the lawyer's availability for the interview.

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## WHAT REPORTERS WANT FROM YOU

You cannot control when a story

will appear or how it will look, but you can exercise some control over the interview itself. Rather than flying by the seat of your pants, being prepared for an interview will reduce risk of being misquoted and ensure that you achieve your objectives — building a relationship with the reporter and getting your message across. When reporters conduct interviews, they seek:

1. Direct Quotes. Good quotes inserted into a story infuse it with a human voice and add a sense of life. They also ensure that the reporter will list your name and perhaps the name of your firm as well.
2. Background Information. The more work you do for a reporter, the more the reporter will like you. Reporters especially appreciate when you provide background information about the subject matter. This information may not make its way into the story, but it will help the reporter understand the subject matter and help them frame it better.
3. Supporting Material. Reporters use this information in the story, but not with direct quotes.

In any interview situation, something you say may turn on a lightbulb in the reporter's head and

make them want to pursue that topic down the road and consult you as a source so keep this in mind. Generally, when you perform well, you establish yourself as a trusted source for the reporter for future stories. Also, the reporter will be receptive to your ideas.

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**THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT**

As with any relationship in life, communicating effectively to the news media hinges on confidence. Reporters will contact you because you have something they don't — credible information relevant to a story they're covering. The more prepared you are, the more confident you'll come across.

For an interview to be a win-win, you must relay information effectively and with a strategy in mind. Even highly educated, knowledgeable professionals often fear gotcha questions, not knowing enough about the subject matter, or possibly freezing before the camera.

But reporters tend to be generalists and don't know a whole lot about any particular subject. They seek reliable sources because they add credibility to their reporting. Therefore, as long as you are prepared you should be able to answer all the questions with confidence and express yourself without trepidation.

**SEVEN TIPS THAT WILL BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE**

This checklist will help you approach any interview with confidence:

**1. Do Your Homework**

When it comes to preparing for interviews, knowing the publication's name alone won't cut it. To make a good impression, research the interviewer and the publication, including the audience of the publication, and the tone and style the reporter uses.

A law firm public relations professional can brief you on these and other aspects, especially when time is tight and you don't have time to conduct the research yourself. For example, after the Norvartis sex discrimination decision last week a lawyer in our public relations network had 50 minutes to prepare for an interview. To her credit she was ready and got quoted in a national business publication.

**2. Simplify**

Hone your messages to a few key points. Very little of the interview will be used. Therefore, you must be very clear on what you want to communicate.

During the interview, assume nothing is off the record. Never say anything you wouldn't want quoted because those are usually just the juicy tidbits that the reporter will use. Even if unattributed, they can pose problems.

**3. Answer Every Question**

Avoid using phrases such as "no comment." You must answer

every question or you will seem evasive. If there is a legitimate reason for not answering a question, state that you cannot answer it and provide the reason.

**4. Flag Key Points**

When you speak, use "flags" to signal key points. Let the reporter know you're about to say something important by flagging it with a phrase such as, "the key point is ..." or "it's critical to remember ..." These flags ensure that the reporter knows you plan to say something important, lessening the chance that they'll miss it while taking notes about something less important you just said.

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**5. Use Bridges to Take Control of the Interview**

Depending on the nature of the story, a reporter may ask you a potentially thorny question. You should answer it, but bridge it to a message you want to convey. For example, "Yes, but have you considered this perspective ..." or "No, but we've managed to solve that problem by ..."

**6. Use Time-Tested Storytelling Devices**

Lawyers are used to conveying only facts. But human beings relate more to stories than facts. Avoid using legal jargon

as the purpose is not impress the reporter with your legal knowledge, but to convey information that the readers will understand. Metaphors and anecdotes help to illustrate and simplify message points. Similarly, if you are passionate about your subject, it will help make a better story.

Remember that the reporter is the pipeline to your audience. Help the reporter tell the best story possible. Offer to help the report-

er once the interview is complete. Often, editors have questions requiring reporters to reach out to their original sources for clarification or more information.

#### **7. Be Ready to Go Off Topic**

During the interview, don't be surprised if a reporter asks something totally unrelated to the subject at hand, but still involving your area of expertise. They don't do this to trip you up but merely because they cover that subject matter and have in-

terests beyond the story at hand. They may already have their next story in mind. Prepare to answer any question. If a reporter asks you something you can't answer immediately, say you'll get back to them later and do so promptly.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Remember it's not the reporter's job to make you and your firm look good. That's your responsibility. Only by planning and preparing can you achieve your public relations goals.

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