TIPS ABOUT BEING INTERVIEWED BY THE MEDIA

by John Jay Daly*

The following outline is based on decades of experience on both sides of the interview situation. While it must be modified to fit your situation—and each interview setup is unique—the general principles should hold true.

1. Be prepared! In fact, be over-prepared. Know thy subject, backwards and forwards and inside out. Yet, at the same time, don’t drown the interviewer in your jargon. Talk plain, simple English. Spell things out. Remember you undoubtedly know more about this particular subject than the interviewer but don’t over impress him or her with your arcane knowledge. Talk in everyday terms, almost as if you were explaining a too familiar subject to your high school neighbor, without talking down to the interviewer.

2. Carry with you written backup material you can leave with the interviewer, yet avoid “drowning” her or him with data. Reporters are most often interested in simple, basic statistics—first on a national, then on a regional or local basis—they can weave into their story. Give them these in writing. Cover such things as the total dollar volume in sales this industry represents, or, translate it into contributions to the Gross National Product (GNP) or some measurable statistic. TALK in simple terms, like the number of people employed or the specific social contributions that are made. It’s often valuable to prepare excerpts for reporters that are taken from longer statistical documents.

3. Also try to carry with you some “quotable quotes” that the reporter can weave into the story that will “make it come alive” to the reader or to the viewer. It could be a collection of sayings uttered by famous people, even yourself, but if they are catchy and worth remembering they are worth saying again.

4. Try in advance to know something about the medium you are being interviewed by. If a newspaper, get advance copies so you can scan them and be conversant with columnists, whether it’s part of a chain. If broadcast, know what network it’s affiliated with. Establish as much “rapport” as you can in advance.

5. Don’t be afraid to interview the reporter so you can get a glimpse of where he or she comes from, how long they’ve been with the employer, whether they are specialists or general assignment, etc. This

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will help you relate to the situation better. Don’t assume all reporters are the same—they’re not.

6. Unless you know the reporter as a long-time personal friend you should never go “off the record” no matter how appealing that “offer” might be. You are never off the record. Keep “on the record” at all times. Remember how what you say will look in the cold light of print multiplied, irretrievably thousands of time. This will keep you cautious but should not cause you to freeze up and be unresponsive, just cautious.

7. If you don’t know the answer, or have to estimate or guess, do so but state this as an estimate or guess. If you promise to get back to the reporter with a specific answer make a note of it at the time and get back within his or her deadline. Ask him or her when they need to know the answer and the phone contact (or substitute) so you can give them the answer. Don’t promise anything you can’t deliver.

8. Don’t ask the reporter to send you a clip. That’s bush. Use some other way to get a copy of the article. It is o.k. to ask when the reporter expects the article will run—perhaps as a feature filed for later use—and thus you can know how to obtain the copy.

9. When it appears in print, if the article is at all favorable or shows a true touch of professionalism it’s proper to write a short note of thanks—either to the reporter or to the publisher. Avoid, if you can, berating the reporter for understandable errors. If you must write such a note, do so, but tear it up before mailing.

10. It’s important to be relaxed and friendly during the interview, yet, at the same time to be serious about the message you wish to impart. If you appear to be “uptight” or overly conscious of being interviewed, it will show up—unfavorably—in the result.

11. Remember that, for most reporters, you are but one of many they will “cover” that day or that week, so it’s your job to “stand out” and to make the proper impression. Relating to local area happenings or making what you have to say as important as reasonably possible is a good way to help the reporter with the story.

12. The goal—your mutual objective—is to try to impart a message that will cause a busy, preoccupied reader of that publication to stop and go through the full story. Therefore you should carefully consider what it is you want to say to the reporter so your essential message can be transcribed and translated so the reader will want to spend the time with the story.

13. Don’t worry too much that what you say is “old hat”—to you. Rather, try to couch your story in an interesting, down-to-earth fashion that
will have basic appeal to most readers. However, if your story is “new” or “different” or “revolutionary,” don’t fail to point that out to the reporter since it may not be all that obvious.

14. Sometimes, however, routine stories—particularly those that affect consumers “where they live”—can have impact. Remember that some of the old, basic appeals still have value. Most people want to learn how to stay healthy, to save money, lose weight, make friends, be successful at home and in business, etc., so anything you can tell them that will answer those basic needs should have some sort of reader appeal.

15. Reporters especially like to know what’s new, or different, or unusual, or trendsetting or paradoxical in a situation so if you can think of elements that will fulfill that basic curiousity, bring it out. If you can suggest picture ideas, do so.

16. It’s often helpful to mail to the interviewer (if time allows, if not, consider having the data dropped by or messenged for advance perusal) information that will help the reporter or interviewer come to the situation better prepared. Don’t count on it being read ahead of time for emnergeries and laziness enter into the situation regularly, thus be sure you have on hand at the interview extra copies of the same data you sent.

17. Material to have handy at the interview could include a brief fact sheet, a Q&A sheet which answers most common questions. Sometimes reporters like also to see reprints of other major stories, particularly from respected national magazines. They often will recast these or quote from them in addition to what you’ve said.

18. Suggestion: If the article is reprinted from a dated issue consider annotating it to both update facts and changes but also to localize it. This helps the reporter or interviewer when doing the story.

19. Even when you’re being interviewed by the print media and even if there’s no photographer assigned, be wary of your dress. Many reporters like to weave in “local color” and might spend the lead or other valuable spot commenting on your looks or appearance, even down to the minutest details. Dress for the occasion. If it’s an outdoor sportstype event and you’re participating as well as acting as publicity person, you wouldn’t wear business attire. Nor would you wear a tee shirt and loafers to a profound religious occasion.

20. If you get a good idea or after-thought following the interview, there’s nothing wrong in re-calling the reporter as long as you don’t “bug” him or her or call beyond deadline. Conversely offer your phone number to the reporter should he or she wish to contact you at a
different site when it comes to writing the story. Often their best questions come afterwards.

21. Broadcast reporters increasingly tape-record entire interviews, not for broadcasting but just for checking their notes. Be aware of this (some print reporters do this, too) and easily consent to their request. Of course be careful of what you say for the tape is “proof” you said it. Tip: If you wish to practice you might also tape the interview yourself, with the reporter’s permission, and later play it back to serve as a teaching aid. A playback can be a wonderful instructor!