

Being an Effective Spokesperson

The information you can offer to the public through the media is valuable. You may be wary of talking with journalists for fear of being misquoted or misinterpreted. But a reporter and a source, with mutual respect and cooperation, can produce an accurate and informative story.

In a journalist's world, some unwritten rules exist. For example, reporters constantly face impending deadlines, so it's important for you to promptly return their calls. And journalism is a competitive business. It's advisable not to discuss one reporter's work with other members of the media.

Let us know when you do an interview or get a call from the media. University News Service keeps track of media contacts with ISU faculty and staff. Call Ag Communications at 294-5616 to report your interview and provide an idea of when and how your comments will be used.

To prepare yourself when a reporter calls, consider these tips.

1. Develop your message
2. Interview time
3. The finishing touch

Develop your message

1. **Get the details.** Use the five Ws and H as a guide.
Who...what...where...when...why...how.
 - What type of interview will it be?
 - Where will the interview take place?
 - When will the interview take place?
 - How long will the interview be?
 - What is the reporter's deadline?
2. **Prepare a maximum of three key points.** Three points are probably the most you will be able to get across. Often only one point will make it into the story. Think of questions most likely to be asked and frame brief responses that make your points.
3. **Condense key points into notes or simple thoughts.** Personalize what you say. Don't just recite dry facts. Use visual words to create images in the listener's mind. If an answer must be technical, provide an appropriate analogy.
4. **It's not just what you say, but how you say it.** Even before the interview begins, take charge. Project an openness and casual self-assurance. It will carry through the entire interview.

5. **Practice. Practice. Practice.** Ask someone to interview you. Practice in front of a mirror, into a cassette recorder or in front of a video camera. Hearing and seeing yourself in action is the best way to identify habits you may have that will distract people from your message.

Interview time

1. **Provide the reporter information in advance.** This is your chance to educate the reporter before questions start. If you have a brochure or other written material, pass it along.
2. **Never answer a question in sentence fragments,** leaving you open to being edited and misquoted.
3. **Don't use jargon the public won't understand.**
4. **Illustrate your message with examples.**
5. **Admit when you don't know the answer to a question.** Simply tell the reporter you don't know. Then offer to get the answer after the interview.
6. **Bridge to your message.** This technique allows you to turn a question around so it can be used to make one of our key points. By bridging, you can answer any question with your pre-determined message. For example..."Yes, and in addition to that..." or "No, let me explain..." or "I don't know about that. What I do know is..."
7. **Keep your answers to 30-45 seconds.** If you're being interviewed for broadcast, it needs to be even shorter, probably 20 seconds or less.
8. **Once you answer a question, STOP.** There's nothing more dangerous than a long rambling answer to a question, because an editor can cut that answer up so it doesn't say what you meant.
9. **Have fun!!** Take deep breathes to relieve tension. Look at the reporter. Relax and enjoy the experience.

The finishing touch

Don't let your body language, or what you're wearing, distract from the message.

1. **Don't wear sunglasses or light sensitive glasses.** These make you look like a crook! If you're out in the sun and wearing a hat with a bill, push it back off your face.
2. **For television,** shirts and blouses of solid, medium-to-dark colors are best. Men should wear a dark blue or gray suits, button jacket and wear a conservative tie. Women can use more color in their wardrobe, but should stay away from loud patterns and big jewelry.
3. **For television, maintain eye contact with the person interviewing you.** Resist the urge to look away, or at the camera. If you're on a talk show, stay involved, looking at either the host or whoever is talking at the moment. You never know when you might be on camera.
4. **For radio and television, stay "on the mike."** That means not moving away from the microphone. Don't tap your fingers or jingle change in your pocket.
5. **Posture is important.** Sit or stand up straight. Place hands lightly at your sides.

In one word, the key to a successful interview is **PREPARATION!**

REMEMBER: Ag Info has a brochure with a reminder card for your rotary telephone file, call 294-2314 for a copy or download a PDF version online at <http://www.ag.iastate.edu/aginfo/WARC.pdf>