How To Be a Media Darling

There's no getting away from it. Reporters and legislators need each other. Here's a primer on your rights and responsibilities when giving an interview.

By Gene Rose

More complicated than the federal tax code and as mysterious as an old episode of the X-Files, the relationship between legislators and the media may never be fully understood.

It's a classic love-hate connection where trust, respect and cynicism often collide in a violent fury. At times it's a marriage made in heaven, and other times? Well, you get the picture.

The American Journalism Review has identified more than 500 reporters who cover the nation's 7,382 state legislators full time. Add the editors, news directors and media outlets that cover the legislature part time and there is easily one reporter for every 10 state lawmakers.

Reporters and legislators need each other. Whether lawmakers are seeking publicity for legislation or are interested in advancing their own political careers, they need the attention and recognition that a media report brings. Good reporters depend on legislative sources to provide information, background analysis or simply the quote that makes their story stand out.

Like any information swapped around the proverbial water cooler, the best stories are the ones that get talked about the most. Reporters want to generate those kinds of stories. They work hard to carve out reputations with their editors, readers, listeners and the people they cover. Their motivation is a good story. Their zeal and determination in obtaining that story is often interpreted as a personal attack.

Legislators need to talk to reporters. The public still gets most of its news from the media, so reporters are an important conduit to get out information about legislators and legislative activity. Focus groups also indicate people don't have time to keep track of legislative activity, so getting attention in the media is critical.

You know you have to do it. Here are some tips on making it easier.

1. TAKE TIME TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE MEDIA OPERATE.

First, take a closer look at the newspapers you read and the TV news you watch. What makes news? The PR firm Fleschman-Hillard says the media like stories about:

- Winners and losers.
- Heroes and villains.
- Criticism, conflict and controversy.
- Trends or change.
- Something new, unusual or different.

If you wonder why the media doesn't seem interested in your bill or media event, change your pitch so it falls into one—better, two—of those categories.

2. REMEMBER THAT REPORTERS HAVE IMPORTANT CHALLENGES.

Reporters have daily deadlines, must have their stories approved by editors, can only report what people tell them and are the subject of endless 'pitches' from people who want news coverage. You also need to know that they don't write the headlines or decide which news stories air. Those decisions are left to editors and news directors, respectively.

3. KNOW YOUR RIGHTS.

You have certain rights during an interview. For example, you have the right to:

- Know the topic. Ask what subjects the reporter expects to cover in the interview. If the interview gets into an area you are not prepared or ready to discuss, set up a time for the reporter to come back.
- Know the format. Is the interview for broadcast? Is it live or taped? Is it for a newspaper or magazine?
- Buy time. Just because a reporter grabs you when you are walking off the chamber floor, that doesn’t mean you have to answer those questions right away. Tell the reporters you need a few minutes and set a time for them to come by your office.
- Have time to answer the question. If a reporter begins asking several questions in a row, you have a right to answer a question...
before being forced to answer the next one.
- Correct misstatements. If a reporter states inaccurate information, say so. That misinformation could make its way into the story if not corrected.
- Use notes.
- Record the interview. Always ask the reporter's permission.

4 KNOW THE RIGHTS YOU DON'T HAVE.
- You do not have the right to:
  - Know the specific questions in advance.
  - See the story in advance.
  - Change your quotes.
  - Edit the story.
  - Expect your views to be the only ones in the story.
  - Demand that an article be published.

5 TERMINOLOGY TO AVOID
- You may be asked to talk “off the record,” “on background,” or “not for attribution” with a reporter. While there are standard definitions for these words, they often mean different things to different people. There may be times when it is appropriate to give reporters some sensitive information. However, never say anything to a journalist that you would not want to see in a newspaper, hear on the radio or see broadcast on television.

6 DON'T FORGET: IT'S A PRESENTATION, NOT A CONVERSATION.
- Keep in mind that every word you say to a reporter is fair game for the reporter to use in a story. Watch the officials on the Sunday morning TV talk shows. In many cases, they know the answers they are going to give regardless of the question they are asked! That's why we suggest that you take some time to think about the message you want to send before talking to the media. Remember, you are talking to your constituents, the general public, the two major political parties and your colleagues every time you are interviewed! All of these constituencies are reading the papers each day. Your answers to questions should either provide reporters with needed information, or be a thoughtful statement that sends a message to those you need to reach.
- In preparing for an interview:
  - List your key messages.
  - Anticipate questions, especially negative ones.
  - Prepare responses to the questions, based on your message points.
  - Know the reporter and the media outlet he or she works for.

7 RESPECT A REPORTER’S DEADLINE.
- If a reporter's deadline is 5 p.m., it does not help if you wait until 4:55 p.m. to call. The reporter needs time to write and craft the story. Find out the reporter’s deadline and schedule a time to talk that allows plenty of time to ensure your remarks can be incorporated into a story.
- Since reporters and legislators need each other, it's best to work toward a good relationship. In the long run, it will pay off.

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