Hugging a Cactus

Here’s how to make your next media interview a less prickly experience.

BY GENE ROSE

For some public officials, submitting to a media interview is akin to shaking hands with a cactus. For even the thickest-skinned, interacting with the spiny plants causes irritation and leaves marks, making the thought of another encounter uninviting and something to avoid.

The excuses to stay away from the media are often the same: All it can do is get me into trouble; I’m always misquoted; or They’ll just print or air whatever they want to anyway.

Those with sterling media reputations know, however, that even though an encounter with the media can be thorny, there’s a payoff for learning how to do it effectively. It can be a tremendous opportunity to get your message out, help shape public opinion and create public discourse on even the most complex issues—an important part of how representative democracy works, many would say. Here’s a three-step crash course on how to successfully embrace a cactus without getting stung.

1. Study it.

Just as there are an estimated 2,000 types of cacti in the world, media take on several different shapes and forms. Understanding how the various kinds operate, how their organizations are structured, and how they view their purpose is critical to being successful. Here are important areas of discovery.

- **Hierarchy.** The demands and needs of the media at various levels relate to their audience. Local media thrive on information that’s important to the communities they serve. The statewide press looks for compelling narratives that tell a larger story and will generate conversation and debate about specific issues. This approach is magnified many times over at the national level. Knowing a media outlet’s audience is an important consideration in framing responses to questions.

- **Medium.** Deadline requirements have blurred since most organizations now have an online presence where stories usually break instead of in the morning newspaper or the nightly newscast. One thing that hasn’t changed, though, is the need to respond to an interview request in a timely manner. Don’t wait until the end of the day. It lowers the chances of your views appearing in the story and gives others the opportunity to steal the headline.

- **Ideology.** The number of full-time newspaper reporters has dropped 35 percent since 2003, according to the Pew Research Journalism Project. Political activists and partisan bloggers are rushing in to fill the void, adding fuel to the country’s growing political divide. With some media outlets more vocal about their political leanings, it’s more important than ever for officials to understand who is conducting an interview and for which outlet.

- **Structure.** Take time to understand how media organizations are structured, and get to know the publishers and news directors. Reporters, for example, don’t write their own headlines, often have to fight editors to get clearance on story ideas, don’t determine the length of a story and have little to no say in terms of where their stories are placed.

2. Approach it.

Don’t run straight into a cactus with closed eyes. Approach it where it’s comfortable. Still, be prepared for some pricks. No one who works with the media on a regular basis goes unscathed. Comments will be taken out of context. Opponents will have their say. The framing of a story will not always meet expectations. But for those who can learn from such experiences and make adjustments for the next media interaction, these types of wounds will heal more quickly.

- **Learn some best practices.** Study officials who have good relationships with the press. Consider what they do and how they do it. Most likely they frame issues succinctly in two sentences yet provide sufficient evidence and explanatory material to demonstrate...
their expertise. Coming up with descriptive sentences goes a long way in helping a reporter put together a story that readers, listeners and viewers will understand.

- **Don’t force the issue.** Too many officials still believe that issuing a press release or holding a press conference will result in media coverage. The media, however, have too few resources and too little time to respond to every request. They quickly learn which releases and events deserve their attention. Consider sharing fact sheets, talking points or other informative materials that reporters can use for reference now and in the future.

3 **Embrace it.**

Ask reporters what they want most out of interviews and the answer invariably is “the truth.” Reporters talk to many people and develop a keen sense of when someone is trying to manage them. They know the difference between spin and sincerity.

- **Be knowledgeable.** Make sure you’re full of information about the subject of your interview. Too often a legislator will simply read a summary when asked about the subject of a bill. Reporters want to know the reason for the legislation, who inspired the bill and the consequences of passage or failure. For reporters, the story is about the issue, not the sponsor.

- **Be honest.** One of the hardest things to say in an interview is “I don’t know.” Public officials often feel they will be perceived as ignorant or unaware if they don’t know an answer so they try to dance around the question. Saying, “I don’t know the answer, but I will find out and get back to you,” however, helps to generate a reputation of honesty and integrity.

- **Be realistic.** Anticipate the questions of an interview, including the uncomfortable ones. “If you dread it, you’ll get it,” is an adage that is appropriate here. A reporter wants to understand all arguments for and against an issue. Knowing what all the arguments are and being able to articulate a response to them raises your level of expertise on the issue.

- **Be proactive.** Take steps to become a better interviewee. Practice developing descriptive sound bites—short responses no longer than two sentences or 10 seconds that summarize a position on an issue.

Taken together, these steps will surely make your next media interview less painful, more productive—and perhaps even enjoyable.

More Americans turn to doctors of optometry than any other eye care professional. With a four-year, doctoral-level clinical degree following college and extensive training, optometrists are licensed to correct vision, but they also diagnose and treat eye diseases. And as the need for new advancements in eye care continue, count on optometrists to offer the most comprehensive eye care.

Learn more at AmericasEyeDoctors.org