PPP-60

COMMUNICATING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

Sending a Clear, Concise, Consistent Message

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Introduction

As a society we expect the media to tell us everything we need to know about issues and events that impact our lives. But the goal of the media is to present the facts and report each story in a way that will help us decide for ourselves what impact it might have or what value it holds.

Reporters are seldom experts on the subjects they report; most rely on information provided by their sources. Much of what they write for print, television, and radio is based on what they are told by experts or others close to the subject: people like yourself.

The public expects the media to provide vital information accurately and fairly

It's the media's job to collect information

Reporters call you for information that will enhance their reporting, and seldom if ever will you find yourself in confrontation with them. Speaking with the local media offers you an opportunity to provide useful information and to convey the positive influence your organization has on the community. Your contribution to news stories reminds people that your company exists; that you employ local people and pay taxes; and that you are an integral part of the community.

You might be asked to explain the local effect of a specific national issue. It might be a story on Japanese beetles or on controlling mosquitoes to guard against an outbreak of West Nile Virus; or it may be a human-interest story on how your business is sponsoring an adopt-a-pet program in conjunction with the local humane shelter. You might be asked to comment on any number of topics—health, water quality, scientific advances—and how they affect your business and the community. Your participation gives you a voice in what will be reported to the public, and you may be the only expert who can explain the significance of an issue and the local ramifications it might have.

Some interviews can be difficult; they might involve controversial issues on which two or more entrenched adversaries are standing their ground. Reporters basically want your opinion and perspective. For example, do pesticides pose a risk to children when used in or around an elementary school? Do farm chemicals pose a threat to the local surface water supply? Why does your company use pesticides when there are clear alternatives? Express your views simply and concisely; help the reporter to present the story in a way that will allow the public to weigh the information and form their own opinions.

View working with the media as an opportunity. Your organization might exist just fine without them, but what if a crisis occurs? Building positive relationships with the media when business is uneventful helps establish rapport that will serve you well in times less fortunate.

Understanding that reporters play an important role in informing the public is the first step in building a successful partnership. Providing timely, accurate, helpful information both in critical situations and in the mundane can enhance that partnership and the credibility of your organization.

The purpose of this publication is to help you understand the role of the media in American society, how news is processed, and how to put your best foot forward during an interview. Your expressiveness—your clear, concise answers to reporters' questions—can help the media deliver accurate, interesting, educational information.

When Information Becomes Newsworthy

You have an interest in what is happening not only in your community but also nationally and around the world. Local news offers in-depth coverage of issues close to home. Headlines can range from property taxes to education to what can and can't be done in the community. National news, on the other hand, covers events of national or global importance; it might focus on what a senator is doing or saying or how the United Nations voted. Trade magazines, although national in focus, may publish information from interviews with pertinent experts in your community.

News must generate interest to produce a profit. Reporters and journalists are limited by time and space, so they must decide what is of greatest interest to their subscribers, listeners, and viewers—that is, what will attract an audience and hold its attention. The "attractor" captures the interested audience that in turn attracts advertisers.

The media's decision on what is news and how best to present it sets the tone of the story, be it front-page coverage with a big headline and a photograph or a brief mention in a newscast. How the story is "framed" influences what readers and viewers feel or think about a specific issue or event. Deciding what is news and how to report it is called *agenda setting and framing.*

Factors that determine whether information or an event becomes news:

- Does it affect a lot of people?
- Will the report right a wrong?
- Is the story/event/information compelling?
- Is there a human-interest angle?
- Is it timely?

- Are people talking about it?
- Will it affect my wallet either positively or negatively?
- Does it have entertainment value?
- Does it tap into the fears or aspirations of the audience?
- Is there a clear-cut underdog for whom we can “cheer”?
- Is it unique?
- Is there an appealing photo or graphic, or is there audio footage that will make the story engaging?

Speaking with Authority, Confidence, and Compassion

The news industry—television, newspapers, magazines, radio, the Internet—faces unique challenges. Journalists must research, synthesize, and write the news under time constraints uncommon to most other professionals. Most of us are unaccustomed to the rapid exchange of information necessitated by journalists with a deadline; but an understanding of media constraints will help you realize how your position may be compromised, why errors occur, and why scientific principles are sometimes reported inaccurately. Your genuine respect for reporters and their obligations will create goodwill, and they will come to rely on you as a source they can trust not only for accurate information but for courtesy as well.

The media have to know their audience, and they have to consistently feed the audience valuable information to make it grow. The bottom line is that the audience has to be interested enough to subscribe to a publication or to purchase it continually at the newsstand, or to watch the news consistently on television or listen to it on the radio. The audience has to be interested; it’s really all about advertising revenues tied to reading, viewing, and listening. Ratings ultimately govern what advertisers and other contributors will pay.

Reporters have to supply all the facts, knowing that their story will get condensed into a 15-second television or radio sound bite. In most cases, short stories have more appeal, so the media try to produce brief news items that not only grab the audience’s attention but also foster understanding.

The journalist’s age, education, and experience influence how a story is reported. Journalists hired into small media markets may be starting their first job after college—or high school—and the disparity in education and experience between these individuals and seasoned professionals definitely affects how the news is presented. Interpretation of complex scientific, medical, political, and/or social topics varies, depending on the reporter’s credentials.

Good reporters, experienced or not, rely on experts to provide the facts and put them into context. They often must break through scientific jargon and condense mountains of information just to pique and maintain public

interest. You can help by presenting the facts as simply as possible when you are interviewed.

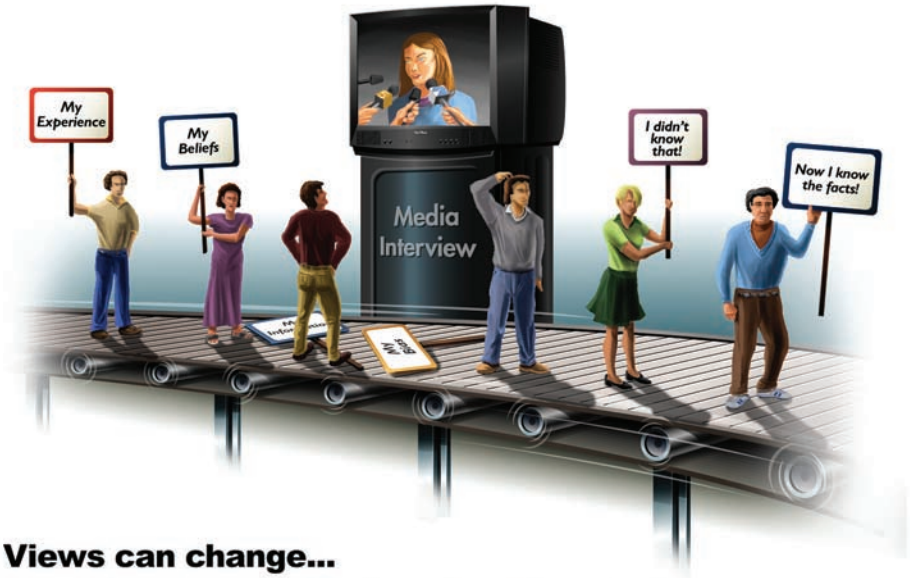
Reporters struggle continually to meet deadlines. There is fierce competition among newspapers, radio and television stations, and trade publications to be the first to report breaking news or exclusive stories, but some contend that the scoop is not nearly as vital as reporting the story completely and accurately.

The goal of most reporters is to present a balanced news report. Generally, they interview people on each side of an issue and present the facts so that the public can draw their own conclusions. But when a tight schedule or an imminent deadline prevents it, reporters have to choose between dropping a story and reporting it without input from all perspectives.

Reporters need fast and accurate information from reliable sources

Why Talk to Them?

The question often arises, Why would I want to subject myself to a media interview? Well, for one thing, if you've done your homework it is an opportunity to have your message heard. It is a way to reach the public, and it's free advertising! Speaking with the media allows you to help set the public agenda. The public relies on professional opinions for answers to media questions, and you're the professional!



Views can change...

You have an opportunity to help people make informed decisions

Express your own opinions or the position of your organization to raise public awareness of the topic, issue, or problem at hand; share important facts with the public to prevent or squelch unsubstantiated or false information. This enhances your own public image and that of your business or organization; and in certain situations it may allow you to publicly defend yourself and set the record straight. Refer reporters to other experts who may be able to answer questions that you cannot.

Interviews Start with *Your* Questions

Not everyone is cut out to deal effectively with the media, and you must decide for yourself whether granting an interview is the right thing to do. Many professionals mistakenly believe that "being interviewed" just means answering questions, but actually it requires thorough preparation.

When you are contacted by the media, ask questions and write down the name of the caller and his affiliation. In deciding whether you will or will not participate, keep in mind that you will be speaking as an expert *through the reporter* to a larger audience. If you choose to be interviewed, ask for time to collect your thoughts and return the call. Then take a few minutes to organize what you want to say, but respect the deadline implicitly. Offer your perspective clearly, concisely, and engagingly.

Ask the reporter questions such as the following.

What questions will you be asking?

Good reporters will explain what kind of information they expect from you. They want to deliver an accurate report from various perspectives in a way that will capture their audience, so jot down their questions and take the time to prepare your answers.

Do not let the prestige of being asked for an interview cloud your judgment; decide in all honesty whether you should speak to the reporter or decline the opportunity. The media will respect your decision if you tell them that you really are not knowledgeable on a subject.

Whom do you represent, and why are you doing this piece?

If you are unfamiliar with a reporter who contacts you, ask whom he or she represents and take the time to confirm the response. If you recognize the affiliate as a fringe publication noted for misquoting or otherwise misrepresenting its sources, you might want to decline the interview. It is important to know if there is an agenda already in place, i.e., whether the reporter expects you to put the nail in the coffin or whether the interview could turn hostile. Don't put yourself in a position to be used—or abused!

Who is the audience?

It is important to know your audience and to understand how they already feel about the subject at hand. Are their opinions valid? Is there a general misunderstanding that needs to be cleared up? Will they be expecting you to reinforce their beliefs or to counter their argument? You might reach a group of 18-year-olds with one approach, but a middle-aged or senior audience might require a different slant.

Will others be interviewed?

It may be important to know if the reporter will be consulting others on the issue as well. Maybe you are the only person being interviewed, but in most cases individuals with various points of view are asked to comment. In other cases multiple sources within an organization may be contacted.

It is important to know who has been or may be interviewed from your own organization, particularly if your firm has a press liaison whose job is to coordinate interviews with the media. Knowing who will be interviewed—both inside and outside your own organization—often reveals the true intent of the reporter and may influence your decision to participate or to decline the invitation.

Have you followed our established procedures for securing interviews?

In large organizations there may be specific procedures for assisting the media. If that is the case with your firm, politely ask the reporter to follow protocol.

What is your deadline?

Most television and radio reporters work on stories that will be broadcast the very same day, so they need a quick interview. Those covering breaking news need immediate, straightforward information. If you cannot accommodate them, refer them to someone who can answer their questions factually and quickly.

Do you expect to consult with me continually as a source for background information, and do you intend to quote me?

Journalists don't always conduct interviews just to get information they can quote, so make sure you know whether the reporter expects to use you as a contact source, a background source, or a main source.

Contact Source. There are times when it is appropriate to provide the names of other contacts rather than answer questions. Declining an offer to speak with reporters is justifiable and prudent when you are being asked to address something outside your expertise. When possible, suggest

individuals or organizations that the reporter may contact. If your referrals are good ones, this approach may lay the groundwork for future media interaction. Consider it an investment in good media relations.

Background Source. Reporters often interview background sources to gain a better understanding of the subject they are covering. Information gathered in context aids the reporter in asking more in-depth and pertinent questions, in composing the story logically, and in developing a unique angle.

When you are interviewed as a background source, it is very important to use everyday language; jargon and acronyms used by experts on the subject may be meaningless to the target audience. If there is time, prepare a one-page hard copy of your comments for the reporter.

Background sources are commonly unsung heroes who never see their names or photographs in print nor witness their voices heard. But if you provide information that is easily understood, you may end up being quoted or interviewed as an expert. Never state anything "off the record" because nothing ever is! Even if a reporter assures you that what you say will be kept confidential, don't risk it; and if you are not authorized to represent your organization on the subject at hand, refer the reporter to someone who is.

Main Source. You become a main (quotable) source when you can demonstrate your expertise on a subject and back it up with research or experience or both. You must clearly understand the fine points of the issue and be able to define its relative importance.

How much time will the interview take?

If the interview is for a feature story or one that doesn't have an immediate deadline, it is appropriate to ask for an appointment. The worst time to do an interview is when you have other things on your mind, so allow enough time in your schedule to answer questions without feeling rushed.

If you are asked to tape a confrontational interview for broadcast, it is very important to set a time limit for the taping session—and stick to it. Otherwise you may be asked the same question again and again until you give an answer the reporter likes. In most cases, 30 minutes is plenty of time for taping comments that will be edited for broadcast.

If you are short on time when a reporter calls, tell the person that you have time for just two or three questions and offer to schedule an appointment to discuss the issue further; then schedule an interview for a mutually convenient day and time—and make sure you keep the appointment. The reporter will appreciate your effort to accommodate the request and will feel free to contact you in the future.

Will the interview be live?

Having a microphone in front of you during a live radio or TV program can be intimidating. Ask the reporter for his questions in advance; and if the interview is tape-delayed, you may ask the reporter to repeat a question so that you can give a better answer.

Are you going to take photographs and/or videos?

If the answer is yes, ask yourself, How do I look? and What image will I portray? If the image you conjure is negative, improve your appearance before the interview, and for video footage pay close attention to your body language as well.

How much detail do you want?

If a reporter wants something concise, respond in as few words as possible. Typically, reporters look for basic information; but it is important to include in your response all of the information you deem crucial, regardless of simplicity and time constraints. If the reporter is working on a long news piece, she will ask for more detail and allow you to expound on the subject.

How much do you already know about this issue?

If the reporter isn't familiar with the topic of discussion, ask if she would like an overview before asking her questions.

May I suggest a location for the interview?

If the reporter is coming to you, choose a location where you feel comfortable. Suggest a spot that will enhance the interview: a test plot, for example, if you are discussing an agricultural pest problem.

What is the correct spelling of your name?

No matter how rushed the reporter seems, you'll both benefit by verifying each other's name and numbers prior to the interview. Ask the reporter to provide all numbers where he might be reached for follow-up, listing them in order of preference; ask for his e-mail address as well. These details become critical when trying to reach broadcast reporters who are continually on the go; and they can save you valuable time, help you meet deadlines, and afford you an opportunity to be heard.

May I provide names of additional contacts?

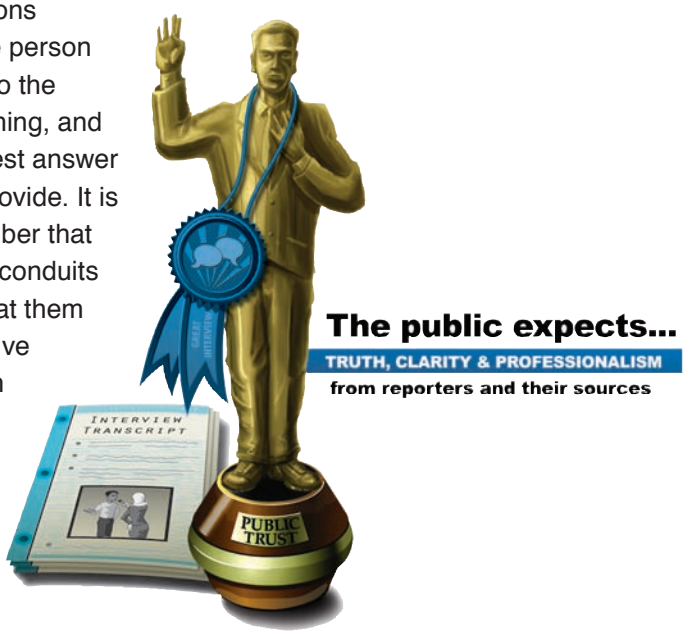
Feel free to mention others who might be able to contribute to the story; it will demonstrate your sincere interest and the reporter will be grateful for the leads. Perhaps more important, the reporter will remember that you were a generous contributor and call you again “next time.”

Is there something specific on which you want me to comment during the interview?

If the reporter wants you to comment on something such as a press release, an article, a legal notice, etc., insist on seeing it in advance. Never comment on something you are handed during the interview unless you are already familiar with it.

Delivering Your Message

Today’s well-informed public expects the person being interviewed to answer reporters’ questions clearly, truthfully, and professionally, so never underestimate the importance of a question. All questions are important to the person who is asking and to the audience he’s reaching, and they deserve the best answer you can possibly provide. It is important to remember that the media are your conduits to the public, so treat them with respect. Effective communication with the media and the public requires experience in being interviewed and answering questions. To effectively communicate your message, you must



- demonstrate knowledge on the topic.
- be enthusiastic about the topic.
- clearly communicate the core message.

If during an interview the reporter’s questions are not leading you in the direction that you believe is most important to the audience, take the initiative to interject information. For instance, after addressing a question thoroughly, add a transitional phrase and take 20 or 30 seconds to comment

from your own perspective. There is a host of phrases that you use every day to interject information into conversation, so use those that come naturally to you—perhaps one of these:

- It's also important to keep in mind that . . .
- Let me add that . . .
- You might also want to know that . . .

But do not use this approach to avoid answering the reporter's questions; the audience will resent your being evasive. Do use it to offer a valuable perspective that the audience may not recognize if you don't take the initiative.

- Go beyond yes and no answers, depending on the circumstances; that is, answer each question with the level of detail necessary to make it clear in context, but don't digress or run on.
- Back your statements with facts.
- Talk freely without having to explain every word.
- Use an analogy to make your point.
- Convey your personal beliefs or position on the subject if answering from your own perspective. If answering on behalf of an organization, you must convey the consensus.
- Repeat key points that the audience should remember.
- Suggest other avenues that the reporter may not have known to pursue.

One of the most important aspects of giving a good interview is to use common language: words that come naturally to you. Don't use jargon and scientific terms that the reporter and the audience may not know. Your goal is to communicate, that is, to raise awareness and broaden the audience's level of knowledge on the subject. Jargon and unfamiliar terminology may confuse the audience and cause them to miss the point. Both the reporter and the audience must understand your message: One out of two won't do!

There are no perfect scripts or how-to steps for answering reporters' questions, but it is important that you feel comfortable with your own responses. Using your own words and examples will go a long way in gaining—and maintaining—the media's confidence in you as a professional.

Your task is to educate the public

Reach them in a way they can understand

The Golden Rules

Following are additional points to remember when speaking with the media.

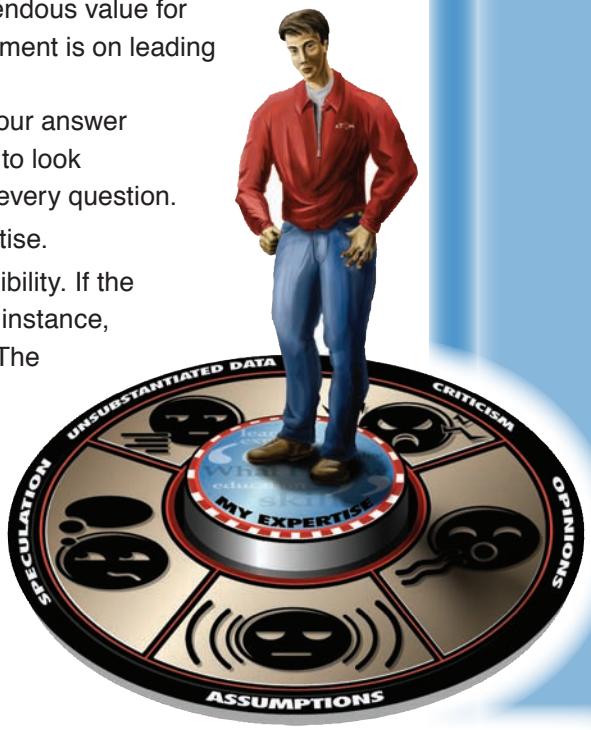
- There are unfriendly interviews, and there are friendly interviews, but what you must remember is this: You are addressing an "invisible" audience that deserves clear, concise information from your perspective. The demeanor of the reporter—professional or otherwise—never relieves you of your obligation to the audience.
- The media are the eyes and ears of the public. What you say to them does matter, and it reflects directly on the company, agency, or association that you represent.
- If you are unsure of your ability to deal with the media, then don't.
- Don't dodge the media. Help them if you can; but if you cannot, tell them so. And always thank them for calling.
- Return phone calls promptly to facilitate strict media deadlines. If they report that you didn't return their calls, it will have a negative connotation.
- Let the reporter finish each question without interruption. Interrupting conveys defensiveness and may result in misunderstanding.
- Answer the question asked, but lead the reporter in a different direction if you think something important is being overlooked.
- Always assume that the microphone is on and the tape is running, even if the reporter leaves the room for a minute. Never let down your guard.

Even comments made while equipment is being disassembled or as you are walking the reporter out of the building can be reported. Use these "informal" time spans to reinforce your key points. Assume that the interview is still in progress until all equipment is put away and the reporter is gone.

- Never fall into the common trap of starting your answer by agreeing with something with which you disagree! In other words, don't get hooked by the reporter's lead-in. For example, the reporter might say, We all know that college is overpriced because of wasteful overhead, so how can we look to the university for cost-effective research innovation? If you do not agree with the lead comment, don't say, Yes, but . . . . Instead, state your disagreement and then address the

question. For example, you might respond by saying, Actually, when you consider the multiple services provided by colleges and their value to society and future generations, college is a tremendous value for the money; and the focus within the college environment is on leading edge technology as well as cost management.

- You can typically take a few seconds to formulate your answer without appearing worried or evasive, but you need to look thoughtful during that time; and don't pause before every question.
- Don't talk or speculate on things outside your expertise.
- Use your scientific knowledge to increase your credibility. If the point is clearly science-based, state it that way. For instance, say "Science shows . . . " rather than, "I think . . . ." The latter can be misconstrued as personal opinion.
- Many times scientists try too hard to sound unbiased. For example, even when the vast majority of accepted work shows a common conclusion, they may feel it is necessary to mention every other study, data point, or speculation. Their answer becomes muddled because they try to include every tidbit of information. Remember that you are being interviewed for your expert opinion. Only when there is truly no definitive answer should you bring up other possibilities.



Don't speak beyond your expertise

- If you use hand gestures in everyday conversation, don't stifle them during an interview. Gesturing helps some people feel at ease and has a favorable effect on the animation of their voice.
- Avoid saying, No comment. The public may view it as a ploy to evade the truth.
- The importance of brevity is monumental. If you spend more than 20–30 seconds answering a question, you're babbling. Answer simply and get to the point. If reporters want more information, they will ask additional questions.
- Once you've completed your answer, wait for the reporter to ask another question. Don't let awkward silence overcome your common sense; i.e., don't repeat yourself or try to make conversation to fill the gap. It is the *reporter's* job to use up the clock!
- Watch the reporter's facial expressions to detect when he wants to ask another question.
- Never give a fill-in-the-blank response to a reporter's question. Complete each sentence. If you leave thoughts dangling, you may be inadvertently misquoted. It is difficult for reporters to shape their reports around incomplete thoughts, so guard against them; and never say what you don't want repeated. Assume that everything you say is on the record.
- Say it correctly the first time. Once you say it wrong, it's hard to make it right.
- There's a time to smile and a time to be serious. Make sure you know the difference.

- Courtesy helps the public feel more relaxed. Be polite and make eye contact with the reporter when answering questions.
- Be honest and forthright. People will sense your sincerity and trust you.
- Never discredit those with opposing opinions when answering reporters' questions: it is unprofessional. If you have information that refutes an opposing view, present it tactfully and positively. Never "attack" the other person.
- Don't try to impress the media. Your purpose in an interview is to get your message out. Think in advance about what you want to say, and jot down a list of key words or phrases to use in answering questions. The list should be memorized or at least unobtrusive.
- Never let your emotions override your technical expertise and common sense. Losing your temper turns the audience off and the media on—and you come off looking like the bad guy.
- Provide reporters your office, home, and cell phone numbers in case they need to reach you for additional comments or clarification.
- Assume that after you've made your comments your words no longer belong to you: they belong to the reporter. Do not insult the reporter by asking to proofread his draft. If he offers you the opportunity, that's fine; in fact, trade magazine writers often do. But never offer constructive criticism unless you are asked. If the story is complicated, you might offer to listen while the reporter reads his notes back to you for accuracy. Stress that you won't mind if he needs to contact you with additional questions or comments or for clarification.
- Relax and remember that in all likelihood you know the topic better than the person asking the questions—and better than the intended audience.

Tips on Working with the Media

Television Interviews. The following tips apply if you have a scheduled interview and time to plan your wardrobe.

- Wear professional clothes in conservative colors. Avoid stark white, deep reds, and blues as well as bold prints, stripes, and dots.
- Do not wear large jewelry since it can reflect studio lighting undesirably. Glasses can be a problem as well, so ask the set crew to make sure there is no glare before taping.
- Do not wear sunglasses or light-sensitive glasses.
- Women should wear only their normal amount of makeup. If you use lipstick, avoid frosts and bright colors. Avoid blue, lavender, and green eye shadow.

- Make sure that your shoes are clean—and shined, if applicable.
- Wear something that will easily accommodate the microphone; a jacket with a lapel is best.
- Assume that the microphone is always on, even during breaks.
- Look at the person asking the questions, and answer in conversation. It looks unnatural—even impolite—to address the camera instead of the person who is interviewing you.
- Do not look at people walking around in the studio. Stay focused on the person asking the questions.
- Stay alert even if the reporter hesitates: the camera may still be rolling.
- Use only those hand gestures and facial expressions that come naturally to you. Too much movement conveys nervousness.

Radio Interviews in Your Own Office. Ask the office staff to hold your calls, and close your door to shut out office conversation and background noise. Turn off the radio, television, intercom, air conditioner—anything that makes a sound. The reporter may ask you to say something before the interview begins to make sure the recording equipment is picking up your voice satisfactorily.

- Avoid the "ums" and "ahs" of audible thought that can creep into the voids as you consider a response to the reporter's question. These are distracting to the listener and may cast a negative impact on what you have to say.
- You may find it helpful to stand up and loosen your tie (if you happen to be wearing one) just before the interview; freeing the diaphragm and throat in this manner can enhance the quality of your delivery.
- Speak naturally and use proper English. Don't use words that you're not sure how to pronounce. Poor grammar and mispronunciation will undermine your credibility.
- Make sure you know the interviewer's name and how to pronounce it. This is especially important during a live radio talk show. Never risk the embarrassment of referring to the host incorrectly. It will jeopardize your credibility with regular listeners. After all, if you can't get the host's name right, why should they take you seriously?

Telephone Interviews for Radio Broadcast. When doing a live radio interview over the telephone it is important to turn off your radio. This is necessary for several reasons. If you are listening to the radio station on which your voice is being broadcast, a high-pitched squeal known as feedback may result. If the radio station is using a delay system, you will hear your own voice on the radio a few seconds after you speak; this will be disorienting to you and distracting to the radio audience. Consider the following as well:

- Ask the person conducting the interview if the telephone that you are using is transmitting quality audio. If not, switch to a different phone. Portable phones sometimes buzz or fade in and out as you move around.

- If you have call-waiting on your telephone, turn it off for the interview if possible. Otherwise, an incoming call may block the audio between your phone and the radio station, creating a silent interruption, that is, a gap in the transmission of your voice.
- Keep the mouthpiece of the telephone about an inch from your mouth and speak at normal volume to avoid distorting the audio.
- Focus on the interview. Find a quiet place where you can close the door to block out noise and distraction. Ask coworkers not to disturb you during the interview. If there is a second phone in the room, set it to divert calls, or turn off its ringer; turn off pagers and cell phones.

Cell Phone Interviews. Don't do a cell phone interview from any location unless there is absolutely no other way, and never conduct a cell phone interview while driving: clarity and safety are the reasons why. Ask the caller to allow you to find a place to pull over and return the call from a landline phone. This will eliminate the nuisance of your signal fading in and out or your losing it completely, and you won't have to take your mind off the road.

In-Studio Radio Interviews. There are several things to consider when doing in-studio radio interviews:

- Some microphones are more sensitive than others, so ask your interviewer how to speak into the one provided. In general, hold the microphone about the width of your fist (4–5 inches) away from your mouth, and always keep it directly in front of your mouth when turning your head from side to side or moving about the interview area.
- Avoid clearing your throat while the microphone is on. Ask to have a glass of water available, but don't drink anything that contains caffeine either before or during the interview (it dries the mouth). Use a cough drop prior to the interview if you anticipate that coughing might be a problem, but do not go on the air with anything in your mouth.

- Don't make noise; for example, don't wear jewelry that might rattle or clink as you move or as it hits hard surfaces such as chair arms, desktops, tabletops, and microphones. If you have a nervous habit such as tapping the table, clicking an ink pen, cracking your knuckles, or rocking back and forth in your chair, be particularly careful not to do it on the air: even the slightest noise may be picked up by the microphone, and nervous motion is distracting. Don't risk having these things detract from what you have to say.

Newspaper Interviews. Newspapers require more details and information than other media.

- Give reporters your business card to assure that your name will be spelled correctly in the article.
- Be prepared with background information and data on the interview topic.
- If you are not the best authority on the topic, ask permission to bring someone else who can contribute to the interview. In general, reporters welcome additional sources.
- If you will be photographed, dress in bright colors and avoid busy patterns as well as dark blue and black suits.

Trade Magazine Interviews. Respect journalists' commitment to fair reporting.

- Refrain from mentioning products by name. Magazines try to remain unbiased, and it puts the reporter in an awkward position if you reference specific products and services during the interview. Use brand names only when asked about specific products.
- Offer to provide photographs and other visual aids if the interview is being conducted over the phone.

Only Part of What Is Said Will Be Used

You might be upset when only a few lines of your contribution to a big story actually get published or when you get only 15 seconds of air time out of an hour-long taping. But you must recognize that news stories are seldom based on the views of any one person. So while your initial reaction might be, What! That's all he used out of all I told him? remember that he contacted you, that he considers you a key source, and that he'll call you again next time.

Good reporters research their topics from various perspectives—public, government, expert, and industry—and the truth is, only a small portion of the information you provide will ever be broadcast or appear in print. Even the most thorough reporter concentrates on the segment that he feels will have the greatest impact on his audience.

The Misquote or Out-of-Context Quote

The misquote and the out-of-context quote represent an important aspect of interviewing that professionals tend to forget or dismiss. Read, watch, or listen—whatever it takes—but find out how the information you provide will ultimately be reported to the public.

Let reporters know that you appreciate their level of professionalism, their fairness in reporting, and/or their writing style; and emphasize your availability for consultation on future stories.

What should you do when you have been misquoted or quoted out-of-context?

This is an important question because consumers tend to believe what they see in print. But one statement written out-of-context can change the whole direction of a story, rendering it misleading or wrong. Reporters often use quotes or comments from their sources to emphasize a point, and that's fine if they get it right; it is when they *don't* that the story can take a bad turn.

Misquotes and comments out-of-context are generally unintentional. Perhaps the reporter didn't fully understand or didn't write down exactly what you said. Maybe she twisted your words just a little bit to put a spin on the story and, in the process, shifted their meaning. Or maybe the comment in question seems out-of-context to you but clarifies the subject for the audience. It's also possible that the reporter took your comments out-of-context and therefore conveyed them incorrectly without realizing it. Regardless what the case may be, you have many options when a statement needs correcting, so think it through before you make the call.

Speak with the Reporter

If a misquote compromises your integrity or raises other ethical issues, you have a legitimate concern and it is both important and appropriate to contact the reporter. But, when you call, give him the benefit of the doubt; he probably was not out to get you, so assume that the message somehow got mixed up in translation. Most misquotes result from the reporter's misunderstanding of the issue. Explain your concern in detail and discuss what kind of follow-up action is necessary to correct the mistake. If you and the reporter cannot agree on remediation, contact his immediate supervisor or the ombudsman within his organization.

Write to the Reporter

If after an interview you fear that your perspectives will not be represented appropriately in the final story, do not hesitate to write a brief, cordial, follow-up letter thanking the reporter for the opportunity to be interviewed and restating your most important points. It may or may not make a difference in how the story comes out, but it will become a written record of your perspectives that might be helpful later if you are misrepresented in the report. If your perspective has been misrepresented, don't hesitate to write a letter to the reporter's affiliate to set the record straight. Use courteous language, get right to the point, and mail your letter within 48 hours of realizing the problem. A professional letter commands a response, whereas a letter to the editor either gets published or it doesn't.

Protection of Information Sources

Hardly a day goes by when we don't read or hear a story that begins like this: A government official close to the situation told us that . . . .
There is a code of ethics among journalists to protect their sources' identities. Sources sometimes have delicate information that they feel should be disclosed, but they know that going public with it could endanger their livelihood or their reputation—or worse. Unnamed sources can often provide valuable background information, give a story some direction, and name other sources who can verify their claims; so by protecting the sources' identity, the reporter has access to information that might otherwise be suppressed.

The United States Supreme Court ruled in 1972 that the names of sources used by reporters are not absolutely protected by the First Amendment. If a judge so orders, reporters may be legally bound to provide a source's name, to turn over all pertinent notes and documents, and, if subpoenaed, to testify before a federal grand jury or participate in a civil lawsuit.

On the other hand, many states have passed "limited shield laws" that protect reporters from having to disclose a source's identity. They are required to disclose the identity of a source only when there is a compelling

reason to do so; that is, when the reporter's information is clearly relevant, or when the information cannot be obtained any other way.

Most professional reporters will not base a story on one source's comments unless they have worked with the person for many years and know firsthand that he is accurate and trustworthy. The reporter can use leads provided by the unnamed source to contact individuals who are knowledgeable on the subject. Checking and rechecking is the only way to verify information.

Sending News Releases to the Press

Normally, press reporters contact us when they need information. But business, industry, government, and trade associations can initiate media contact by sending out news releases on information they believe is interesting and newsworthy.

News releases can be used effectively in generating publicity on any subject: new products or services, a change in leadership, employee news, etc. In other cases, an organization might use a news release to inform the public that its employees are volunteering time for a community project, or that the company is donating goods and services to help a local charity, or that it is deeding a piece of property to the community as a wildlife sanctuary. A news release that's exciting and unique represents a "free story" to the media.

News releases are important avenues by which the media can develop topics for their market. Research indicates that 50 percent of all copy in a newspaper originates as a news release. It's easier for reporters to use a news release as a starting point than to go looking for items of interest for their daily newscast or newspaper or for their monthly magazine. By doing a little follow-up reporting and adding a photograph or two and a few quotes, they have a great story that otherwise might have been missed.

Competing for Attention

While the information in your news release may be of great interest to you, it arrives as just one more sheet of paper on the reporter's desk. Many news organizations receive 200 news releases a day!

If you're going to spend valuable time writing a news release, do it right the first time. Remember, it's not how many news releases you send, it's whether your message reaches the public. Most news releases are tossed in the bin because they

- read more like advertising (media *charge* for advertising and run the news for *free);*
- contain hype words and phrases such as *revolutionary, the best, fantastic, terrific,* etc.;

- are of limited interest to the reporter;
- are not newsworthy;
- are not in an appropriate format;
- don't have lead paragraphs that quickly convey the content;
- are poorly written and contain numerous spelling and grammatical errors;
- leave out pertinent facts and details; or
- contain too much jargon or too many abbreviations, making them difficult to read.

Remember that you and the journalists you're contacting may interpret the term *news* very differently, much as scientists and reporters differ in their perception of *probability* and *fact.* Always try to write press releases in the style most commonly used by the media you're addressing.

Writing an Effective News Release: Less Is More

News releases that are well written and targeted for specific media outlets have a reasonably good chance of being used, whereas poorly written generic releases do not. And since news releases are intended for reporters and assignment editors, it is important to ask yourself what they want to know.

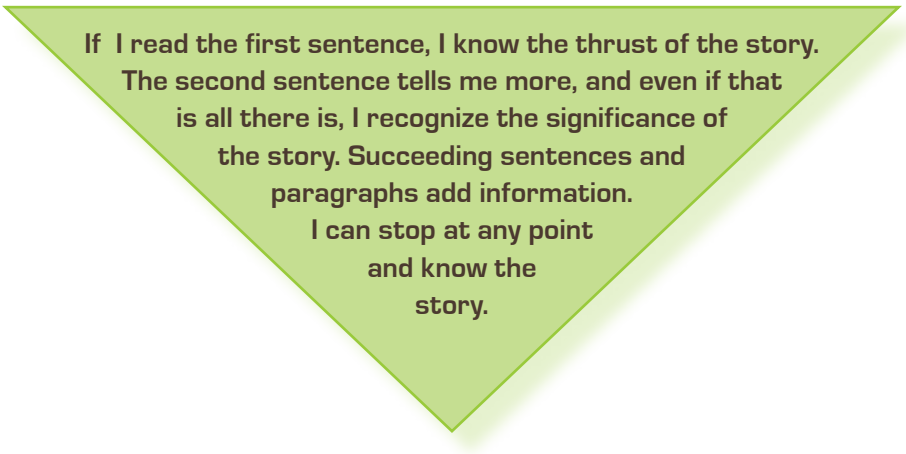
If the journalist doesn't quickly recognize how the information in a news release would benefit his readers/viewers/listeners, it won't make the cut. So if you can't write a news release that lends itself to easy interpretation, you're wasting the journalist's time as well as your own.

Make your press release newsworthy
By submitting a press release, you have total control

How to Write a News Release

Every news release is skimmed, initially, and only those that captivate the reporter get a second look. Try to limit each news release to one page (never more than two). Some organizations distribute a brief news release, initially, and write a longer version to provide reporters who call for more information. Consider the following tips when writing your own news release.

- Use the inverted pyramid theory to help reporters recognize the importance of a news release:



- Use company letterhead (8 1/2 by 11 inches).
- Type the words NEWS RELEASE in capital letters at the top left-hand side.
- Type FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE at the top right-hand corner unless there is a compelling reason for the journalist to hold the information until a certain time or date. The holding of a news release is called an *embargo* and should be used sparingly; if applicable, indicate the date after which the story should be run.
- Type CONTACT INFORMATION beneath NEWS RELEASE. The contact person has to be easily reachable. Preferably it should be the person who writes the release; but, if not, designate someone who is wholly knowledgeable on the subject. List a second contact in case the primary person is unavailable. Provide each contact's name, position, phone numbers (day and night, landline, and cell), pager and fax numbers, and e-mail address (but don't list the e-mail addresses unless you know that they are checked frequently for messages).
- Write in journalistic style: short sentences and paragraphs; active voice; present tense. The text should be typed and double-spaced.
- The headline should be centered on the page and should be a single phrase that conveys the main point of the news release. For example, a poor news release headline might read, RISE UP! Rewritten, it could read, ART MUSEUM TOUR TO RAISE MONEY FOR CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER. Which one conveys the clearer message to the reporter? Which one has a headline that says NEWS!

- The lead paragraph is absolutely the most important paragraph of the news release; it conveys the *who, what, when, where, why,* and sometimes *how* or *how much*. Using the preferred headline above for a news release on the child advocacy center, the lead paragraph can be outlined:

Dateline:	West Lafayette, IN, November 30, 2002
Who:	Local businesses
What:	Fund-raiser for child Advocacy center
Where:	Art Museum, 123 Main Street, West Lafayette, Indiana
Why:	To provide counseling for abused children under the age of 14
How Much:	$50 per person (donation)

The paragraph could then be written as follows:

> *Local businesses will sponsor a special evening tour of the Art Museum, 123 Main Street, at 6:30 p.m., November 30. A donation of $50 per person will go to the Lafayette Child Advocacy Center to fund counseling programs for abused children under the age of 14. For tickets call Tom Jones, (765) 123-4567.*

- The second and third paragraphs can add details such as quotes, facts, and figures. Imagine a reporter who has two news releases. One cites statistics, quotes experts, gives phone numbers for the experts, and provides the website for statistics used in the release. The other states basic facts but offers little else. Both may interest the reporter, but which one do you think the reporter would be inclined to use?
- The final paragraph of the news release, sometimes called the *boilerplate,* is one or two sentences that briefly describe the pertinent association, agency, university, or company. It can also inform the reporter where to go for more details, perhaps with web addresses or phone numbers for the experts quoted.
- If the text is more than one page, center —MORE— on the bottom of the first page and make sure the top left-hand corner of the second page contains the same contact information as the first page, along with an abbreviated headline and “p. 2.” Lastly, try not to carry a sentence onto another page lest the pages get separated; this is especially important in the last paragraph of the release.
- The pound signs ### or —30— should be centered underneath your last line of text to indicate to the reporter that this is the end of the news release; an alternative is to type —END—.

Sending a News Release

There are literally thousands of places to send news releases, so focus on the media outlets that would be most interested in your story. If it's something that affects a particular industry, a trade magazine might be a perfect fit. If it's something that might be of interest to the community (e.g., eliminating yellowjackets), a local television talk show might be good. Or, if someone has been hired or promoted, the local newspaper might be an ideal choice. But don't assume that your story is of interest to only one segment of the news media. Send it to all that you think might be even remotely interested. Let them decide what they want to run. Yours may be the next story they use!

Call the media that you've identified as potential recipients of your news release and determine who should receive the information. Call that person to see whether they prefer U.S. mail, e-mail, or fax. One word of caution: Sending news releases by e-mail is popular, but it poses some difficulties. A news release should never be sent as an e-mail attachment due to the risk of computer viruses; also, the person who receives it may not have software that is compatible with yours. Compact discs are more desirable.

If your news release is about an event that you would like the media to attend, send it two to four weeks in advance. This will allow the person in charge of assignments to schedule reporters, photographers, and equipment. Don't forget to take pictures, and video or tape record the event. The tapes can be used to complement a news release following the event if no media attend. Remember, however, that a news release after the event has occurred must be sent immediately thereafter to be newsworthy. Save photos and tapes for promotion of future events. If sending a photograph with the press release, always provide the date and location where the photo was taken as well as names (spelled correctly!) of the photographer and the people in the picture. If a journalist has to search for this information, the photo likely will not make it into the publication. If a reporter gets an angry call from someone whose name was misspelled or who was not identified in a photo as a result of inaccuracies in a press release, the journalist is not likely to publish photos or information from that source in the future. It is surprising how keen a journalist's memory can be!

Working with the Media During a Crisis

Communication during a crisis is one of the most complex forms of communication there is. Pressure cooker stories—pesticide spills, vehicular accidents, fish kills, lawsuits, workplace violence, fires, floods, etc.—definitely stir public interest.

People want information about a crisis as quickly as possible. They want to know what to do or how to protect themselves. Their only access to

pertinent information may be through the media, which places tremendous pressure on reporters to verify what has taken place and what harm it has caused.

During a crisis, however, loyal media contacts (e.g., fire, police, hospital personnel) may be too busy dealing with it to grant an interview. This makes it difficult for reporters to access information when the public wants it most; and this is where the organization involved in the crisis can play an important role in disseminating information. The media turns to the organization's spokesperson for the facts.

Handling a crisis properly means that bad news concerning your organization needs to come from you. Some organizations don't want to share bad news for fear of tarnishing their image. However, the public tends to like cover-ups even less than they like bad news. Stonewalling and partial truths that put the company image ahead of community safety trigger public outrage that may be more damaging and long-lived than the effects of the crisis itself.

The Crisis Communication Plan: Preparing for the Unexpected

"Crisis" is defined as a significant business or community disruption (that) stimulates extensive media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny may affect your organization's normal operations and may also have a political, legal, financial, or governmental impact.

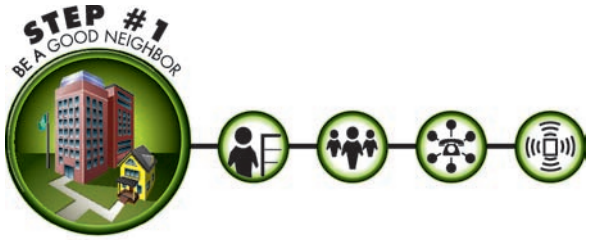
During a crisis, information is often transmitted live from the scene. News coverage may extend into weeks or months until the problem is resolved, and public confidence in your organization may teeter between positive and negative as the public hears and reads about the incident. Positive public perception may hinge on whether or not you are truthful and whether you have placed the interests of your organization above those of the community.

That's why it is important—in fact, critical—that you develop a Crisis Communication Plan, that is, a blueprint that describes how your organization will deal with the media if and when a crisis occurs. The Crisis Communication Plan is the communication component of an emergency response plan developed by industry and local services (e.g., police, fire, hospitals). Preplanning for an emergency facilitates responding to an actual crisis and dealing with the media.

A Model Crisis Communication Plan

The Crisis Communication Plan for most businesses is a one- to two-page document that outlines company policy on dealing with the media; it directs personnel to relay accurate up-to-date information first and foremost during a crisis. The following is a model that you may use as a guide in writing your own Crisis Communication Plan.

5 Easy Steps to Generate a Crisis Communication Plan . . .



Step 1. **Express your company philosophy on working within the community.**

General Principles. This organization cares about the community. We hire local people, purchase many of the products we use from local businesses, and have every intention of building an organization that the community will be proud to have in it midst. All of our operations are completed in a safe, professional manner.

We shall inform the public in a timely manner of any emergency or crisis that occurs within our operation. We will disclose the facts and make every effort to minimize any negative impact that the crisis may impose.

Step 2. **Designate and train specific employees to communicate with the media.**

Policy A. Company employees are not to speak with the media during a crisis unless instructed to do so by a member of the Crisis Management Team.

Policy B. A designated media spokesperson shall be responsible for relaying timely, accurate, up-to-date, and sensitive information to the media. All media and public inquiries during a crisis must be referred to the media spokesperson (name the person) for response.

Policy C. The Crisis Communication Plan will be updated annually.

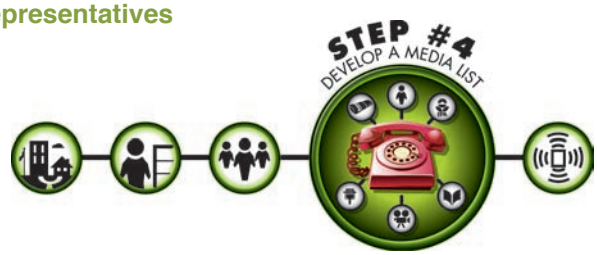
Policy D. The Crisis Communication Plan and the company's emergency response plan will be activated simultaneously.

Step 3. **Develop and train a Crisis Management Team to take charge during a crisis. Team members must be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.**

~~~ CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM ~~~

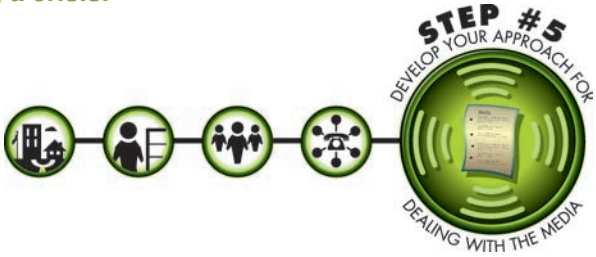
Order in Which to Call (Enter Names)	Phone Numbers and E-mail Addresses				
	Day	Evening	Cellular	Pager	E-mail
1. Primary Spokesperson:					
2. Alternate Spokesperson:					
3. President or CEO:					
4. Safety Director/Trainer:					
5. Department Manager(s):					
6. Key Employee(s):					

Step 4. **Develop a list of media representatives to contact during a crisis.**



~~ MEDIA CONTACTS ~~~			
Media to Contact (Enter Station or Newspaper)	**News Desk Editor**	**Daytime Phone**	**Evening Phone**
Local Television:			
Local Radio:			

Step 5. **Develop a step-by-step approach—a Crisis Communication Plan—for dealing with the media during a crisis.**



- Handle the emergency according to the organization's emergency response plan and simultaneously activate the Crisis Communication Plan.
- Notify the spokesperson of the emergency and what is currently known about it.
- Activate the Crisis Management Team through the spokesperson or safety personnel.
- Notify all employees of the emergency. Inform them that all calls are to be logged and that all questions must be directed to the spokesperson.
- Have the spokesperson review the facts and inform media contacts of the crisis.
- Keep the spokesperson and the Crisis Management Team apprised of all activities regarding the crisis.
- Provide the media only the facts that are currently known about the crisis. If a reporter poses a question that cannot be answered immediately, take his name and phone numbers and call him as information becomes available.
- Initiate a press conference if necessary. You may want to call a press conference to answer questions or explain details that cannot be easily addressed in a news release. For example, maybe you don't know exactly how the crisis will unfold, but you can inform reporters of actions underway to control the situation.

The Message Must be Clear, Concise, and Consistent

Respond quickly during a crisis. In the event of a life-threatening situation or an environmental spill, first contact the local Emergency Management Agency and ask their personnel to notify the general public. They have the capability to get the word out quickly. Then go ahead and contact the local media. If they are already on top of it they will tell you so.

During the initial contact with the media, you need to provide basic information: what happened, whom it affects, and what action the public needs to take. Provide instructions on meeting with your media contact person.

While these initial phone calls are being made, have someone set up an emergency crisis center where your spokesperson can address the media and where families of those affected by the crisis can gather. These should be separate locations, if possible, to allow privacy for the families.

Provide information equally to all media. Deal with the issue up-front to avoid misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the facts. Most companies have their spokesperson read a prepared statement to brief the media; after the

briefing, reporters are given the opportunity to ask questions. Be ready to handle the following inquiries.

- How did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- What is the risk to the public or the environment?
- How long will the risk last?
- Have the proper authorities been notified?
- Was anyone hurt or anything damaged?
- What is being done to control/correct the problem?
- Are there any special precautions that the public should take?

It is always best to tell the media that the information provided is all that is known at the moment and that follow-up information will be provided as the issue unfolds. Answer questions to the best of your ability, but don't speculate or address hypothetical scenarios. It may be helpful to have members of the Crisis Management Team present to help field media questions; they sometimes have the knowledge or expertise to answer inquiries that the media spokesperson cannot.

A useful preparation activity for dealing with a crisis is to *have scientific backup information at hand in usable form.* You may have mountains of support information, but volume can work against you if you have to try to locate it or sort through it on a moment's notice.

When answering questions, be sure to remember the following points:

- Stay calm and avoid confrontation. Never argue or lose your composure. If a question contains words you dislike, don't repeat them. Politely correct hostile or inaccurate remarks in your answer and avoid assigning blame.
- If anyone has been injured or killed, first express your sincere personal condolences; your expression should be one of caring, not guilt.
- Make sure your answers are easy to understand. Don't use technical terminology or jargon unless you are prepared to explain it.
- Don't be led into unfamiliar territory. Keep the interview on track by emphasizing the points that you want to make.
- Never say, No comment. It only invites speculation on what you haven't said.
- Don't say anything "off the record." There is no legal obligation for a reporter to keep anything off the record. If you have a comment that you don't want publicized, don't say it.

Conclusion

The framers of the U.S. Constitution clearly understood the importance of the media, freedom of speech, and an uncensored press in a democracy. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

A democracy needs an open and free press unhindered by government regulations and legal challenges. The media in most situations cannot be told what to say, how to present it, what words to use, or what to cover as news. The media are free to disseminate information. This is important because citizens must trust that the information they receive is accurate and uncensored.

The media report international, national, regional, and local events and play a critical role in educating the public. They deliver information that we need to act on and information that we need in order to better understand the world in which we live. Their reporting contributes to and influences government policies, industry practices, and public perception.

You don’t have to know everything to be a source of information

It is the media who decide what fraction of available information is presented, how an issue is portrayed (e.g., confrontational, fairly, balanced), and the amount of resources devoted to a specific item. The media act as information filters. They search for information, sift through it, and relay to the public what is currently newsworthy. News is filtered through the camera lenses and pens of those who bring the information into our living rooms, workplaces, and vehicles.

Since news outlets have limited amounts of airtime and page space, only a small fraction of a day's events is ever presented. Reporters and editors must decide when information becomes news based on what is capturing public interest and what is important at the moment.

It's a judgment call as to when information is news and what is of interest to the reader or listener. For example, trade magazine editors might list ten items they deem important, but they may have only enough space to cover seven items—so three items don't make the cut. However, that doesn't mean that the information in the excluded three is unimportant; it just means that somebody had to decide what to cut, and did. Another person or committee might choose to use all three and cut a different three. It's a judgment call.

What makes the news is reflective of the reporter. A reporter might sit through a three-hour county commissioners' meeting, but it would be ludicrous for him to report everything that was addressed. Instead, she must consider what topic is most important and to whom, what the public needs to know about it, and where to refer them for additional information.

A television reporter might allocate 90 seconds to a story, while a newspaper might publish it on the front page of the local section. In essence, it is the reporter who decides what is newsworthy. Thus, the media decide what we read in newspapers and magazines, what we see on TV, and what we hear on the radio. They turn information into news!

Working with the media does not have to be stressful or confrontational. Most reporters are professional, ethical journalists: their job is to report the news. The person who agrees to give an interview—that's you!—has to understand how best to respond to their request for information.

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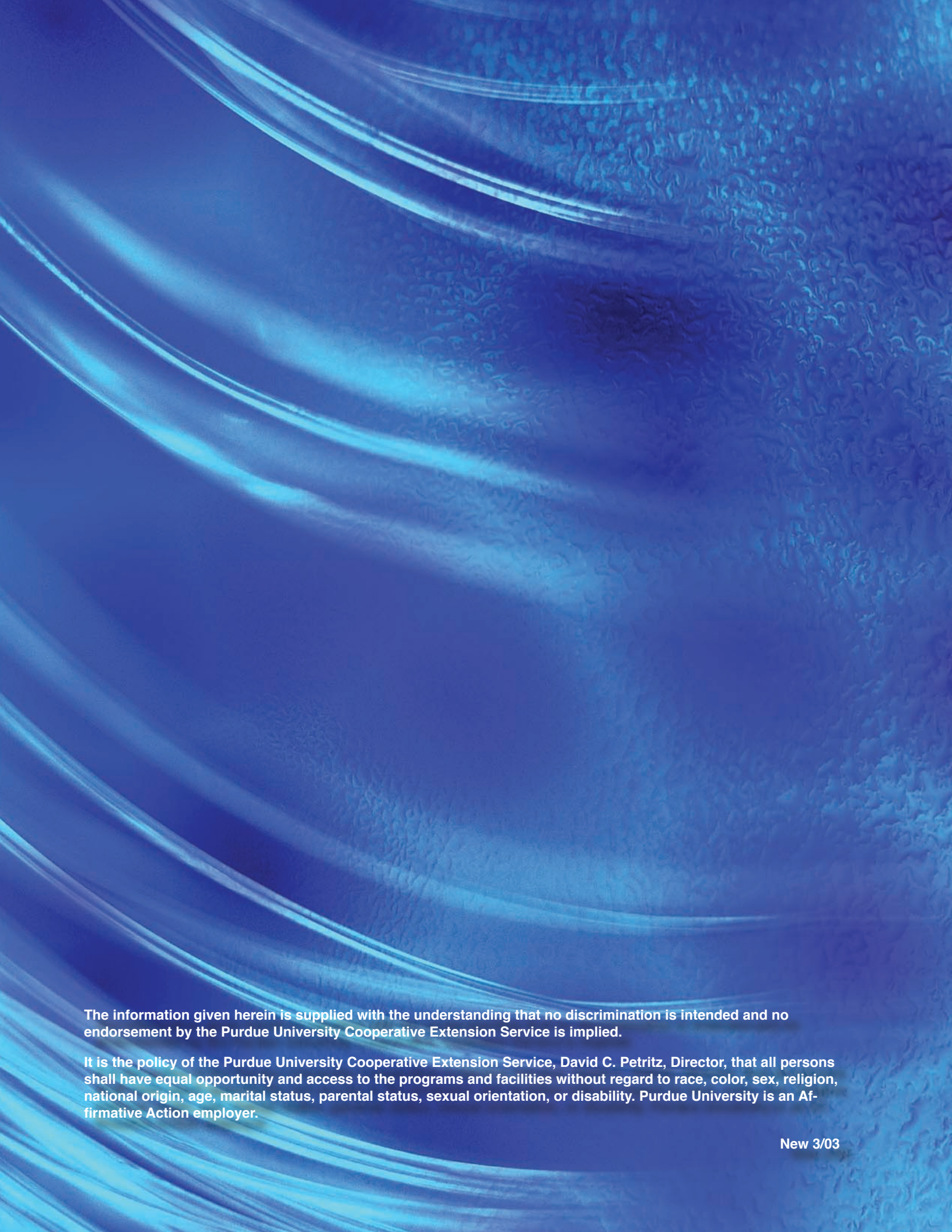

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