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## **MEDIA STRATEGIES: HOW TO KNOW WHAT REPORTERS WILL ASK**

Will you be prepared if and when the media calls? That's a question even seasoned professionals ask from time to time. Getting a reporter's call can make anyone feel anxious. But if you feel prepared, you'll be far more likely to take advantage of an opportunity for visibility.

One of the secrets to success is to be armed and ready by anticipating what reporters will ask. Even if you have someone in your organization that is preparing "talking points" for your interview, you may feel blindsided if the talking points don't match the questions. The key to building confidence is understanding how reporters think about stories and how you can provide them with what they need.

Recently I had a chance to interview Hillary Clinton on Boston's NPR news station, WBUR. Filling in as the morning news host for a few weeks reminded me how little time reporters and hosts often have to prepare. We thought the interview would take place on Friday that week. Monday morning, I walked in the door and they said the interview was taking place in five minutes! I hadn't read her new book. I hadn't even read the back cover or the inside flap!

So I sat down with the news director and wrote up 10 or 12 questions that were "top of mind." These were, in retrospect, the obvious questions that anyone would want to ask. Why did she write the book? Was she running for president? Why not? How does she handle her critics? What impressed me was that she had a good answer for all of those questions. Did she know what I was going to ask ahead of time? Of course not! Even I didn't know. She sat down and thought about the likely questions that anyone would ask and prepared well in advance for the dozens of interviews she would do over those few weeks.

Anyone giving media interviews can prepare the way Hillary did, even if you don't have a press agent or public relations firm. Write down the questions in advance that you are often asked on the topic. Don't write down self-serving questions, or questions you would like to be asked. Think of the questions you don't want to answer, so you're prepared for anything. Remember, you never want to say no comment – it makes you sound guilty as charged. If there is something you don't want to talk about, explain why you can't talk about it. That will satisfy most reporters.

Another secret to success is to get a lot of practice. Hillary Clinton has had so much practice that she now handles interviews flawlessly. Regardless of whether you agree with her politics, it's easy to see why she was elected to the U.S. Senate and remains at the top of her game.

While you may not be as in demand as Mrs. Clinton, it's smart to take a cue from her when speaking with the press. You may think you're totally prepared to answer reporters' inquiries off-the-cuff – you can “wing it” with the best of them. But, if you have taken time to write down the questions, and prepare your answers, you'll handle anything that comes your way.

Like most successful businesspeople, your hectic schedule probably doesn't allow for a lot of practice time. There are some techniques to help you prepare for those media calls when they start coming in. If you can appear confident, knowledgeable and ready at the asking, you'll make your way into journalists' rolodexes, and you'll get lots of press, for free!

### **Be Available**

It's important to remember that reporters are not experts in any one field. Deadline pressures determine how well they can prepare prior to an interview. Usually, they learn just enough to get by. Always return their calls immediately and be a helpful and informative resource, whether you make it on camera or not. You'll be known as the media's “go to person” and you'll be at the top of the list next time they need a source.

Reporters want:

- Timely stories
- Trends
- Snappy sound-bites
- Strong opinions
- Fresh angles
- New information
- Broad appeal
- Help with elements

### **Play the Reporter**

Make sure that you're informed about current events. Providing memorable examples will help add value to the interview. Write out ten questions that you might be asked. Remember – these aren't the questions you want to be asked – but the questions you expect to be asked during the interview. Anticipate the tough ones.

Work on crafting your message. Think of three points you'd like to make. Use colorful language, interesting analogies, facts and figures. Now answer those questions as simply, and as succinctly as you can.

## **Build Credibility with the Press**

Most members of the media don't mean to be rude. They're simply doing their job when they ask tough questions. They are trying to uncover the real issues by digging beneath the surface. Never say "no comment" – it will appear as if you're secretive or have something to hide. Don't appear defensive. Prepare ahead of time with thoughtful answers, and:

- Always tell the truth
- Be open about underlying issues
- If you can't answer, say why
- If you don't have the information at hand, offer to track it down as soon as possible

Field sensitive or controversial questions as completely as you can, and make the interviewer really understand where you're coming from.

By following these strategies, you'll build credibility with the press – an invaluable commodity. Like Hillary Clinton, you'll be ready to catch any curveball that's thrown your way. When reporters need to do an interview on a very tight deadline, it will be you they call again and again.