

MYTHS ABOUT WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Talking with media representatives can sometimes be nerve racking, but if you're prepared and focused, the experience can be less painful. RCC Marketing & Community Relations offers the following information to help make your next encounter with a member of the press a more positive experience.

MYTH #1 – The media is out to get us.

The reality is there might be a few reporters out there who have a chip on their shoulders. They're looking for those juicy "agency/school/business-gone-bad" stories. If you encounter one, don't take it personally. If you sense you are being set up for an ambush interview, stop and plan how to best handle it. Don't go into it alone or unprepared.

The majority of reporters are hard working, honest people who strive for balance in a story. Good reporters don't use a story to share their bias or opinion. They'll interview as many sides of an issue as they can and present it from there.

MYTH #2 – Reporters ask really dumb questions.

Successful reporters learn as much as possible about the issues surrounding their beat. So why do they ask really simple (i.e. dumb) questions? They may already know the answer, but they are trying to get it in your words for their readers or listeners.

They could take it off the news release, but it's your words that make a story unique. Answer their questions honestly and in simple terms. It will be helpful to people who don't have much knowledge of your department or program. You may also use the question as an opportunity to discuss what you want to say.

MYTH #3 – I have to talk like a bureaucrat.

When working with the media, you *are* a representative/spokesperson for the college. But there is no need to use "bureaucratese" or acronyms that the public probably won't understand. It's fairly pompous and tends to put the average person off.

Think about it this way: You want an auto mechanic to explain your car's problem in layman's terms, or your doctor to explain your medical condition using a vocabulary you can understand so that you can make an informed decision about your vehicle or medical care. The public wants the same straight talk when it comes to education.

MYTH #4 – It's possible to go off the record.

It's possible but not guaranteed. Going off the record is a leap of faith and based on a trusting relationship with a reporter. Few of us reach that level of trust. The bottom line is that anything you say during an interview is fair game. If not in this story, it can show up in another. The best advice is never go off the record. If you don't want to see it in print, don't say it.

MYTH #5 – The reporter should let me check the story before it runs.

The reality is that most reporters dislike being asked for editorial rights on a story. They (rightfully) view it as a form of censorship. On rare occasion, writers may ask you to check a story – especially if they are unsure of their facts.

MYTH #6 – Flippant comments never end up in print or on the air.

The reality is that glib or facetious comments, especially from someone official, are highly printable and will almost always end up in print or aired on television/radio. Scores of people have experienced the horror of picking up the paper and seeing how bad their cute (at the time) comment looks in plain old black and white.

MYTH #7 – They should print (or broadcast) everything I say.

There isn't enough airtime or room in a newspaper to include everything you say. It's up to the reporter to determine which portions of your conversation are of interest to the reader.

MYTH #8 – I have to have an answer for everything.

It's perfectly acceptable to say that you don't know the answer to a question. Refer the reporter to someone who knows the answer, or offer to research it. If you don't know, don't try to bluff your way through. Remember, even if the camera or tape recorder is running and the reporter is just staring at you, you don't have to fill in the blanks.

MYTH #9 – The media is on the phone, and I'm alone in this.

If you don't feel prepared at that moment to talk to the reporter, just say it isn't a good time for you and ask if you can call back. Find out what the interview is about. Also, ask about deadlines. Reporters usually work on a tight schedule. Don't be surprised to find out that they'll need to hear back from you within an hour. During the time you've gained, you can pick up a phone and call someone to help you clarify your thoughts on the subject and identify your key messages. Feel free to call Marketing & Community Relations for help.

Most importantly, if you've promised to call back, keep your word. Failing to call back will send a message to the reporter that you and those you represent aren't trustworthy. Never say "no comment" and hang up the phone. The words "college officials refused to comment" look really bad in print.

Of course, there are times when it's appropriate not to go on the record. In a crisis (e.g., accident, natural disaster, threat, litigation, fire, personnel issue, police investigation), the call should be handled by a single college spokesperson. Simply explain that it would not be appropriate for you to comment and direct them to the President's Office or Marketing & Community Relations.

NOTE: If the media asks questions about a specific student, refer the call to the director of Enrollment Services or the dean of Student Services.

MYTH #10 – The reporter should be smart enough to find the one or two key messages.

If you haven't bothered to focus on what your key or important messages are, why should the reporter? Before doing an interview, ask yourself the following: If I could only see two points covered, what would they be? Keep those key messages in mind throughout the interview. Start with them and reiterate the key message(s) during and at the end of the interview.

MYTH #11 – You should engage reporters in verbal duels.

We usually try for feelings of goodwill and cooperation during interviews. This is rarely achieved by getting into acrimonious debate. Your "opponent" will ultimately have the final word – in print or on the air. You will win the battle but lose the war. Remember the old saying: "Never engage in a war of words with someone who buys ink by the barrel." The same could be said about those who have access to the airwaves.

MYTH #12 – Being interviewed is the worst thing in the world.

Nope. It'll only feel that way if you're not relaxed, focused and prepared.

Questions? Call Margaret Bradford, director of Marketing and Community Relations, 956-7088.