10 Tips for Handling Inquiries, Interviews

Regardless of whether you think talking to the media falls under a PI’s job description, at some point in your career a reporter may call or your institution may ask you to speak to the media. Whether the reporter seeks background on an in-depth examination of a science or societal trend, a sound bite for breaking news coverage, or is focusing an unwanted spotlight, it is in your best interest to be prepared.

Here are 10 ways to do that:

1. Know who is calling and why. Get the reporter’s name and media outlet. Find out why the reporter asked you for an interview, and try to get a sense of the his or her focus or angle. If you feel you are not the best person to address the subject, say so.

2. Buy time to prepare. Confirm the reporter’s deadline. Set a time to speak within that time frame to allow you to the gather your thoughts. Resist the temptation to wing it.

3. Know the audience. With the reporter’s outlet, angle, and audience in mind, consider both your message and the best way to convey it to that particular audience.

4. Know your message and stay on it. Don’t leave yourself open to misinterpretation. Create a headline in advance and make it the lead point. Think of different ways to communicate that point, and be sure reinforce it in every response.

5. Avoid jargon and technical language. You are not talking to your peers. Overuse of specialized terms will obscure your message and lose the audience. If a term is absolutely essential, use it and then define it in layman’s terms.

6. Respect the reporter. Never talk down to or become argumentative. If a reporter is misinformed or cites incorrect facts, remember you are the expert and politely correct him or her. And, be sure to get the reporter’s name right in on-air interviews.

7. Avoid “no comment.” This classic retort makes you look like you’re trying to hide something. If you cannot answer, explain why.

8. Do not speculate. Speculative answers may come back to haunt you. If you can’t answer to a question, say so and promise to get back to the reporter with information. Hypothetical questions are notorious minefields. Do not be enticed to respond to what-if scenarios.

9. If it shouldn’t be in the news, don’t say it. “Off the record” is a myth. Always be aware when microphones, cameras, or tape reorders are present.
10. Appearance matters on camera. Dress simply and conservatively. Sit up straight. Be mindful of your body language. Don’t make Richard Nixon’s mistake (before his televised interview with John F. Kennedy): always say yes to make-up!