

# When the Media Calls

Reporters are invariably in a hurry. In reality, while journalists greatly appreciate an immediate response, it is perfectly reasonable that anyone approached by a reporter should ask for time to consider the request and how to respond. It is OK, to tell the reporter you can be available in 20-30 minutes. Say that you will return the call, but be absolutely sure that you do so.

If a reporter approaches you, in person or by telephone, make sure from the outset that you really understand what they want, what publication or program they represent, and how they propose to use any comments you make. In the case of radio and television, you should find out whether a proposed interview will be live or recorded, the format of the program, and who else will be taking part.

Remember—Even in what may be a crisis situation for you, the media offers the opportunity to reach a vast audience with your own words and images.

## Responding to the media:

- Obtain the name of the person calling, the media organization and, if available, the anticipated time of release of information in print or broadcast.
- The best approach is to be prompt, helpful and honest. All contacts from the media should be returned as soon as possible, in deference to reporters' deadlines. At the most, a call should be returned within a half-day. If that is not possible, an alternate person should be asked to return the call with a truthful explanation of why you are not available or to offer to do the interview.
- Make sure you understand each question before answering. If you cannot answer the question, or are uncomfortable providing a response, take the reporter's number and advise him/her that someone who can provide the information will contact him/her as soon as possible. Then follow-up.
- Plan the points you wish to make and your responses to standard questions and arguments. An interview is an opportunity to be sure your voice is heard.
- Do not offer speculations or gossip.
- Do not be condescending or underestimate the reporter's intelligence, but make sure the reporter understands your responses.
- Remember that in responding to the media, you will be seen as representing and speaking for all guardians. Personal opinions should be clearly and carefully identified as such.
- If questioned about specific cases, be honest and say you can't provide information about a case in which you are not directly involved and that confidentiality prevents you from discussing your own cases.
- Speak as if everything you say is "on the record" even if the reporter has assured you it is "off the record."

## In speaking:

- **Don't use jargon.** Every industry or profession has its own unique language. Remember who your targeted audience is, and communicate in language they will understand.
- **Don't say "no comment."** The audience interprets that as guilt or a cover-up. The rule of thumb for responding is to explain why you can't respond and then offer other useful information.
- **Be pro-active.** Just responding to queries isn't enough. Suggest story ideas to reporters. Help them understand the issues and how they affect the interests of the general public.
- **Be relentlessly and aggressively positive about your position.** It's easy to fall into a defensive position. Your job is to use the media opportunity to sell your position or ideas -- not apologize for them!
- **Look at any question as a jumping-off point,** not as a set of limiting parameters. Most people only answer the question. They don't see the question as an opportunity to articulate an agenda.
- **Tell anecdotes.** Since the beginning of time, the most effective communicators have been storytellers. Learn how to illustrate your point with an example or anecdote which helps the listener to visualize and empathize with your position.
- **Use your clients as testimonials.** Look outside your own organization for third party validation. Trained and well-briefed individuals can give compelling interviews to support your position.