

“No Comment” Is No Option

In times of crisis, you must speak to the media. Only you can tell your (or your client’s) side of the story. Often law firms have a knee-jerk reaction during a crisis — they batten down the hatches and refuse to talk to anyone, especially the media. Take a deep breath, plan your messages and strategy, practice your quotes and talk! Here are five tips to remember when dealing with the press.

Plan Your Quotes and Practice

Decide exactly what quote you want to see in the newspaper or on television on this issue. Get help refining and practicing that quote until you can segue there from almost any question. Choose one or two more related quotes that support and illustrate that main message. Now practice until you can deliver all three quotes in your sleep.

Limit Your Messages

The #1 problem that lawyers and legal spokesmen have in interviews is saying too much. They tend to speak in long paragraphs rather than brief sentences. Lawyers tend to use words and terms of art that many people don’t understand.

Two good messages or quotes will do the job in any interview.

How brief is brief? A recent study during the 2000 presidential election found the average quote or sound bite of the candidates on television news was seven seconds long! Seven seconds is one brief sentence, at most. The quote length has shrunk 30 percent in 12 years — from 10 seconds to seven.

Another problem with long-winded interviews is if you say too much, you sound defensive. When I was an investigative reporter on television, I decided where to “dig” during interviews based on when the subject “explained too much.” When the interview subject went on and on, I found he was usually trying to hide something!

Don’t Repeat Negative Words

One trick reporters use to get a “bad” quote from you is to put words into your mouth by using negatively charged words in the question — which you then repeat in your answer! Don’t do it. “I wouldn’t say Micro**** is a nightmare client” is not the quote you want next to your name in the Wall Street Journal! Pause first, and then choose your own words.

It’s Not a Deposition

Think of the questions the reporter asks as suggestions of topic — not questions you have to answer specifically and narrowly. An interview is not a deposition. You don’t have to answer the questions asked. Instead, answer the questions you wish the reporter had asked. If you give the reporter good quotes, he will be satisfied.

Help the Reporter Do Her Job

Give the reporter other people to interview who support your view of the issue — specifically, “real people” who are affected by the issue. Print and broadcast reporters hear their editors scream at least once a day, “Where are the real people affected by this story?” Your side of the story will get more coverage if you give the reporter “real” people to interview and objective facts they can verify.

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