

By Marsha Redmon, Esq.

As a lawyer, would you consider performing an appendectomy on your son or daughter? Of course not, you would go to a doctor who has been trained to perform surgery. While you may never face Diane Sawyer or Dan Rather in an interview, talking to the press without preparation is a lot like a lawyer deciding he can do surgery because he’s seen it once or twice. It’s just not safe.

Media interviews are not life or death matters, but they do shape the public’s opinion about you and your law firm or corporation. How well you communicate to the media relates directly to your firm’s reputation and your personal success.

Only You Can Tell Your Side of the Story

Many lawyers and law firms take the stance, “If we don’t talk to the media, they can’t misquote us.” No. If you don’t talk to the media you don’t get to tell your side of the story. The story will still be done. Reporters don’t back away from a story just because one side won’t talk. The result will be that your side (or your client’s side) of the story won’t be told well – because you didn’t tell it.

A few years ago I was doing an investigative story for television about the huge increase in the number of personal bankruptcies. One man had filed bankruptcy but continued to live in a very expensive home. Coincidentally he was also the plaintiff in a high profile discrimination case. He refused to tell his side of the story. But worse -- he left abusive phone messages at the TV station. He swatted at my news photographer and his camera and shouted obscenities on camera. We used all of that on TV. That became his side of the story. My point is, anything he chose to say I would have put in my story. He could have said, “My lawyer assures me that my bankruptcy complies with the law – everything I kept is allowed by law.” And then stopped. I would have used that.

Every media interview is an opportunity NOT to be squandered

You’re probably thinking, “But we’re lawyers, we’re more careful than that.” Careful is one thing. Silent is another. Lawyers as a group are probably the most media shy of all professions. You must learn to see media interviews as an opportunity NOT to be squandered. Any time you can get your firm’s name in front of the public it adds to the firm’s credibility and name recognition.

Here is the secret that media savvy lawyers know -- a media interview is not a deposition – you don’t have to answer the reporter’s question. Answer the question you want to be asked. Talk about what you want to talk about. If you give a reporter good quotes, or sound bites (in broadcast news), they will go away happy. You can’t completely ignore the topic of the interview, but you can say what you want, exactly the way you want to. Don’t be restrained by

the question or its exact form. The key is to prepare before the interview. “Winging it” is not good enough.

Preparing for interviews: Limit your messages

List the three most important things you want to say to the reporter. Then decide the single most important thing you want the readers of that publication to remember after they finish reading the article. You must focus on just a few messages. Otherwise the reporter may take some unimportant detail you fleshed out and make that your one quote. If you limit what you say it is much easier to assure you’ll get the quote you want.

Brevity is key in media interviews for a number of reasons. From the reporter’s viewpoint -- short statements make good quotes. Don’t make the reporter go on an archeological dig through her notes to unearth the gems you buried in your lengthy, verbose statements. Make it short. Otherwise the reporter will have to cut down what you said to a reasonable length. From your viewpoint this is dangerous because the reporter may mangle your words in order to come up with a short quote.

Of the many hundreds of professionals I’ve trained for media interviews, lawyers have the hardest time speaking briefly. Lawyers tend to talk to reporters in paragraphs, not quotes. You will never succeed in media interviews unless you learn to be brief and quoteable. When I was an investigative reporter on television I interviewed at least one hundred lawyers. I remember two who were brief and quoteable.

How brief is brief? The average quote right now on television news is seven seconds, based on a study conducted during the 2000 Presidential election. That’s right – seven seconds. In the last 12 years the length of a quote on TV has shrunk by 30% -- from 10 seconds to 7. In recent years the average print quote has become shorter as well. A good rule of thumb for print is to stay under 20 words or two short sentences. Quotes in the trade press still tend to be longer than the consumer press. Bottom line, shorter is better.

Here are examples of good quotes seen in *The Washington Post* in the last few months. “When tires fail drivers should be able to pull over, not roll over.” 13 words, Bridgestone/Firestone President John Lampe. “Too many entrepreneurs think, ‘I’m the only one doing this.’ They are always wrong.” 14 words, venture capitalist Pat Kerins.

Two more reasons to be brief: you won’t confuse the reporter and you’ll have time to repeat your most important points. The more you tell a reporter the more opportunity there is for him to become confused. Too much information often leads to confusion. Keep most of the details to yourself.

Repetition of your key points will help the reporter to get your quote right. The time worn advice of “tell them what you’re gonna tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them” works as well with the media as it does in speeches. Repetition of your key points also emphasizes which points are the important ones. When a reporter hears you say something two or three times, they know you think it’s important. They also get another chance to understand it more fully.

Preparing for interviews: Becoming quoteable

What makes a reporter pick a certain phrase you say as a quote? The definition of a quote is a lot like what Duke Ellington said when someone asked him to define good music. He

said, “If it sounds good, it is good.” A quote simply sounds like a quote. It rolls off the tongue. It is visual. It has a nice structure, like the Lampe quote above, “...pull over not roll over.”

Good quotes often stake out a clear position – black or white -- not gray. “The end of” “The first” “The last ” “The biggest ever” “This will forever change .“ Most good quotes come after much work. The best include analogies or metaphors. These take time. When I work with lawyers preparing for interviews we often spend one third of our preparation time working on metaphors or other visual language that will make the quote come alive. An analogy is the single best way to guarantee you’ll get the quote you want. A good analogy is visual and beautifully descriptive – and reporters cannot resist them.

Don’t talk like a lawyer – and other bad habits

Never use corporate speak or euphemisms like “right sizing” instead of layoffs. It is offensive and reporters won’t use what you say as a quote, unless they use it to make you look bad. Use language that everyone can understand. It takes more work to translate legal terms into simple language – but it’s the only way you’ll become a good communicator that reporters come back to again and again. Think of the level of understanding of the audience of the publication or the show that the reporter works for. If you’re unsure, ask the reporter. When in doubt, use language the average mother-in-law could understand. The “mother-in-law test” is the one reporters use.

Realize that some reporters may have a chip on their shoulder about lawyers. Treat each reporter as a peer. Don’t keep them waiting. Know what their deadline is and keep your promises about timing. Bottom line – you don’t want to anger someone who buys ink by the barrel. Reporters always get the last word!