The California State University

Working Successfully With The Media

Introduction

Go online, watch television, access the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or other social media sites, listen to the radio, pick up a newspaper—somewhere, a California State University campus is in the news. Whatever the story, and whatever your feelings are about the media, they are a significant vehicle for the university to use when communicating with its various audiences. When you get that reporter's call or email—and you will—knowing a few basic rules can help you respond. Investing your time learning techniques to get your messages out can show quick results. Successful relations with the media are not a luxury in this 24/7 world; they are a necessity.

Dealing with the media can be intimidating. It is not easy answering questions with a microphone, tape recorder, smart phone, camera or notebook in your face. This brochure will help you make your encounters more successful. By understanding the news-gathering process, your level of comfort will increase and you’ll look forward to going online, opening your morning newspaper, or turning on the news, even when you know you’re going to be quoted.

Be Smart

Be honest
Never lie. Never lie. Never lie. And don’t guess. The reporter may already have the answer and you will get caught.

Plan, don’t panic
Never answer unprepared and don’t be intimidated into rattling off answers.

Be brief
Nothing hurts you more in this age of speed than someone who takes five minutes to give a 20-second answer. Think headlines, sound bites and in 140-160 character answers.

Avoid jargon
Get rid of the alphabet soup and speak plainly.

Think interview, not conversation
You are using the media as a way to reach your audiences; you are not in a back-and-forth chat with the reporter.

Define, don’t defend
Make your own points rather than defend negative assertions. Don’t repeat negative words.

Avoid “no comment” and “off the record”
The former suggests guilt and the latter rarely works.

Rely on your Public Affairs Office
They are professionals who can assist you. They can give you background on reporters, editors and bloggers.

The Key to Success: Have a Message

• Before you do that interview, know what you want to get across: In other words, have a message.

• You will define the story in your terms if you deliver your message, rather than just answer questions.

• Don’t worry if you repeat your message. The more you say it, the more likely it will be seen or heard.

• Determine 3 to 5 message points or “SOCOs,” Single Overriding Communication Objectives, that you want the reporter to know. Weave them into your answers, no matter the question.

• Think of the 10 worst questions you could be asked and prepare your answers.

Think of the interview in terms of a circular formula:
(a) Question (b) Answer (c) Bridge (d) Message.

Listen to the Question
Answer Briefly
Deliver your Message
Bridge with a transitional phrase, such as “In fact, let me add that...” or “The point I want to make is...”
Be Successful

Be prepared
Don’t think you can just ad lib through a tough interview, especially one on television.

Respond quickly
Reporters are on short deadlines. Today’s news won’t wait for tomorrow’s comments.

Use examples or anecdotes
Often it is easier to understand a complicated point with examples, not explanations.

Don’t fill space
Filling space often means you’re wandering from your message, and that’s when you usually make mistakes.

Don’t lose your temper
Don’t let your ego or anger get in the way.

Don’t speculate
Deal in the facts, not fantasy.

Don’t give your personal opinion
You speak for the CSU every time you talk, so your personal opinion has no place during the interview.

Don’t be intimidated
You are the expert, not the reporter. State your points with authority.

Avoid “no comment”
If you can’t talk about a subject, say something such as, “I can’t answer that, but here’s what I can say…”

Know Your Rights

To be quoted accurately
Speak slowly and clearly and communicate your messages. Don’t overload reporters with information.

To protect the privacy of individuals
Don’t be intimidated into discussing private or personnel matters that are not public information.

To establish ground rules
You can determine the time, place and location; it’s not just the reporter’s choice.

To make your own tape recording
Just as many reporters tape conversations for accuracy, you also have the right to tape the interview to make sure you are quoted correctly.

To have a public affairs person with you
Reporters may not like it, and it shouldn’t happen with every interview, but if it is a sensitive story, do it.

Deliver

Your message is useless unless people hear it.

A few simple rules:

• Use the full name of your university or its nickname, but don’t just use initials (e.g. CSU) because there often are many places using the same acronym. If purely a local interview, then initials are OK on the second reference.

• Project your voice.

• Smile, if appropriate.

• Maintain eye contact with the reporter.

• Don’t look up to the ceiling or down to the ground; neither is flattering.

• Stay away from photo-gray glasses, which can look like sunglasses.

• Sit, don’t swivel or rock in a chair. It’s distracting.

• Lean forward a little in your chair to show interest.

• Keep your hands away from your face.

• Use gestures if you do naturally; don’t use stilted movements.

• If standing, keep your hands at your side, not in your pocket or in front of your crotch. Don’t cross your arms over your chest.

• If standing, don’t sway from side to side.

• If you’re nervous, take a few deep breaths or try other exercises to help you relax.

• Keep the “ahs,” “uhhs” and “you knows” out of your conversation. Pausing between sentences helps.

• If you’re at a stationary microphone, don’t lean in and out, because your voice will fade.

• Don’t wear loud-patterned or striped clothes on television—it’s distracting.

After the Interview

You just spent an hour preparing for the interview, a half-hour actually in the interview, and only 15 seconds was used. Or, worse yet, the story was preempted. How are you feeling? Disappointed? Let down? Mad?

Don’t be. Consider that 15 seconds a positive boost for the CSU—you got your message, your “SOCO,” out. If the story was accurate, consider yourself a winner, even if you weren’t quoted.

You don’t have to always appear, be heard, or quoted for it to be a successful media encounter. Sometimes, providing the correct background information and having it used is a solid victory.

In addition, your cooperation may lead to additional calls from that reporter or others. Once you are seen as the expert, you’ve laid the groundwork for a successful relationship with the media.

Plus, you’ve gotten your feet wet and know a little better what to expect the next time you are called, and you will be. Count on it.