



# Communicating with the Media:

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## If a News Reporter Calls, Are You Ready?

There has been a huge storm in your area and your cafeteria is sheltering people who've been evacuated. You're at capacity, there's some confusion about supplies, there was a short power outage, and you just found out that your staff has not been able to provide a woman with a disability the accommodation she has requested. She's frustrated and uncomfortable and when she sees a reporter covering the storm she tells him about her situation. The next thing you know, the reporter is calling you for an interview. Are you prepared to speak to him and be assured that your facility and school will be represented fairly?

The news media are always looking for exciting stories and especially for stories that uncover trouble. You know the old saying, "if it bleeds it leads." When a reporter calls you to ask for an interview, there are some things that you can do to prepare for the interview. By using the strategies below you can improve the outcome of the interview and be confident that you have represented your cafeteria, school, or district to the very best of your ability.

## Before the Interview

When the reporter calls you, never start the interview right away. Ask them what it is they would like to discuss and then let them know that you are very busy at the moment and that you will call them back in the next few minutes. Reporters work under the tightest of deadlines, however, they can always wait a few minutes. Using this technique will allow you to collect your thoughts and prepare a little bit. If the reporter approaches you in person, without an appointment, you can use the same technique. Ask them to take a seat away from your office or station and let them know you will meet with them in a few minutes.

Make sure you are the person who is authorized by the policies and procedures to speak to the media or clear it with your supervisor. Then, before you call the reporter back think about your facility's mission and goal. Be prepared to recite it. This gives the reporter a clear understanding of the situation and gives you something positive to say to start the conversation. Then, if possible, take a minute or two to write down how you would like to respond to the issue that the reporter wants to cover. And remember, a reporter will not share the story with you before it airs or is published, so be as thoughtful as you can in answering each question.

### **During the interview, if the reporter asks you difficult questions use the following strategies:**

- Take a deep breath, pause, and keep a straight face or smile before you answer questions. Plant your feet firmly on the ground at shoulder width and keep your hands by your sides when you are not gesturing or pointing to something. Avoid moving around unnecessarily, hunching your shoulders, or crossing your arms in front of you. If you don't understand a question, ask that it be repeated.
- If the reporter makes a false statement in asking a question, correct them firmly, but politely, or point out that the "facts are not in" and that it might be too early to make that statement.
- Don't feel obligated to accept unfamiliar facts or figures. It's okay to say, "I'm not aware of that" or "that's not my area of expertise." If you don't know the answer to a question simply say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you." If you have a legitimate reason for withholding certain information then politely say "it's confidential."
- If appropriate, set the record straight or present facts. You might say, "this is a common misperception," or "there may be a misunderstanding."

- Deflect questions you do not wish to answer by providing some interesting or touching information to divert the focus away from the controversy. For example, if the reporter asks why the woman with a disability was not provided the accommodation that she requested, you could say "we aim to make every individual here as comfortable as possible in these difficult situations. In fact, just yesterday we re-arranged the entire layout on that side of the room so a little boy with mobility issues could access the restrooms and the food service. We had everyone here helping him out, it was so touching." Make sure that everything you say is the truth and accurate. And don't over answer.
- Don't feel obligated to answer hypothetical questions unless you can use the opportunity to put your organization into a positive light. In this case, you can often state the general goal and mission of your program and then give a short quote or anecdote about a recent accomplishment of your facility.
- If you truly feel you can't answer a question or it would be legally inappropriate to do so, explain why. Saying "no comment" will make you look and sound like a guilty politician or like you are hiding something.

## Making the Most of an Interview

If you have a point that you want to make, use the following techniques to communicate it in a way that the reporter will become engaged, be able to understand it, and use it in the story.

- Whether you are in front of a camera or not, let your voice and your delivery reflect some emotion and points of emphasis. It's okay to use gestures that complement the expression of your ideas. Maintain eye contact throughout the interview and keep an "open," friendly face. Communicate enthusiasm and involvement in your subject.
- Make sure the information you provide is meaningful and useful, but keep it as short as possible. Avoid telling long complicated stories or going off on a tangent.
- Avoid giving personal opinions, advice, or commentary. You are there to represent your facility.

The media has an important role in reporting on the events and situations happening in the world around us and most reporters are knowledgeable, courteous professionals. When you respond using these techniques and maintain your professionalism, you will set yourself up to have the best possible interview and present your organization in the best possible light.