Media interview guide

A member of the media calls you to conduct an interview:

- Be friendly. Most of the time, reporters are hardworking professionals trying to complete a story.
- Buy time. You are under no obligation to interview right now. Politely explain that you will call the reporter back, and ask what you should be prepared to discuss. Then call the reporter back.
- Call your regional director or a member of the communications team to learn more about the reporter, gain background on the issue, and discuss the message points you would like to use during an interview.

Phone numbers:
Curt Wohleber, Strategic Communications Associate with MU Extension Communications, Columbia, MO; Office 573-882-5409; wohleberc@missouri.edu

Interview tips

1. **Be prepared.** If you aren’t prepared for what the reporter wants to discuss, you should put off the interview for a short time and get prepared. (Call one of the above contacts for help.) Preparation should include anticipating questions, reviewing factual material and structuring effective answers. You don’t want to speak off the cuff when reporters call unless you are very comfortable with your knowledge of the subject matter at issue.

2. **Get the important facts out first.** Make your key points upfront, and come back to them as often as necessary. Emphasize facts, don’t speculate. Do not push a point of view in a conflict, but instead try to provide accurate and unbiased information. Reporters encourage speculation (it’s part of their job). Don’t fall into that trap.

3. **Tell the truth.** If you mislead a reporter, you immediately lose your credibility as a source of information. That hurts you and the organization. In addition, if a reporter discovers that the facts are at odds with what you’ve said, this may well be part of the story he or she writes. The only alternative to being truthful is being silent.

4. **Elaborate only when necessary.** Answer questions as directly and concisely as possible.

5. **Address the issues from the public’s perspective.** A reporter certainly will be interested in your perspective, along with all other perspectives. But the story he or she prepares will be founded on a journalistic objective to accurately and adequately inform the public. You will establish better rapport with the reporter — and get more of your side of the story told — if you think about the issues in terms of what the public will want to know and address the issues in that context.
6. **Talk conversationally.** Don’t memorize your lines for face-to-face interviews or read prepared text in phone interviews. In an interview, don’t act like you’re on trial or, at the other extreme, like you’re having a lighthearted conversation with an old friend. Treat the reporter as an equal. Don’t lecture.

7. **Don’t fill conversation gaps.** After you’ve answered a reporter’s question, simply wait for the next one. Reporters know that if they wait a bit, most people will feel obligated to offer them additional information.

8. **Avoid jargon.** A lot of specialized terms, abbreviations and buzzwords may make perfect sense to you. But don’t expect the reporter or the public to share your understanding. If it’s important to use a buzzword or abbreviation, make sure you explain it.

9. **Don’t evade.** It’s usually pretty obvious when you’re being evasive. That usually makes a good reporter press even harder. If there are legal, proprietary or other reasons for not answering a question, say so. If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. If it’s an important question, tell the reporter you’ll get the answer and let him or her know.

10. **Be accessible.** Your objective should be to become a credible and reliable source of information for reporters. You can’t do that if they can never get ahold of you. When reporters call and leave messages, don’t wait until the next day to return their calls. Be sensitive to deadlines. Ask reporters what their deadlines are. If you can’t provide the information they want before the deadline, tell them so.

11. **Don’t expect editing privileges.** Some print media reporters will provide an advance copy of a story to a key source to double-check accuracy. But that’s the exception, not the rule. If a reporter does give you an advance copy, don’t try to change something you said but wish you hadn’t unless you have a very good working relationship with the reporter.

12. **Don’t overreact.** When there is bad news, we all have a tendency to overreact by 1) refusing to say anything, or 2) over-explaining and over-communicating. Seek a middle ground.

13. **Assume the cameras or recording devices are on.** In a radio or TV interview situation, assume the recorders and cameras are on at all times — even before and after the “official” part of the interview. If a microphone is in the room, assume it’s on. Don’t get caught off guard and say something you wouldn’t say in a formal interview. A newspaper reporter doing a phone interview often will record the interview. The reporter should tell you this, but always ask just to be sure.

14. **Treat reporters as professionals.** Treat all reporters the way you would like to be treated. Recognize that reporters are generally very bright individuals who are working on a stressful deadline. They do strive for balance and fairness. Be aware of their deadlines, and be responsive.