

Mistakes Lawyers Make in Media Interviews

How to Get the Quote You Need in the Press

Prepare -- Don't Wing It

Like everyone else, lawyers who try to wing it with a reporter tend to do badly. We all need to prepare each time we talk to the press. Even with planning, we need to fight the urge to give too much detail and to use big words. It is much better to stay away from the complicated "why" and "how" and focus instead on how the subject at hand will affect the audience in their everyday lives.

Limit the Message

The fastest way to prepare for each interview is to list the three most important things you want to say. Then decide the single most important thing you want the audience to remember long after they finish reading the article. Getting one good quote in print after an interview should be counted as a win! You shouldn't expect more than that. That's why it helps to identify before-hand the one quote you absolutely want in the story.

If you limit how much you say, you are much more likely to get the quote you want. Making the reporter go on an archeological dig through pages of notes to unearth the gems that were buried under verbose explanations never works. Lots of detail is bad; it may confuse the reporter or hide the issue.

Repetition of key points also helps the reporter get the quote right. Hearing something more than once always increases understanding and retention. Repetition of key points also reinforces for the reporter what you think is important. Conversely, never repeat unimportant points or detail.

Keep It Short

Brevity is key in media interviews. From the reporter's viewpoint, short statements make good quotes. By speaking in long paragraphs instead of short sentences, you run the risk of the reporter mangling your words and meaning when the reporter chops up what was said to make the quote short enough. That's one way lawyers get misquoted.

How short should quotes be? The average quote right now on televisive news is seven seconds. The average print quote is getting shorter as well. A good rule of thumb for print is to stay under 15 to 20 words or two short sentences.

Here are examples of good quotes that have appeared in print recently:

- "Enron robbed the bank. Arthur Andersen provided the get-away car. And they say you were at the wheel." 18 words, Rep. James Greenwood (speaking to the Andersen partner in charge of the Enron account)
- "When tires fail, drivers should be able to pull over, not roll over." 13 words, John Lampe, president Bridgestone/Firestone

Keep It Simple

Think about the level of understanding of the audience -- the people who read the publication or watch the TV program. Use language they can understand without having to think. Stay away from legal terms when your audience is the general public. Although you are hoping to reach a certain savvy business audience with your quote, reporters are not going to use quotes that are too complicated for their broader audience. For example, *The Washington Post* has a very sophisticated business audience subset within its total audience. The newspaper nonetheless is aimed at a broad audience and stays away from complex terminology.

Generally speaking, many television news programs and talk shows are written at about a fourth-grade level, and print publications are at about a sixth-grade level. Trade press and business newspapers are a little more complex. It takes some effort to translate legal terms into simple language, but it's the only way for you to become the kind of great communicator that reporters come back to again and again for interviews.

Keep It Visual

Knowing the trick to crafting killer quotes gives you *control over the interview process*. A lawyer who learns how to write and deliver quotes the media can't resist can essentially control what the reporter prints from an interview. Reporters do interviews to get quotes. That's why they come to you. Background information fills in the story, but *a reporter's job is to get great quotes*. A great turn of phrase, a compelling visual image -- these are irresistible to reporters.

Duke Ellington said when asked to define good music: "If it sounds good, it is good." Reporters pick out what *sounds* like a quote. It rolls off the tongue. It is visual like the Lampe quote above. "Pull over, not roll over" paints a picture. Sometimes it rhymes like "If the glove don't fit, you must acquit." Or alliterates like "killer cows hit Kansas."

Good quotes often stake out a clear position -- black or white, not gray. This is another reason many lawyers aren't good with the media -- they've been taught to qualify everything and avoid sweeping statements. You should look for the chance to give quotes that are sweeping: "The end of," "the first," "the biggest ever," "this will forever change."

The best quotes often include analogies or metaphors. These take time to develop. Using an analogy is the best way to guarantee the quote you want. A good analogy is visual and beautifully descriptive, and reporters cannot resist them. Unfortunately, analogies never spring fully formed from the mind upon demand. They take lots of work. A good example is from Senator Tom Daschle regarding the Republican tax cut:

*If you make \$300,000 this year, this tax cut means you get to buy a new Lexus.
If you make \$50,000 a year, you get to buy a new muffler for your used car.*

Treat Reporters as Peers

Finally, it's important to remember that reporters are people too. They also have high stress jobs with constant deadlines. You need to call reporters back immediately and find out what their deadline is and what they need. Let them know quickly whether you will do the interview. Keep promises about timing, and don't make them wait. Good relationships with reporters pay off exponentially.