

Media Interview Guide

Why It's Important

If a reporter called today to interview you about your work, would you be ready? You could be asked to give an expert opinion during a crisis; to explain how some aspect of your work fits into a popular or current issue; or to describe an academic, research or Extension program that may be of interest to the general public. This is your chance to offer a clear, accurate and concise message that any lay person can understand.

Make your media interview a professional, friendly encounter between you and the reporter. Every time you speak with members of the media you represent not only yourself, but also your program, department, college and the university. News coverage can influence public perception and the credibility of CSU and Extension.

By reaching audiences beyond the campus through television, newspapers or radio, you are extending the land-grant missions of teaching, research and extension to thousands—even millions—of people. This guide offers tips to help you present an accurate, informative message to the public.

How to be Interviewed

Your interview may be held face-to-face or by telephone for a newspaper or magazine, or video/audio-taped for television or radio. It may also be conducted through e-mail. As for location, it could be held in an office if it's strictly for information gathering, but if the story is a feature about a new project or study, a location that illustrates the topic would be a good place to meet with a reporter.

“Expect to deal with reporters with a very wide range of experience covering science and other issues. You may get someone just out of college who covered a car wreck the day before and will be writing about the weather tomorrow. Or you may get someone with years of experience writing about the issue and advanced degrees in the subject.”

—Mitch Tobin, science reporter

What to Ask When a Reporter Calls

- Ask for the reporter's name, the media outlet and exactly how you can be of help. Find out how the reporter will conduct the interview—face-to-face, by telephone or by email. Is it for print or broadcast distribution?
- Ask enough questions. Will it be in your office or laboratory, out in the field, or in a studio? Is something visual required, and will a photographer or videographer accompany the reporter? Once you know which type of interview is expected you'll have a better idea how to prepare.
- Agree to participate only if the request is reasonable to you, if you can address it from your area of expertise, and if you can do it within the reporter's time constraints. You can refuse the interview.
- If you are not the expert, don't be so anxious for coverage that you start speaking anyway instead of referring the interview to someone else. Remember, reporters have specific information they are looking for to enhance their story. This is not the time to grab the chance to talk to them about something else.
- Unprepared? Tell the reporter you will call back in 15 minutes or so. Collect your thoughts and then follow through on your promise to provide an interview.
- Respect reporters' deadlines. Return phone calls promptly. In many cases, reporters need a response in minutes, not hours or days. If they can't get in touch with you, they will go on to their next potential source.

“Before the interview I got to the office early and asked myself what I thought the reporter would want to know. After going through some of my papers, I wrote down five or six things I knew I wanted to say. When the reporter arrived, she asked, ‘What exactly do you do?’ I wound up telling her exactly what I had written. I later did the same thing in front of the camera.”

*—Donato Romagnolo,
university nutritional chemistry and biology professor*

Focus Your Message

Can you explain your work or opinion clearly and briefly for a lay audience? Conducting a media interview without advance preparation is like delivering a lecture without organizing your notes. You know the subject, but maybe the audience won't get it. Remember that the reporter's main priority is to inform the public, not to be a spokesperson for you or the university. All you can ask is that the story be accurate and fairly balanced. You've got a better chance of that happening if you have a clear, focused message you could just about deliver on an elevator ride.

If you could make only three key points during the interview, what would they be? The following questions should help you answer the “so what” question about your work:

- Briefly, what do you do?
- What is interesting about it?
- Is it something new or unique?
- Why is it important? Who or what benefits? (Getting a big grant isn't the most important thing for the public—the content or benefit of the program is.)
- Does it answer a need or address an issue in the community or environment?

You must be able to answer the traditional news questions: who, what, when, where, why and how. The simpler the message is, the easier it will be for a reporter to portray it accurately. News reporters do not have the time or space to describe an entire research project or the history of a program in detail. Tailor the news to suit your audience.

Your appearance

Most of this is common sense, but it does make a difference, even for print media interviews. Look professional but relaxed. Stand or sit up straight. For television or video interviews, avoid wearing red, black, white, stripes, or small prints. Avoid distracting jewelry, hats, or anything with an insignia on it from a commercial institution. That implies an endorsement you may not intend. A T-shirt with a saying on it in big letters almost guarantees that your audience or the reporter will read that instead of listening to you. Keep your hand and body gestures natural and appropriate. Light powder can reduce facial shine.

Watch what you emphasize. If your facial expressions and body language are more animated or exaggerated when you talk about certain things, you can be certain the reporter will emphasize that in the story.

During the interview

While there are cases when a media interview may be confrontational, always remember to behave in a professional, friendly manner based on mutual respect between you and the reporter. You will have a better chance of achieving your goals while building a relationship with the reporter. You'll then be remembered as a reliable source for future stories.

- It's okay to be nervous, especially before a TV interview. To relax: inhale deeply through your nose; exhale slowly through your mouth. Or make tight fists and count to 10, then release slowly.
- Give the reporter your full name, title, and university department or extension office.

“If we see ourselves as educators—and as a land-grant institution we all should—then we should utilize the media a lot more than we do. It's nerve-wracking sometimes but let's face it, it works! I spend hundreds of hours teaching relatively small groups; I hope it has an impact on the students. Then I get a three-minute spot on the 10 p.m. news and if I get across just three points then literally thousands of people can learn just a little something.”

—Dawn Gouge, urban entomologist, agricultural center

“It is sometimes hard to convince the reporter that research collaborators need to be included in the story. I will usually give their names and phone numbers but I never depend solely on this. I try to emphasize how that collaborator is important to the story during the interview. Failure to cite collaborators (on the part of either the expert or the reporter) can make for some difficult times in the workplace once the story is published.”

–Gene Giacomelli, director, Controlled Environment Agricultural Center

- Avoid jargon when addressing a lay audience. Even scientists in fields different from your own may not know your professional vocabulary. If you must use jargon, be sure to explain briefly any unfamiliar terms, including acronyms not commonly understood by the public.
- Speak clearly and distinctly in a modulated, polite tone that is loud enough to understand. Don't lose your temper.
- Make your points and stop talking. Avoid rambling and keep your answers short. You don't have to fill silent interludes if you've finished answering a question. Just smile.
- Listen to each question carefully before responding. Ask for it to be repeated if you don't understand it. Ask the reporter if you should clarify anything.
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer. In the case of a TV interview, look at the reporter instead of the camera, unless you are instructed otherwise.
- Assume everything you say will be quoted. Nothing is ever off the record.
- Never say “No comment.” Most people now assume that means you are guilty of something.
- If you make a mistake when you answer a question, stop and calmly tell the reporter you're going to start over.

Recorded Interviews

Remember that the microphone may still be on, or the camera still running, after you finish the formal interview. Videotaped footage called B-roll is used for cutaways during a televised story to provide visual interest for the audience. This can be a good thing for you, as long as you talk and behave as you did during the formal interview. Sometimes a reporter will ask you to provide a summary statement again—you can repeat what you said before, using the same words. For telephone interviews, assume that they are being recorded.

“Sources, especially scientists, often want to see a story before it's published. At the Star, and most other papers, this is frowned upon or even forbidden. The basic idea is that if I show you the story prior to publication, it's unfair not to do the same for all the other sources, especially if the story is about something contentious. However, I—and many other reporters—am willing to go over quotes and other information attributed to a specific source. I will sometimes e-mail the source the handful of paragraphs in which I'm quoting them to make sure I heard them right.”

–Mitch Tobin, science reporter

Pitching stories

We can help you if you'd like to contact a reporter or news outlet to pitch a story idea. Some things to consider:

- We'll seldom pitch a story to two competing newspapers or broadcast outlets at the same time. Each will assume it's an exclusive, but if they find out they're both working on it your story may be dropped altogether.
- A story shouldn't be pitched to more than one assignment desk or reporter at the same outlet.

After the interview

- If the interview goes bad (in your opinion) please contact us so that we can follow up with the reporter.
- Don't expect to see the story before publication, but mention that you would be happy to review any material the reporter may be uncertain about. Find out what the deadlines are, and be sure to work within those restrictions on any follow up material.
- Don't be afraid to call the reporter back or follow up with additional information: details you couldn't remember during the interview, clarifications, etc.
- You do not have control over the finished product. If there are minor problems, let them go. If anything is grossly inaccurate, contact us.
- As you build your relationship with the reporter, you can offer to discuss other story ideas when a deadline is not looming.

Code Of Ethics

Contrary to popular public opinion, journalists and media outlets do operate under an industry code of ethics, based on unbiased truth and accuracy of information. Here is one such example from a daily newspaper: “If we expect readers to view us as credible, then we must aggressively seek and fully report the truth while remaining independent and free from any legitimate suggestion that our independence has been compromised.”

About the reporter

Your interviewer may work for a daily newspaper, a national scientific publication, the local television network affiliate in another community, or even another state. You may be contacted by more than one reporter for a story. Remember that journalists today often research their stories before they interview you. They can join online discussion groups, monitor government sites for new information and examine datasets freely available on the Internet. Computer-assisted reporting means the reporter is better informed (or sometimes misinformed) about the subject before coming to you.

You also need to be aware that you are only one of several sources the reporter is turning to for information. In order to assure accuracy, credibility and verify information, journalists will often quote numerous sources in their story. You probably won't know who the others are until the story is published or broadcast. In the case of a scorpion sting, for example, a reporter may quote someone from the Poison Control Center, a university entomologist and a pest control operator to present a more balanced and informed story. And there's no guarantee that you, the university source, will be the most prominent in the story—or even used at all. That's the nature of a free press.

A Reminder

There is a difference between the news business and academia. Newspapers and broadcast stations focus on fast-breaking stories told in short, concise sound bites. In contrast, universities operate at a more measured pace, where research and analysis can take months or years to complete.

Yet reporters and university professionals both share the need to tell a clear, accurate story for their intended audiences. Whether you're a professor teaching a complex subject, a researcher working in a highly technical laboratory, or an extension agent working in the community, getting your message across clearly is essential.

"I think it's important to remember that most reporters are working on deadline so when they request an interview they usually need it within a couple hours. Also, like any other business, some reporters are better than others. Until you develop trust, I would stay focused when being interviewed, be sincere but keep your answers succinct."

*—Thomas Ropp,
general assignment reporter*

Citing Media Stories about Your Work

Now that your story has hit print or been broadcast on television, perhaps you want to post it on your departmental Web site or use a video clip in a presentation. To avoid plagiarizing, be careful how you do this. Even though the story is about you, it is not technically yours.

Since there is no single policy for citing published material, it's best to contact the individual media outlets that own the story. To reprint stories, you must ask for permission on an article-by-article basis; some media outlets offer these services. There are also media services that offer duplicates of television broadcasts.

Extras For The Reporter

These items may ensure that your name, university affiliation and area of expertise are correctly spelled, identified and explained:

- Your business card
- Fact sheets or brochures about your program
- Copies of your research articles if the reporter asks for background information
- Things that help the reporter think "multimedia." You can do this by offering a highly visual interview location so your story may be better presented. The story is bound to get more play if there's an interesting photo connected to it, or even a graphic or map.

For More Information

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"Don't expect the story you give during the interview to be exactly the one that comes out in the press. They may select some of your comments, but not all. In the case of TV, only brief portions of your interview will actually appear. Also, be aware that reporters may have a preconceived idea about the subject when they come in, so try to keep your points as clear as possible."

—Carl Olson, university entomologist
