

## Tips for Working with the Media

VERSION 2 • JUNE 2012



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# Tips for Working with the Media

## Introduction

This is a general guide for dealing with the media. It covers basic rules for speaking to journalists, dealing with sensitive issues, letters to the editor, and approaching the media with story ideas. It also outlines a media policy all small organisations should have in place.

## General rules for interviews

- It can be extremely satisfying to discuss your area of expertise with a journalist. However, never agree to an off-the-cuff interview if you are unprepared.
- Be aware of the journalist's deadlines. If you have to call back, find out their deadline and ring back at the agreed time. If for some reason you can't get through to the journalist's direct line, call the news desk.
- Before starting the interview, ask the reporter's name, the organisation they represent, and whether they are freelance. Ask for their contact details in case you need to get back to them.
- If you have to use difficult terms or names, spell them.
- Keep your words simple and explanations brief – avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Give vivid examples to explain technical facts if possible.
- Make time for the interview so there are no interruptions. Turn your mobile phone off.
- If the interview relates to a report or speech you are going to make, have copies to hand, and provide one to the journalist in advance.
- Remind the journalist to include your name and that of your organisation and encourage them to use your post-nominal title if you feel it is appropriate.
- Occasionally journalists and editors allow their interviewees the opportunity to fact check the story before it is published. Ask if this is possible.



## Sensitive issues

- If a journalist phones with an awkward question, tell them you must first consult a colleague or that you need time to gather more information but will ring back in a few minutes. This gives you time to collect your thoughts and take appropriate action.
- Ask the journalist what the article is about, what they have already learnt and what they expect to learn from you. Try to understand the “angle” of the story. Find out who else will be interviewed.
- Check that their telephone number is correct. Ring the journalist back even if you do not have the answer – they can then find another source, if necessary.
- Be prepared to answer questions on any negative aspects of your area of expertise but prepare yourself by writing notes and then keeping to them.
- Always work with journalists even if you cannot comment. Instead of refusing to comment say: “I can’t comment at this stage because I don’t have all the facts”. (Or other plausible reasons such as “the matter is under investigation, “I cannot disclose private information about a client”, or “it’s before the courts”.)
- If you do not want information to appear in print it is best not to mention it to the journalist. Do not say, “This is off the record”. Avoid any off-hand remarks.
- Think about the salient points you want to make and have them up front. Always be aware that although you are the expert, the interviewer “owns” the story and they are experienced at presenting it. It pays to stick to known and verified scientific or technological principles.
- It is important not to make sweeping generalisations. If you are representing an organisation make sure you convey the messages agreed upon. However if you are asked to speak as an engineer representing the profession as a whole, frame your comments as an individual “In my experience...” or “In my view...”.
- If asked a sensitive question outside your area of engineering expertise, explain you cannot answer and suggest the journalist contact IPENZ.

## How to approach an interview situation

### NEWSPAPERS:

- If a newspaper journalist has asked you to comment on a news story you will most probably be interviewed by phone, and it will be brief and to the point.
- Feature articles have longer deadlines so the journalist will generally meet you in person.
- The editor or chief reporter will decide when, and if, the article will appear. Sub-editors will write the headlines, which occasionally means they do not reflect the tone of the article.
- Ensure the journalist has your full name and title, and encourage the use of your post-nominal title if you feel it is appropriate.

### **RADIO:**

- Often radio interviews are done over the phone. Ask the journalist to advise you when they start taping.
- The tone of your voice is important. Try to relax – this will help you talk more slowly.
- Do not talk down to the interviewer. Be patient and remember that the public probably has little knowledge of your subject.
- A taped interview gives the opportunity to delete stutters, but not embarrassing statements.
- Live interviews mean your words will not be edited.
- When preparing for a radio interview, write out the main points. Have a strong message so that even if the interview goes off-track, your main message is clear.

### **TELEVISION:**

- Avoid wearing clothes with obvious checks or stripes, as these will possibly “strobe” on camera.
- Remember you are talking to the journalist, so look at them rather than addressing the camera, as this would give the impression of a public speech.
- Keep your hands empty of pens or paper so you don't fidget.

## **Contacting the media with your story idea**

- First write down what the issue is. If necessary, discuss your story idea with others to clarify your point of view. Write one page or less describing the issue, your organisation's involvement and what you want to happen. Your introduction should summarise your story, as it may be the only sentence the journalist eventually uses.
- Next, either phone a journalist that you know personally or ring the news desk and briefly outline your story. They will pass you on to the correct journalist. Explain your story and be prepared for the journalist to ask questions.
- Follow up your call with a short e-mail giving more details of your discussion. This will usually be what you have already written but may include additional information.
- If you have contacted the journalist, they will assume the story is their “exclusive”. This is an excellent way of building relationships. Don't break that trust by releasing the story to others. If it is a good enough story the news services may pick it up and make it available to all.
- Journalists are also looking for visual elements. If you have high resolution photos available or can arrange for the journalist to visit with a photographer this may increase the chances of the story being picked up.
- If you would like advice or help in releasing a story, contact the IPENZ Communications Manager.

## **How to handle a journalist's errors**

- If a minor inaccuracy occurs but the general message of the story is correct then sometimes it is better to leave it as it is.
- If a major mistake is made, consult the IPENZ Communications Manager for assistance, or phone the newspaper's news desk and discuss the publication of a small correction notice.
- If the story is online, you may be able to make a clarification in the “comments” section.
- You may be advised to write a letter to the editor outlining the error with a copy going to the journalist. Your letter may be published and, in some cases, the paper may print a retraction. However, this step will ensure the debate is carried on in public, which you may prefer to avoid.
- In extreme cases of misrepresentation, a complaint can be lodged through the New Zealand Press Council (for newspapers, magazines and periodicals) or the Broadcasting Standards Authority (for radio and television).

## Other Electronic Media

- Stories you are involved in can have a long life, on news websites or on YouTube etc, so it is important you do not speak rashly or out of turn.
- It is likely that a journalist will undertake a search on your name during the course of writing an article. Make sure your organisation's website, and your LinkedIn account etc are accurate and up to date.
- Ensure your personal accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook are sufficiently private.

## IPENZ support for speaking out

If you are asked by the media to comment during a natural disaster or on an unusual engineering event, and you need help, please contact the IPENZ Communications Manager.

## Speaking as an IPENZ Member

- Information provided or opinions expressed by Members are their own views and not necessarily supported by IPENZ. They should therefore make it clear you are not representing IPENZ. Members are encouraged to use their post-nominal titles.
- You may write a letter to the editor to express a personal opinion as a citizen, but use your private address and do not mention IPENZ.

## Media policies for small organisations

Every organisation should have a media policy. In smaller organisations the policy can be as simple as:

- Designating one person to talk to the media
- Ensuring all staff know who that person is and know to refer all journalists' enquiries to that person in all cases.

## IPENZ Media Monitoring

When a journalist interviews you about an engineering story, please advise IPENZ so we can look out for possible press coverage. If you need help releasing a story, or have a good story idea, also let the IPENZ Communications Manager know.

### Communications Manager

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# Talking to the media: opportunity or risk?

*(published in the New Zealand Herald 29 April 2004)*

After speaking in public, talking to the media is one of people's greatest fears. Many otherwise well performing managers and professionals stumble and fail, but success is easier if you follow some simple rules.

The first and greatest mistake is to think that you have to talk to a reporter because one calls you for comment, or asks you to appear on a programme.

Flattered – perhaps. Obligated? No. There may be a down side in saying no, but yes doesn't have to be the automatic response. Pause, think, call back if necessary.

Then try this. Ask what kind of opportunity is this for me and my organisation. Ask, "what can I usefully say on this occasion, through this medium, and to the audience who will hear, see or read what I say"? If the opportunity doesn't measure up, say no. Say it politely and firmly, but say no.

If the opportunity does measure up, then ask whether you are the right person to say those things. Ask also who else will be in the article, or taking part in the programme. What is the angle of the story or the approach of the programme? (If you don't know – find out.)

Only if overall the positives outweigh the negatives should you say yes. Otherwise why risk it?

I put two simple questions to ten current journalists and communications advisers recently. I asked what was the most common mistake people made when they are being interviewed. The journalists talked of dishonesty, evasion, lies, and being deceptive. The communications people talked of lack of preparation.

Common faults were:

- Not understanding what the interview is about. To go into an interview without asking questions first, full of bravado that you can wing it can spell disaster, commented a TV journalist.
- Other journalists referred to "attempted evasion, closely followed by use of bureaucratic jargon or management talk", and being "misleading, obfuscating, failing to give a straight answer, lying."
- An interview is an opportunity to say something. Your comments may inform, entertain, rebut another point of view, shift the ground on an issue, promote a person, brand, opinion or product, any of those things. But your participation has to aim to achieve something for you: otherwise why do it?
- To prepare properly: ask what is the one single point that you want to get across. Focus on that, write it down and rewrite it until you can say convincingly and naturally. (And assemble the facts to support it.)

As Jim Hacker famously said on *Yes Prime Minister*, “if you have nothing to say, say nothing. Better still have something to say and say it, no matter what they ask.” An overstatement, but valid.

So what marks someone out as being good in media interviews? The journalists said:

- Someone who projects as open, accessible and out-going is going to be well received.
- Having a clear message, with facts and figures to back it up, but more importantly, honesty.

A good interviewee, one adviser said, is “in command of their subject, will be able to translate complex issues into very simple language that is accessible to any audience. If it’s a TV interview the person needs to look the part.”.

Electronic reporters refer to interviewees as “talent”. “Good talent” often earns a place in a news story because he or she adds colour, robust comment or in-depth knowledge. “Poor talent”, no matter how knowledgeable, is often avoided or cut.

So assess the opportunity, prepare properly and perform strongly. Then you communicate with conviction and credibility.

*John Bishop is a journalist and a communications adviser. He regularly speaks, writes and teaches people about media. This article is reprinted with his permission.*

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