Media Relations 101: Following Up With News Reporters

Media relations 101 is designed to answer common questions about working with the news media and help college staff better understand how to work with reporters.

Question: With the help of our college public information officer, I sent several reporters a media advisory for an upcoming event for our program. What is the best time of day to call a news reporter so I can follow up in-person and find out if they are covering my event or if I can answer any questions?

Answer: It’s so great to hear that you sent the reporters a media advisory for your event and are now calling them to follow up. Making a follow-up call can be vital to securing news coverage. Typically, the best time of day to call a newspaper reporter is any time before 12:00 noon. Never call a newspaper reporter to follow up on an advisory or story pitch after 2:00 p.m. or in the early evening. A reporter is typically on deadline at that point to generate copy for the next day’s newspaper. Unless he or she is writing about you that day and told you to call, your follow-up call may be an unwelcomed distraction.

In radio, deadlines are ongoing and throughout the day. Know when the reporter you are trying to work with is on the air. Generally, it’s smart to call after his or her show airs, and not before. So if the reporter is typically producing stories for a 12:00 noon news update, don’t call at 11:00 a.m. Instead, call at 1:30 p.m. after the show is over.

In television, production deadlines typically revolve around news shows, with a heavy emphasis on the evening news. Avoid the hour before the evening news goes on the air. This is when the newsroom is the frenetically busy. Generally, for a television station with a news program starting at 5:00 p.m. and running at 6:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., the best time to place a follow-up call is any time before 2:00 p.m.

You can improve your opportunities to influence the media by reaching out to reporters at the times convenient for them.

Question: Should I send a reporter a gift to say thank you for producing a great story about our program?

Answer: No, you should not send the reporter a coffee mug, take him or her out to dinner, or offer any other gift or service. Most traditional news media agencies have ethics policies in place that do not allow reporters to accept gifts or services of any kind. The reporter may be risking his or her job by accepting your generosity. You don’t need
to use stuff to show that you are grateful. If you want to express your appreciation, send a thank-you note or e-mail message.

**Question:** What is a Skype interview?

**Answer:** A Skype interview is a television interview that is conducted through a computer using video software known as Skype. Participants use a webcam that is attached to their computer and in sync with the software, as well as a microphone for the interview. A time is set up for the interview, and the person conducting the interview will typically “video call” the person being interviewed using Skype. This type of interview is often more convenient to schedule than an in-person interview.

**Question:** We have an upcoming event at our college that we would like to publicize to the community. What basic information needs to go into a media advisory?

**Answer:** A media advisory should always include who is planning the event, what the event is (descriptive information), where the event is (location, address), when the event is (date/time), why the event is significant (explain the context or reasoning for the event, e.g. to help unemployed baby boomers come back to campus, the college is holding a plus 50 health care careers forum) and how it will be conducted (e.g. a fair with booths, a lab tour, etc.). This basic information – who, what, where, when, why, how - is known in the news business as “the 5 W’s and the H.” It’s also important to list a contact name with phone number and email address so reporters can easily get in touch. Mention potential photo or video opportunities that are part of the event to make it more attractive to the media. State on the advisory that interviews will be available and that there will be photo or video opportunities if some exist as part of the event.

**Question:** We would like to see our plus 50 program featured on a local radio show that is popular with baby boomers because we think many of the people listening to the show could be potential students for our college’s programs. How do we go about approaching the show and being featured?

**Answer:** The Internet is your friend in pursuing this type of interview. Go online and research the show first. Note what time the show is broadcast. Listen to previous episodes to ensure that your idea is a good fit. You could email the show’s producers or call to pitch your idea. If you are going to call the station, you will want to call after the show goes off the air (not during the show or before the show). It helps to write down what you would like to say. You might write: “Hi, this is __________ from XYZ Community College. I love listening to your show and I have a segment idea for you. Is
now a good time to talk?” [Wait for response]. If you get an affirmative answer, then you might say, “As you know, many baby boomers lost their jobs during the Great Recession. Many older adults find that their skills are outdated and need updating. One solution is going back to school and training for a new career. But that can be scary when you are older. We have specialized programs helping unemployed baby boomers come back to college and train for new careers as [cite examples from your college]. We’d love to come on your show and share what we are doing to help baby boomers as they come back to college to earn degrees or certificates.” Then wait for what is hopefully a positive response. Feel free to modify our suggested script for your own purposes.

When a journalist interviewed one of our college’s students, he or she did not remember what we had talked about over the phone and it made the interview a little awkward for our student. How can we help avoid this situation in the future? While a few years ago we might not have done this, times have changed. Journalists are overworked and time-strapped. They often appreciate receiving a biography or profile on an interviewee in advance of an interview, usually by email. Say that you have already talked to this person and you jotted down a few notes on what they said, and you know that the reporter will ask whatever he or she wants at the interview, but that you thought this information might be helpful.