

Helpful hints for dealing with local media reporters

What to do if you receive a call from a local reporter:

- a. Tell them they have the wrong number and run to the bathroom.*
- b. Say “Je ne parle pas anglais,” or something like that, hang up and take the phone off the hook.*
- c. Insist that you have the White House on the other line and can’t keep the President waiting.*
- d. Pretend that you are temporarily deaf because of heart medication you started taking.*

Don’t panic. Here are a few things that you need to keep in mind if you ever get a call from a local reporter.

1. Most likely, he or she is vastly underpaid, overqualified for the career they have chosen, and may only be doing this story because otherwise they would have to go back to writing obituaries.
2. They need information from you. In most cases, they need much more than they realize. In this market, few media reps know much about the faith, the nature of the church, or its mission. They will be likely asking you something, looking for an answer in 25 words or less, and hoping that it pleases his or her grumpy news director or grouchy editor.

The reality is that most of our answers will take more than 25 words to explain and that no matter how meticulously we peel back the nuances, it’s going to come out in print or over the air far differently from how we remember saying it.

Advice #1: Don’t overthink. Like a kid taking a test for which he is overprepared, you might fall into the trap of giving the “wrong” answer because what you THINK the person is asking is really more complicated than the simple question for which they need an answer. If you are not sure, simply rephrase the question and repeat it back to them.

Reporter: How many people are served by your food pantry?

You (Source): (In brain) Does he mean each week, or each year, or does he know that the St. Vincent de Paul society runs the pantry and not the parish. Does he think we operate a food kitchen and serve hot food? How large an area does he mean?

Out loud: The parish operates a food pantry through its St. Vincent de Paul society. Do you want to know how many pounds of food we distribute, or how many families we serve each month?

Advice #2: Make them think. For a reporter, this does two things. First, it intellectually invests them in the story. Instead of thinking what he or she wants for lunch, you have forced the reporter to think on your terms. The reporter has to determine which figure will have a greater impact on the story. Second, if the reporter HAS AN AGENDA or AN AXE TO GRIND, this immediately takes him or her out of attack mode and onto defense.

Reporter: How about both figures, and also, can you tell me how it compares to the numbers from previous years?

Source: (In brain) Panic! Panic! Panic! I don't know the figures five years ago. I don't even remember what I had for breakfast. Now what do I do? I took this position this year, and only because the pastor pressured me to do it. I'm going to look like a fool on camera and everybody will see me. I hope my deodorant is still working.

Out loud: That's hard to say. I just took the position this year, and I can tell you that from what my volunteers say, we've had a harder time keeping food on the shelves. We've had to ask the members of the parish more often to help replenish our supplies and we are looking at other ways to serve the needs of the community.

I can tell you that we recently got a shipment from a local school of about 300 cans, and most of those were off the shelf in less than a week. From what I understand, that supply would have lasted a month last year.

Also, I've been surprised at the number of older people coming in and telling me that their pensions and Social Security checks can only cover rent and medications. These are seniors who have worked hard all their lives and now find themselves having to come here for help. That's not just an injustice to their finances, but it's also an assault on their human dignity. Same with young kids coming in, especially during the evenings. Single moms have to work during the day, but judging from how grateful they are, some of them may actually be picking up the rice and beans they'll serve their children for dinner that night.

Advice # 3: Put a human face on a problem. Reporters know that if they can paint a picture of a family in need, it will push their story closer to page 1 or the top of the newscast. It may also stir their consciences. Reporters are visceral hunters, hence the old axiom, "If it bleeds, it leads."

Advice #4: Don't overwhelm them with "God says..." "Our faith says ..." or "The church teaches..." This will turn them off, bore them to death or flip on a switch deep in their subconscious and turn them into rabid dogs.

Reporter: Wow, I didn't realize it was that bad.

YES, SOME REALLY DO SAY THIS.

Reporter: Could I come back later and talk to some of them, maybe tape them?

Source: (In mind) That might be a great idea. It might let people see how much work we do here and encourage them to support it. It would make me feel good, because then ordinary folks would think I have a friend in the media.

Out loud: I'm not sure that's a good idea. Remember, people only come here because they have to. They are at a low time in their lives. I will ask a few if they would be willing to go on camera or on the record, but many hold jobs and all of them deserve their privacy. I know that if I were ever in that situation, I wouldn't want the whole world to know. I'll get back to you if anyone is willing to talk to you.

We have some volunteers who have been around a while and might have some interesting anecdotes that might give you what you want. When we are done, if you like, I could call a few I know who live nearby and might be able to come down today.

Advice #5: Despite outward appearances, every reporter has a heart. Deadlines, too many long days and difficult stories may obscure it over time. However, at the core of every journalist is a person who wants to make the world a better place. Just like us.

Advice #6: Never put innocent, unsuspecting clients at risk for unwanted publicity. That's why parents sign permission slips for their children in schools. People who we serve are not props for the camera.

Advice #7: There's a ham in all of us. It's tempting to be a "hero" or to want to be seen on TV, and frankly there is an adrenaline rush that goes with it. The key is focus. You are there on behalf of a mission that's bigger than you and keeping focus on the message will prevent the ego from getting out of hand.

Advice #8: Provide alternatives. You may know that a volunteer this year was a grateful recipient last year, and that she would be more than happy to tell the reporter this. Don't tip your hand, but let the reporter have the "power" to choose how far to go with the story. Most will not want to take that step because it involves more work, time or resources than what is available.

Reporter: Thanks for the offer, but we don't have time today. Maybe some other day. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us today. We have to go back and edit the tape, and it should be on the evening news.

Source: No problem. If you have any other questions, don't hesitate to call me.

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED YOUR FIRST INTERVIEW.

Other tips and pointers:

- Everyone gets nervous. I trick myself into consciously delaying being nervous until after the interview and to focus on the task at hand. Trust me, it works.
- Most reporters want you to look at them and not the camera. Just do it.
- Most reporters will talk to you before the camera rolls to tell you what they want to ask you. It should allow you to begin to form answers ahead of time.
- Normally, the younger the reporters, the less experience they have. Some will come to an interview believing they already know the answers you are going to give them. Also, many may come from different parts of the country and be unfamiliar with local customs or terms. Be aware and be patient. Give short, direct answers and usually, somewhere in an editing room or in front of a computer, the students learn.
- There's a good chance that the best thing you thought you said won't make it into the report. There's a good chance that your name, organization's name and other information will be wrong. Unless it's heinous (Identified as Ku Klux Klan instead of Catholic Charities), live with it.
- Always make sure that you check in with your supervisor or your communications officer before and after the interview.
- Watch the report or read the article. This serves several purposes: 1. It shows how much of the story you wanted to develop actually made it. 2. It helps you to see what areas you might need to work on in your preparedness, carriage or delivery.
- Don't be afraid to work from notes during your interview. At the same time, avoid particular statistics on-air, and use general terms ("more," "less," "half," "double," etc.) Print reporters love specific numbers however.
- Be prepared. If you need to have someone role play with you before an interview, do it.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Be honest. If you don't know an answer to a question, just say "I'm not sure about that. Can I get back to you with that information?"
- Avoid "No comment." That's blood in the water to sharks. Even baby sharks.
- As uncomfortable as media interviews may be, they have to be seen as part of our mission. Evangelization means sharing the Good News, even when we may have bad news. Secular newspapers and TV stations serve a large audience, and most of the time, the work we do truly merits shouting from the mountaintops. Should you ever be in a situation when there is "bad news" to report about the church, how responsibly and accurately you handle that opportunity says oodles about the church as well.
- If a newspaper reporter offers to send you a copy of the article before it is published, you may accept it. When you receive it, don't fuss over every word. If you need, share it with your supervisor or communications officer for a second look. Respond to the writer as soon as possible.

- If something in the interview is terribly wrong or the report is horribly botched, inform your supervisor or communications officer immediately and they will know how to handle it.
- Relax and let the Holy Spirit do its job.