

# ImPRESSive

## A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

October 2000

## TIPS FOR INTERVIEWS

### PART I: NEWSPAPER

*Giving an interview for the first time can be daunting, to say the least. You are probably nervous about getting all your information right. Maybe you're concerned about sounding like a fool in your quotes. Or it could be that the idea that your words will linger forever in the newspaper's archives strikes fear into your heart.*

*Despite these misgivings, you are willing to be interviewed because you know that it will further your cause. You realize newspapers are a valuable tool in educating the public and swaying decision-makers and for these reasons, you feel it's important to give interviews. The question is how to prepare for them.*

*Let's say Jane Smith from the Generic County Reporter is doing a story on the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). In the past, you've helped her gather information and you think that she's a credible reporter. Today, you received a phone call from Jane. She's interested in setting up an interview for an article she's writing on your state's ability to enroll kids in CHIP. You've never been interviewed before, and you're not sure what you should expect. Here are some tips for making the interview as successful and painless as possible.*

### Set Clear Goals for Yourself



erratically in the interview, you will not help your cause. Before you begin, consider how this article could be helpful to you and your

You should never agree to an interview unless you are sure of what you want to convey. Not all press is good press. If you sound like you are uninformed or your message shifts

ultimate goal of enrolling more children. Then, think about whom you want to sway and what language or arguments would best accomplish that.

Use your goals to determine your "message." Your message could be something concise like "Kid Care Now" or "Don't Play with Kid Care." Throughout the interview, you want a clear theme to develop. That's your "message."

## Be Prepared

Before the interview, you should prepare possible questions you expect the interviewer to ask and come up with answers to those questions. Then make an effort to sit down, preferably with someone else to help you, and practice your responses. Try to be clear, concise, and interesting. You don't want to drone on long after the reporter has stopped taking notes. Remember, you should have a clear message you reiterate when appropriate. For example, in preparing for your interview, you and another organizer have come up with some possible questions Jane from the *Reporter* might ask:

- \* How many children have been enrolled in the CHIP program since its inception?
- \* How many children are eligible but unenrolled in the program?
- \* What are some barriers to their enrollment?
- \* What measures has the state taken to remove these barriers?
- \* If no measures have been taken as of yet, what are your recommendations for removing those barriers?

When brainstorming your responses, try to find ways to insert your message. You don't need to use your catch phrase in every response, but the general message should be conveyed as often as possible.

When practicing, try to anticipate difficult questions the reporter might ask you. Find different ways of answering the question and consider possible follow-up questions. When brainstorming responses to tricky questions, think two or three questions ahead to see where the reporter might try to lead you. It

sounds like a lot of speculation, but it's worth it when a little forethought can help you avoid a sticky situation.

In the interview, you want to respond to the reporter, not just answer her questions. That means you want to tailor your remarks in such a way as to lead the reporter back to your key point, your "message." If you feel that the interviewer's questions are straying away from the real issue, steer the dialogue back to the topic by saying something like, "That's an interesting question, but I think the real issue is . . ." or "While that may be one aspect of the problem, the greater issue is . . ." You don't want to antagonize or appear to belittle the reporter, but you also don't want to jeopardize the value of the interview.

*Before the interview, consider:*



- \* How will this interview further your goals?
- \* Whom do you want to sway/ impact?
- \* What is the best language/ argument to sway these readers?
- \* What do you hope to get across in this article?
- \* What questions do you expect to be asked?
- \* What information do you want to convey?
- \* Are you prepared?

The reporter has been trained to think of the interview and the story as hers. Therefore, you shouldn't expect her to docilely follow what you think the agenda for the interview should be. There's a certain tension between any good reporter and her savvy interviewee. It's your job to get your points across as effectively as possible and still maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. It's in her interests to fold your perspective of the issue into the story she envisions.

You should realize that most interviews will take place without a lot of preparation time for you. You shouldn't expect to have much advance notice. Therefore, by the time you present yourself as a resource for journalists, you should have already practiced and given considerable thought to your interview techniques. You don't want to be caught off-guard.

## **Understand the Reporter's Needs**

Some reporters at a newspaper have a specific beat, or topic area, that they are expected to cover and on which they can be very knowledgeable; others are general assignment reporters, or reporters who are expected to write on a variety of issues that may constantly change. When a reporter first approaches you for an interview, you should determine how much she already knows about the subject. Oftentimes, reporters new to the topic will inform you that they will need more than the usual amount of background information. This presents you with an excellent opportunity to educate them and strengthen your professional relationship. Good information from you now will make it more likely the reporter will rely on you in the future.

If you are working with a reporter new to CHIP, for example, it's a good idea to give her as much comprehensible background information as you think necessary to understand the issue. This doesn't mean that you should fax her a hundred-page treatise on why the state is doing a rotten job signing up eligible children. What you should do is give her one to two pages of background information and let her know about any informative and easy to use websites that are available. A bulleted fact sheet would be easy to read and quickly convey the key points. Remember that reporters need to prepare for interviews almost as much as you do. They'll appreciate the extra information and the opportunity to prepare their questions in advance of the interview.

If the reporter is an old hand on the subject, you don't need to steer her toward any information unless you think she is unaware of something new that is integral to the topic. In this case, you might want to mention the new piece of information and let her know where she can find it. If the reporter asks you about any new information, you should feel free to let her know about the latest data available, for example.

## **The Format**

Most interviews take place over the telephone. The reporter may call you a few hours before her article is due and ask to interview you on the subject. She'll ask you to spell your name slowly and to give her your exact title and the name of your organization. She may also ask you to succinctly describe your organization. You should say something like "Columbia Citizens United is the largest non profit, non-partisan consumer organization in the state that deals with CHIP and other health issues." You should have a standard description of your organization developed

before your first interview.

During the interview, if you falter and inadvertently give incorrect information, make sure to correct yourself as soon as possible. Be as accurate, succinct, and clear as possible, even as you put forward your message. With practice, this will become second nature.

## On the Record vs. Off the Record

Anyone who's ever seen "All the President's Men" has heard about on the record and off the record. *On the record* means that your words can be used in a story and attributed to you. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, this is how you should be speaking to reporters. It's rare that you would need to go off the record for any reason. *Off the record* is a gray area that is often dependant on different reporters. Before you enter this murky area, make sure that you and the reporter understand each other about how the information will be used. For the most part, off the record means that your information cannot be used in the article and the reporter cannot repeat it to anyone using you as the source. What the reporter can do is to ask other people to confirm what she has learned from you, on the record. She might ask someone else, "I've heard that Senator Jones originally refused to vote for funding for the CHIP program. Is that true?"

For an advocate, you should almost always restrict yourself to things that can be used on the record and attributed to you. If you're giving reporters information that you don't want to be linked to, you should realize that this situation could easily backfire on you. If you really feel that you must give this information, make sure to let the reporter know that this information is off the record BEFORE you say a word.



You should never assume that any information you give is off the record. No matter how much you trust a reporter, make sure she agrees that information is off the record before you begin speaking.

There are other categories for sharing information with reporters. One is called *background*. Saying something on background means that you don't necessarily want the information to appear in the story, although it can, depending upon your agreement with the reporter. It cannot, however, be attributed to you. Background information is used to help a reporter frame a story or more accurately understand the context of the issue. The reporter might attribute it to "a source in the activist community" but that should not jeopardize your anonymity. While this information can be useful to the reporter, she will probably still try to have someone confirm the information on the record.

*Not for attribution* is another method of dispensing information. It can be used in the story, but it should be attributed to a "source."

If a reporter uses a tape recorder to record the interview, it should be turned off before you provide any information that is anything but off the record. No matter your relationship with the reporter, mistakes can be made.

Remember, reporters aren't there to protect you from yourself. If you volunteer too much information; forget to say that something is off the record before you say it; misunderstand what the reporter means when she says off the record, on background, or not for attribution, you're going to be the one who's hurt. The clearer you are in the beginning, the less damage control you'll have to do later.

## Ending the Interview

Once the interview has come to an end, make sure the reporter has your phone number (if she did not call you first) or other contact information such as e-mail to insure that she can get in touch with you if she has any follow-up questions as she is writing her story. Get her phone number as well, in case you have anything really important to add. If possible, find out when she expects the story to run. Sometimes, even when a reporter has written a story, it does not run due to the newspaper's space constraints. You never know when a water main might break and drive you from relevance. In closing the interview, make sure to thank her for her time.

## Collecting Clips

If this is the first time you have ever seen your name in print, you probably won't need to hear this advice; however, it's important to collect and file your clips. These clips can be used in soliciting other articles on your issues, can be included in press kits, used in testimony, brought to editorial board meetings, sent to funders, and analyzed for future interviews. And besides, they may come in handy for your organization's 25<sup>th</sup> (or 50<sup>th</sup>) anniversary celebration!

## Corrections

Hopefully, this won't ever be an issue, but everyone is capable of making a mistake or misunderstanding something you might have said. If it's a really grave error, call the reporter and let her know of the mistake, in a professional, non-confrontational way. If you come on strong, yelling and threatening to get her fired, you can pretty much say goodbye to

any good relationship you might have had with her and, perhaps, other members of the press. Reporters are like the rest of us, they like to talk, and reporters have friends and colleagues who are also reporters. Always remember to be calm and polite in pointing out inaccuracies.

If the reporter is unresponsive to your request for correction and the mistake is something huge like "Columbia Citizens United accepts more money from the insurance industry than any other state advocacy group," you *have* to set the record straight. Talk to the reporter's editor at the newspaper and let him know—calmly, professionally—that this information is inaccurate and damaging. If this article is one of a series that seems to show a bias against your organization by this reporter, you can ask to have another reporter cover your stories in the future. However, this should very rarely occur and you should be aware that it could diminish your coverage. If you are seen as troublesome, you could be bypassed by the media.

## Conclusion

It's important for you to remain self-assured no matter how nervous you may be feeling. The reporter has come to you as an authority. Be confident in your mastery of the material. With the proper preparation, there's no reason to worry. The more interviews you do, the more comfortable you will be.

Look for the next issues of **ImpRESSive**....

\* *Tips for Interviews Part II: Radio*

\* *Tips for Interviews Part III: Television*

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- \* Getting Your Message Into National Stories, June 2000
- \* How to Shift Focus on a Story, April 2000
- \* The Art of Story Banking, July 1999
- \* Getting in the Editorial/Opinion Pages, March 1999
- \* Creating Working Media Lists, December 1998
- \* Drafting a News Release, October 1998

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### Tell us what you think...

**ImPRESSive** is a series of tip sheets providing media guidance to advocates. Please contact us with your comments and questions.

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