

Practice

Preparing to interact with the media

Diane Scherzler

It's a bit like trying to lose weight: achieving good press relations rarely occurs by making a huge effort during a few events. You will achieve more through small, but regular efforts. Here are some tips for becoming familiar with the media and preparing yourself for the next time that a reporter calls you up:

Regularly read the newspapers, watch TV and listen to the radio

Ask yourself:

- What are the key elements of the stories that are related to my field of expertise? Do the journalists usually show beautiful pictures? Are acoustic elements important (e. g. whale songs)? Is the priority likely to be on interviews with researchers or with other people affected by the issue?
- What are reporters usually interested in when interviewing my colleagues?
- Are there doubts or anxieties the public expresses with regard to my field of expertise?
- Which misconceptions and stereotypes about this issue do I observe among journalists and among the general public?
- Which newspapers respectively TV and radio broadcasts do I like/dislike?
- What elements of a story make me like it? Is it the vivid language, the pictures etc.? Why do I dislike a reporting? What could I learn from this for my own communication strategy?

Even if you don't like some of the journalists' questions, or if you are tired of their stereotypes of your issue, you will probably be confronted with them when working with a journalist. So think beforehand about the answers you want to give instead of being caught unprepared. In addition, keeping in mind the particular media outlets that you like or dislike helps you decide whom you should address when you want to contact "the media".

Test and exercise the comprehensibility of your research

Use every opportunity for explaining your research: Talk about it with your partner, your neighbour, a child, your car mechanic, a friend, or a former schoolmate. Pay attention to what they understand and what you have to explain twice. What is too complicated for to be mentioned? Encourage them to interrogate you closely, so you experience what aspects of your work could be of public interest. Notice how you aroused their attention, and what comparisons you used for creating a colourful and vivid story.

Be aware of different audiences

Your "perfect" audience might be a group of educated people who are keen on your subject. But you should want to reach other people as well. They will have a different previous knowledge, different concerns, different needs and different approaches to your subject.

Awareness of these audiences is essential if you want to communicate effectively. It is a good exercise to try to place yourself in the position of people with whom you are trying to communicate. Ask yourself: Why should Joe the plumber want to know about my work? What might that lady over there at the bus stop think about it? - You could do these little exercises in the train, in the supermarket or when you're sitting with other people in a waiting room.

Protect yourself from caught at a loss for word

Although you don't know exactly what a journalist might want to know from you, there are several questions you should think about long before an interview takes place. These questions are probably quite different from what you think about in your daily scientific routine:

- What is the most important point about your research? What message do you really want to get across when being interviewed?
- What about your work is unique, extraordinary, astonishing or fascinating to the audiences likely to read, watch or listen to this journalist's report?
- What use does your work have?
- Is your (field of) research relevant to everyday life?
- What connections to current events (social, political ...) exist?
- Who pays for your research? Does your project justify the costs?

These questions don't mean that you should contact the media only if your work is useful, relevant to everyday life and so on. Regardless of your answers to these questions, thinking about them will protect you from being caught speechless after such a question and will help you to give good interviews.

Write your personal manual

If you note your observations and experiences down (maybe together with your colleagues), you can develop over time your own collection of ideas on how to communicate best with journalists and non-expert audiences.

Diane Scherzler M. A.
Orchideenweg 6
72762 Reutlingen
Germany
+49/(0) 71 21 / 27 45 41
mail@diane-scherzler.de