

# *Ten Media Commandments*

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*FROM SOBEL COMMUNICATIONS*

*PETALUMA, CALIFORNIA*

## **I. Prepare for the interview**

Interview requests from the media are often either verification calls to check the accuracy of comments or statistics quoted by others, or to request your statement about an event or policy. Stay ready for random media calls and requests for interviews at any time. Assume you will be asked about that one area you feel least comfortable discussing. Check information you are likely to use for accuracy and give thought to how you will frame your response to tough questions.

## **II. Know your audience**

If you are being interviewed by a radio or television reporter keep your answers as concise and compelling as possible. A radio or TV audience is used to hearing 15 or 30 second "sound bites." If your answer is long and misses the point, it will not be used or it will be edited in a way you did not intend. On the other hand, if you are being interviewed by a newspaper reporter take whatever time is required to deliver your answer. Make sure the interviewer understands the most important elements of the story.

## **III. Interviews are not conversations**

Conversations involve a great deal of give and take. Facial gestures and body language help define the mood and tone. The format and content of an interview however, is distinctly different. An interview is structured to obtain information for an audience that will not come into direct contact with you. The interview may at times be harsh and subjective. The interviewer will not be as open as a person you are engaging in a conversation. Most importantly, an interview generally goes in one direction. The reporter asks the questions and the subject answers. Don't mistake a reporter's friendliness as an acceptance of your point of view.

## **IV. Listen carefully before responding**

In an attempt to anticipate a question, or to demonstrate we know the answer, we often respond prematurely. Answering a question should involve a moment's thought. Such a delay indicates adequate contemplation of the question and shows respect for the interviewer. It also makes certain that you have heard the entire question and any inference it may contain. If a question catches you off guard, delaying for a second will also allow you to gain additional time for your answer. If you need even more time to formulate a response, have the interviewer repeat the question, or say, "I'm not sure what you mean, are you asking me....?" Another technique you may use is called "bridging." This requires that you restate the question and in answering shift the discussion to areas you think are more important or feel more comfortable discussing.

## **V. Tell the truth**

This is a very simple commandment and above all others will keep you out of trouble with the media. Never lie to a reporter. If caught, it makes for terrible publicity and a certain loss of credibility with the public. More importantly, the media will not forget the transgression. If you ever have the temptation to answer in less than truthful terms  
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because you don't have all the information, it is quite appropriate to say, "I don't know, but I'll check on it for you." If the information is of a sensitive nature it is fair to say, "The answer would require that I release confidential information, which as you know I cannot do." Such answers are better than saying something that will certainly be checked and you may later regret.

### **VI. Avoid jargon**

Avoid jargon and acronyms whenever possible. The public often does not understand business or government jargon or acronyms and feel it is used as a way of obfuscating the facts. People pay more attention to your thoughts when they are delivered in simple terms.

### **VII. Avoid "What if" questions**

Trying to answer "What if" questions leads only to speculation about events that have not or may not occur. Politely refuse to answer a "What if" question. Remind the interviewer that such a question puts you in a very difficult position. While you might like to answer, questions should be based on facts and not on hypothetical situations over which you have no control.

### **VIII. Avoid "No Comment" responses**

Answering a reporter by saying "No comment" invites suspicion and will likely cause the reporter to widen the inquiry. A better response is, "I would like to answer that question but..." Give the reporter a feeling as to why you are not answering the question. Don't, under any circumstances, leave the impression that you are guilty of something or avoiding a question.

### **IX. Avoid going "off the record"**

This is a dangerous technique that puts the reporter in an uncomfortable position and which can backfire later. If the information you provide is newsworthy the reporter will find another person to confirm it, thus making it appear your confidence has been violated. The interviewer then feels a need to justify why the story was printed or broadcast. In any case, you are left to fix the mess. If you don't want it reported, don't say it.

### **X. Don't lose your cool**

Remember to maintain your composure during an interview. While hostile reporters are rare, aggressive reporters are common. It is vital during an interview that you are nice and responsive. Assist, don't compete. If you think a question is leading, inaccurate or unfair, say so calmly, yet firmly. In the worst of circumstances don't let the interviewer know that you are uncomfortable with the questions being asked. Remember to smile genuinely if you can. A friendly and helpful personality is hard to criticize. After all, believe it or not, reporters are people too.

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