

## A few things everyone should know about reporters...

~ *Barrie Hussey, Strategic Communications Solutions*

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Do you ever wonder how and why reporters do the things they do and ask the questions they ask?

Do you ever stop and consider why our interactions with reporters are so critical to success in media relations?

There are two simple reasons:

1. Reporters have the ears of the public. They shape the public agenda. Like it or not, reporters have a lot of influence on what, and how, the public thinks.
2. Reporters are the people you will deal with most. They are the people on the street who make the first, and perhaps only, contact with you.

You will probably never pick up the phone and hear Lloyd Robertson, Peter Mansbridge, or Gord Martineau on the other end of the line asking for background or to set up an interview. It will be a reporter; the people who do the leg work, pull the information together, and shape the way stories are played.

It is imperative to understand when you are face-to-face with a reporter, it doesn't matter how you think journalism should be practiced. What matters is how it *is* practiced.

And, if you want to have some influence on how stories about your organization are portrayed in the media, you must:

- Have an understanding of who reporters are.
- Know what reporters do and how they think.
- Put your ego aside and help reporters get their job done.

Furthermore, never underestimate reporters. Remember, they've heard all the excuses.

### **Reporters are in the news and information business.**

Don't confuse the news business with the 'media.' There are two different sides to the mass media as we know it.

1. The publishing/business side. It's sole purpose is profit. The product: the number of readers, viewers or listeners an outlet can deliver to its advertisers.
2. The news and information side is made up of the people who fill the space, or time allotted, with the messages the outlet's audience wants to know about.

The line separating these two sides is often blurred, or takes on varying shades of grey. Most reporters will balk – or walk – at any attempt of pressure in their job of reporting honestly, fairly and accurately.

It is always wise to remember reporters know how to get information – and get it quickly. They usually have many sources – on both sides of any issue. If they want to talk with you and you won't talk with them, they will find someone else to get the information from.

### **Reporters need trusted sources.**

Public relations, communication people, and business executives are among many sources of information reporters seek out and use to complete their stories.

One of the more critical steps in becoming a 'newsworthy' source for reporters is gaining and maintaining trust. Trust can only be built over time. The best chance you have of getting your news into the daily run is if a reporter or editor knows your information is reliable.

So, how do you develop yourself into a trusted source of information? It is done by always providing your reporter contacts with unbiased information. Cooperate with reporters by ensuring your media relations initiatives cater to their needs. Ensure your spokespeople treat journalists as seekers of information, rather than people who are out to get you.

Truth must always be the underlying principle in the media relations process. Once you've lost a reporter's trust your credibility, and perhaps the reputation, of your organization is lost.

### **While every reporter needs a story, not every story needs to be told.**

Don't let anyone tell you any different: A 'scoop' is still where it's at in the news business. A reporter's imperative is simple – get the story.

Editors want reporters to get the story, get it first, and always before 'deadline.'

Reporters question everyone and everything until they feel they have a handle on all sides of the story. They hope to uncover that which is not being said.

It is the reporter's job to search out the best attainable version of the truth. To do this, they **must** ask questions. Sometimes those questions are none of their business and they may come off as hostile or aggressive.

Those of us on the other side of the notepad need to understand two simple facts:

1. A reporter needs a reliable story, and they need it now. We, as communicators, should go that extra mile and help them get a balanced story. Even going so far as to suggesting sources with opposing points of view.
2. Building strong rapport (relationship) with reporters is the key to success.

### **Reporters see themselves as guardians of the public trust.**

The people who become reporters and remain in the news business usually have a well defined sense of social responsibility. While they are hired and fed by those from the business side of the media, reporters feel they report directly to their 'public' or audience. To sustain public trust, good reporters maintain a healthy degree of scepticism and set the ethics bar higher than most industries.

Certainly, there have been lapses in ethical judgement across the news media, but in their mission to keep the public trust reporters who don't follow ethical standards are out the door sooner rather than later.

As a consequence, reporters expect the same openness and honesty from the public relations and communication people they work with as sources.

**To truly understand a reporter, walk a mile in their shoes.**

It is important to understand the reporter's job and newsroom realities. You must think and act like a reporter. Know the individuals and what they cover. Become familiar with the media outlet, the make-up of their target audience and how they skew stories to their audience.

The best way to get to know reporters is to have a good story idea to discuss with them. You can do this by searching the archives of the outlet to make sure your story is new, an update on an ongoing story, or a new angle on something in the news.

And always remember; 'if it ain't news, it ain't used.'