

Media interview guide

A member of the media contacts you for an interview

If you are asked to talk to a reporter about a potentially sensitive or controversial topic, first contact your program director, or reach out to MU Extension Integrated Marketing Communications at imc@missouri.edu or 573-882-7216. Where necessary, program directors and communications staff can help you frame issues, develop message points and articulate official policies.

Be friendly. Most reporters are hardworking professionals trying to complete a story.

Buy time. You are under no obligation to interview right now. Politely explain that you will call the reporter back, and ask what you should be ready to discuss. Then call the reporter back.

Be prepared. Preparation should include anticipating likely questions, reviewing factual material and structuring effective answers. You don't want to speak off the cuff when reporters call unless you are very comfortable with the subject matter at issue.

Get the important facts out first. Make your key points up front and come back to them as often as necessary. Emphasize facts. Do not push a point of view in a conflict, but instead try to provide accurate and unbiased information. Reporters encourage speculation (it's part of their job). Don't fall into that trap.

Address the issues from the public's perspective. A reporter certainly will be interested in your perspective, along with other perspectives. But the story he or she prepares will be founded on a journalistic objective to accurately and adequately inform the public. You will establish better rapport with the reporter — and get more of your side of the story told — if you think about the issues in terms of what the public will want to know and address the issues in that context.

Talk conversationally. Don't memorize your lines for face-to-face interviews or read prepared text in phone interviews. In an interview, don't act like you're on trial or, at the other extreme, like you're having a lighthearted conversation with an old friend. Treat the reporter as an equal. Don't lecture.

Avoid jargon. A lot of specialized terms, abbreviations and buzzwords may make perfect sense to you, but don't expect the reporter or the public to share your understanding. If it's important to use a specialized term, make sure you explain it.

Be accessible. Your objective should be to become a credible and reliable source of information for reporters. You can't do that if they can never get ahold of you. When reporters call and leave messages, don't wait until the next day to return their calls. Be sensitive to deadlines. Ask reporters what their deadlines are. If you can't provide the information they want before the deadline, tell them so.

Don't expect editing privileges. Some reporters will provide an advance copy of a story to a key source to double-check accuracy, but that's the exception, not the rule. If a reporter does give you an advance copy, don't try to change something you said but wish you hadn't unless you have a very good working relationship with the reporter.

Assume you are "on the record." Assume the recorders and cameras are on at all times — even before and after the "official" part of the interview. If a microphone is in the room, assume it's on. Don't get caught off guard and say something you wouldn't say in an official interview. A reporter doing a phone interview often will record the interview. The reporter should tell you this, but always ask just to be sure.

Treat reporters as professionals. Treat all reporters the way you would like to be treated. Recognize that reporters are generally very bright individuals who are working on a stressful deadline. They do strive for balance and fairness. Be aware of their deadlines, and be responsive.

If you have questions or concerns about talking to the media, feel free to contact MU Extension Integrated Marketing Communications at imc@missouri.edu or 573-882-7216.