

Community First New Forest

When a reporter calls ...

What do I do if I get approached by the media?

Your immediate reaction might be: "Help! I don't want to talk to them!" Perhaps you see it as an intrusion into your busy working day. Or you have a deep mistrust of journalists and you're afraid of saying the wrong thing or being misquoted.

On the other hand, you might regard press coverage as a chance to enhance the profile of your project or organisation, which in turn could secure funding.

Don't panic! Find out what they want

If you receive a call from a journalist, clarify what they need.

- A TV reporter may just want to chat about your recent achievement and fix a day when they could film a feature
- A radio reporter may ask for a live or pre-recorded interview over the phone
- A newspaper reporter may want to interview you there and then over the phone

Do I have to answer their questions straight away?

News reporters are nearly always up against tight deadlines, but most would appreciate that they will get a better interview if you are properly prepared.

If you want time to gather your thoughts, ask what sort of deadline they are working to, and request a short time to get the facts together before calling them back. Take down their name, the name of their organisation and their telephone number and, if possible, a list of the questions they want to ask.

You now have perhaps 15-20 minutes to prepare what you will say.

Do respect the reporter's deadline!

Do I have to answer all their questions?

Don't be lured into discussing anything you are not comfortable seeing in the media.

How do I get everything I want to say into an interview?

Don't try to say it all. Decide on two or three main points you want to get across and write them down. Reporters are usually looking for no more than a sentence or two and may just want you to talk in a general way. However, do not let the reporter sidetrack you.

What if they ask awkward questions?

Rarely, a reporter may try to play devil's advocate or ask a difficult question.

Know what you do not want to say, and think how you would answer the worst possible question.

If he or she chooses to give you a hard time (eg. *"wasting tax payers money"*) or attempts to rubbish your work, don't rise to the bait. Stay calm and repeat your message.

Talking to the media after a press release

First, find a copy of that press release. What did it say?

Hopefully, the press release described your work succinctly and it will just be a matter of the journalist asking you to reiterate what you have already said. Rehearse a few questions and answers of the "what, where, who, why, how?" variety.

To summarise ...

Whether the interview is for the press, radio or television, the following simple guidelines should help protect you against distortion and enable you to get across what **you** want to say:

Five golden rules

- Begin with the main points and ideas
- State your point clearly and repeat it frequently if necessary
- Avoid jargon and acronyms
- Use simple, intelligible examples to support your statements
- Be polite and positive, not defensive

Useful preparation in advance

Statistics - Have some useful statistics and background information to hand. This might include how many people your organisation serves, the number of staff you have and what your remit is.

Be aware of jargon – Specialised phrases (eg "community engagement") and acronyms (eg NFDC) are so often used in community work that it can be hard to even realise you are using them. Make a list of all the jargon words

and acronyms used in your organisation and either explain them in the interview or don't use them.

What Not To Say to A Reporter

Here's a checklist of things you should definitely not say.

"This is off the record."

If you don't want the reporter to know about something, don't tell them. Things said "off the record" have a nasty habit of appearing in print. If you need to give some information for guidance, not for publication, then make this clear.

"I don't think you'll be able to understand this, so I'll try to say it as simply as possible."

Never talk down to a reporter. They know when they're being patronised.

"Actually only twelve people turned up – but hey, that's a result for Northbrook Estate. At least we kept a dozen of them out of trouble for the evening!"

Do not make flippant remarks, if you say it to a reporter do not blame him or her for using it.

"The person who deals with this is away for two weeks – can you call back then?" or "This afternoon? I'm sorry, I've got a meeting. Could I call you tomorrow?"

The media is driven by tight deadlines. If you haven't got time for them, they won't have time for you. You've just lost your opportunity.

"No comment. "

This may lead to one of the following outcomes:

- *"XYZ Organisation's spokesperson declined to confirm or deny that...."*
- *"XYZ Organisation refused to talk to us about...."*

Neither of these is good news for you.