When a Reporter Calls

Coverage of issues and topics in the news today frequently raises questions which require the insights of an expert.

Reporters from local and national print and broadcast media are often looking for experts who can respond to questions about today’s important issues. And Robert Morris University faculty and staff are frequently called upon by these reporters for their expertise and knowledge.

The most important advice we can offer you when a reporter calls is to call the Office of Public Relations.

We are ready to assist you to achieve a successful interview with the media. We can arrange a mock interview to help you prepare, provide background information on the publication or outlet that has called you, or help you draft your speaking points.

The Public Relations staff consists of professionals with years of experience working with reporters for broadcast and print media. We are happy to share our knowledge with you.

We work with the media on a daily basis and handle a variety of other responsibilities that enhance the University’s reputation and image. Our job is to help Robert Morris University and its faculty and staff to effectively communicate how the University is equipping men and women for their professional careers.

Following are some tips to help you when working with the media. Please do not hesitate to call us at 412-262-8650 for assistance.

After You Are On the Air or In Print

- If there is an error in a story, let the reporter know immediately. This prevents errors from being repeated.
- If you have a complaint about a story, talk to the reporter first, then go to the editor or producer/news director.
- If you like the story, let the reporter know by phone or note. Reporters appreciate feedback. Do not send gifts. You also might let the reporter’s editor know that you liked the story.
When the Telephone Call Comes

- The interview begins immediately. You can say no; but most of the time it is to your advantage to agree to the interview.
- Assume everything you say to a reporter is “on the record.”
- If you need some time, ask to call the reporter back in five minutes or in an hour. Make sure you do so.
- Ask the reporter what topics will be covered in the interview. Set your ground rules up front.
- If a reporter called while you were out of the office, return the call as soon as possible. Deadlines are very tight. If you do not wish to speak with the reporter, call the Office of Public Relations at 412-262-8650.
- If you must decline an interview, never use the words “no comment.” Rather, say why you can’t give the interview or can’t comment on that topic.

To Prepare for the Interview

- Once spoken, a comment cannot be taken “off the record.”
- Decide on your key messages – no more than three.
- Anticipate the tough questions that may come up.
- Practice your answers – have a mock interview session with the Public Relations staff.
- Write out your key points – not a statement – to take along. Review them in advance of the interview but don’t read them during the interview.
- Consider your appearance carefully, especially for a television interview. Contact the Public Relations Office for tips on appropriate television attire (some colors and styles make you look better than others).
- Remember, a reporter may not be as prepared as you are, especially in an impromptu phone interview. In that case, you can gently help the reporter put things into a proper context. Try not to treat the reporter like a student who hasn’t read the assignment.
- You don’t have to do the reporter’s job, but the reporter doesn’t have to do your job either.

Once the Interview Starts

Do ...

- Do tell your story. If you don’t, someone else will.
- Do keep your answers short. (Limit the detail to what is needed to put your answers in the proper context).
- Do remember that you know more about your subject than the reporter does, so use the interview to state your points.
- Do remember to smile. It is one of the most effective means of communication. Positive body language is important – use your hands as your normally would in conversation and remember to “sit up straight.”
- Do use concrete examples and “plain English” in your responses. The more abstract you are, the greater the chances the reporter will misinterpret what you say.
- Do stay cool. Remember, the reporter is not your audience – the public is.
- Do buy time to think by restating the question. If you don’t understand a question, say so, and ask the reporter to rephrase or explain.
- Do control the interview and use the time to state your points. But remember, you must always answer the important questions.
- Do listen carefully. What is the reporter trying to get?
- Do provide background information.
- Do ask the reporter a few questions near the end of the interview to be sure he/she understood your message. This will not work for television or live radio, however.
- Do watch out for two-of-three-part questions. Answer only the part you want.

Don’t ...

- Don’t lie.
- Don’t let reporters put words in your mouth. Do restate your point.
- Don’t use technical language or jargon.
- Don’t use “off the record.” If you must speak off the record, state you are doing so and get the reporter’s acknowledgement and agreement first.
- Don’t unload, confide in or seek advice from a reporter.
- Don’t ask to have a story read to you before publication.
- Don’t speculate on issues unrelated to the topic.
- Don’t ramble.
- Don’t bluff. If you don’t know, say so. Offer to get the information the reporter is seeking if you have access to it.
- Don’t speculate about results or actions. Don’t use hypotheticals unless they are for illustrations or examples to help the reporter (reader) understand your point.
- Don’t say “no comment.” Explain why you won’t comment.
- Don’t play games. Release information promptly, even if it is negative.
- Don’t accept the reporter’s facts/misinformation.
- Don’t assume a reporter knows “all.”
- Don’t get tricked by the “either/or” question. Example: Was the money missing because of mismanagement or simply theft?