



Tips for working with the news media

Preparing for an interview

- Understand that reporters are usually working on a deadline, and sensitize your support staff to this fact. Call back right away, or call Public Relations at x42220 immediately and ask a PR person to find out the reporter's deadline and determine if you or a colleague can help them in time.
- Ask for the reporter's name and the media organization for which he or she is reporting. If you're not sure what the nature of the media organization is (newspaper or magazine? TV, radio or Web?) ask for more information, or refer them to Public Relations.
- When a reporter calls requesting an interview, you have a right to ask them the topic of the interview and some sample questions. If you need time to collect your thoughts and the reporter's deadline allows, offer to call back later at a specific time -- and follow through. Or call Public Relations to discuss how to handle the request.
- You are not *required* to get permission from Public Relations before giving a phone interview. But PR staff are available at any time to consult with you before you give an interview, or to speak with the reporter first and verify what they want and if it's a worthwhile or appropriate request.
- If a reporter asks to come interview you in person or take photos or video, please call Public Relations to arrange for an escort by a media coordinator. Escorts are **essential** both in patient-care areas, to protect the privacy of patients, and in research areas.
- Think of two to three main points you would like to make about your subject. Gather facts, figures and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready.
- It's best not to play favorites when deciding whether or not to grant an interview to a specific reporter. It may seem like a good idea in the short run, but in the long run it will damage your relationship with reporters and may come back to haunt you.
- Don't let yourself be ambushed by the media. If a reporter shows up in your office or calls at a time when you are unprepared, reschedule the interview for a time when you feel comfortable. If you need guidance, call Public Relations.
- Have printed materials or web links to support your information whenever possible in order to help the reporter minimize errors. If time allows, offer to fax or e-mail the reporter printed information and links in advance of the interview.
- Be aware that reporters' schedules are determined by the news of the day. Don't be offended if an interview gets canceled or rescheduled because a more urgent story arises.

During the interview

- If you are being interviewed by phone, the reporter is required by law to tell you when you are being recorded. If you're not certain, you should ask.
- Begin at a basic level. Avoid academic or technical jargon; explain special terms if you must use them. Use analogies, descriptive terms and active verbs.

- Understand that you will probably not have the chance to review the reporter's story before it appears. But, you can ask them to read your quotes back to you, or to check facts with you. It is best to make this request at the start of the interview.
- Be brief! We live in the age of the sound bite. Television and radio stories may use only a 10-30 second cut. The shorter your comments, the less likely they are to be edited. Even print reporters are looking for short, snappy quotes.
- There are five C's to success: Speak with conviction in a conversational manner while retaining your composure. Be confident. Remember that you are the expert. Be colorful -- tell stories and anecdotes that illustrate your point. Give examples.
- Stick to your main points and do not allow yourself to get drawn too far off on tangents. Most people make the mistake of talking too much. Repeat your points if necessary to get back on track.
- Speak in complete thoughts. The reporter's question will be edited out and your response should stand on its own. A good trick is to repeat the essence of the question.
- Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information where necessary.
- If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification rather than talking around it. If you do not have the answer, say so. Tell the reporter where to find the information, if possible.
- Never say, "No comment." Instead, if you cannot or do not choose to answer, explain briefly. For example, "It is our policy not to discuss lawsuits currently in litigation" or "I can't answer that because I haven't seen the research paper you are referring to."
- Avoid saying things "off the record." Reporters may or may not honor this, and it annoys them. If you don't want to hear it on the evening news, you had better not say it.
- Be honest. Don't try to conceal negative information; rather, let your interviewer know what you are doing to solve a problem.

Tips for radio and TV interviews

- For television interviews, plan to wear solid-color clothing. Stripes, plaids or other designs can cause problems with color TV pictures. Avoid large, jangling or reflective jewelry. Look in a mirror, if possible, just before going on camera. The reporter may not tell you that your collar is folded over or your hair is out of place.
- Choose a location where you can screen out extraneous noises. Hold your calls and turn off your computer, if possible. Avoid rooms with loud background hums from air conditioning or heating units. Never conduct a radio interview on a cell phone.
- Find out in advance whether the interview is edited or "live." If you agree to a live interview, be sure you are comfortable thinking on your feet and responding off the cuff.
- In edited interviews, do not answer questions too quickly; pause briefly before answering. This helps the reporter get a "clean" sound bite and also has the added benefit of allowing you time to think out your answer.
- In edited interviews, it's O.K. to stop and start over again if you don't like the way you worded your answer. But you can't do this in a live interview!
- In a TV interview, look at the reporter and not the camera. The only exception is in a satellite interview, when the reporter or anchor will be at their office and you'll be in a studio. If you're uncertain where to look, ask before the interview begins.

- Stay stationary in front of radio or TV microphones and avoid sitting in a chair that rocks or spins. Wandering around or rocking in your chair looks bad on TV, and can cause the recorded volume to rise and fall on radio.
- Be aware of and avoid nervous habits such as pen tapping and leg movement that can interfere with the interview.

After the Interview

- Ask the reporter to identify you in print or on-air as being affiliated with the University of Michigan Health System. Academic titles don't often stay intact on newscasts or in articles; they're often too long or complex. Work with the reporter to decide on a title that works for both of you. If nothing else, use a generic title: "U-M cancer specialist", "U-M health policy expert", "U-M transplant surgeon", "U-M geneticist".
- You may want to ask when a story will appear. The reporter may not have an answer, but if he/she does it's always good to be aware. If you think the news story might result in a reaction from the public (for example, prospective patients or clinical trial participants), call Public Relations to plan on how to handle that reaction.
- If you feel after reflecting on an interview that you misspoke or gave incorrect information, call the reporter as soon as possible and let her know. Similarly, you can call with additional information if you forgot to make an important point.
- Give positive feedback to reporters, if merited, after a story appears. Like the rest of us, they usually hear only complaints and rarely get a call or note to say they've done a good job.
- If an error appears, let the reporter or Public Relations know right away. Sometimes a correction can be printed or aired, or information can be corrected in the Internet version of the story. You also will want to prevent the incorrect information from being used as background for future stories.
- If you are unhappy with a story, share your concerns with the reporter first. Contacting his or her editor is a last resort.
- For radio and TV stories, obtain a tape of the final broadcast if possible and critique your own performance, looking for ways you might improve in the future.
- Call Public Relations to let us know when you've done an interview so that we can track down clippings or tapes of your story. Or, if you receive a clipping or tape, please share a copy with us.