



Healthcare Marketing

Understanding needs of reporters key to successful interviews

No matter what their background or expertise, for many healthcare CEOs and executives, giving interviews to reporters is not a favorite activity. Whether it is a general concern due to a previous situation where a story didn't turn out the way the interviewee wanted, an irrational fear that a Mike Wallace "wannabe" might be asking the questions, or an overall concern that the "wrong thing" might be said, conducting interviews can be a daunting experience for even the most seasoned of executives.

But this need not be the case. Armed with an understanding of what reporters want and need, and with the right internal preparation, interviews can be a significant tool to communicate important information, position a company and its products and services and build name awareness.

As a first step, healthcare executives must understand that a reporter's job is not to promote their company or its products. Publications and media outlets today - particularly in healthcare - need to focus on news, information, insights and analysis of interest and value to their readers. If your organization's story helps to highlight a particular trend or issue, or if you are introducing a new product or service, reporters will need to talk with you in order to develop an insightful and accurate story. To prepare a well-rounded article, reporters will typically interview several sources and combine the information into a story that they believe fairly and accurately portrays the issue. Keep in mind it may not be your opinion; it will, however, be the reporters' analysis of the situation based on research and additional interviews.

Finally, while most trade and business publications tend to focus on news and information that is of interest and that provides insights and expert information to others in the industry, there may be times when a story is just plain "bad news." If your company has had a poor showing financially or if a product has not performed as expected, that is news and it will be reported by a publication. The publication is not "after" your company; they are simply communicating information of interest and value to others in the industry.

However, whether the news is good or bad, there are several steps to take to ensure that your information is communicated clearly and effectively. Here are some tips that can help ensure that any interview situation you undertake reflects appropriately on your company and on you as the spokesperson.

- Understand the "big picture" issues and where your company fits into the larger story. For example, a story on outcomes' results from a pilot program for diabetic patients would want to first highlight the overall scope and cost of diabetes care in America today.
- Make sure you are comfortable with the topic the reporter will be interviewing you about. Even CEOs and administrators don't have detailed information on every aspect of their organization. If it is a new product or service, ask the

product managers or department heads most familiar with the topic to provide you with an overview. Review material and notes to get specific facts or figures that could enhance the story. If you have an internal public relations department or an agency, ask them to provide you with an overview of the questions to be asked.

- If you are unfamiliar with the publication or media outlet, check it out before the interview. Most publications today have a website that will give you information on the audience, focus, etc. of a media outlet. To go a step further, do a database search from the website on the topic or issue for which you will be interviewed. This can give you an idea of how a publication has covered a certain area in the past and how they might likely cover it again.
- Remember that most television interviews are about 90 seconds long and most print interviews include only a few quotes. This means you have very little time to say what you want. Prior to the interview, select two to three key points you believe are vital to make and be sure to reiterate them if needed.
- Think before you answer. Don't say the first thing that comes to mind. Repeat the question if you need to in order to ensure you understood properly; phrase your answer carefully.
- Remember that reporters work on very tight deadlines. Often they call needing an interview or information within a very short period of time - if they can't get what they need quickly, they will go elsewhere.
- Return reporter's calls promptly and don't be surprised if an interview is needed within 24 hours or less. If an interview is scheduled and you must cancel or reschedule, do so at the earliest convenience. Keep in mind that by postponing the interview indefinitely or by not promptly returning a phone call, you may not be included in the story. Reporters often don't have time to wait indefinitely for responses. If they don't hear from one company, they will move on to another source.
- Use layman's terms as much as possible; particularly if you are talking with your local newspaper or a consumer media outlet. Even if you are talking with a trade publication, keep in mind that the reporter may or may not be familiar with medical terminology or industry language. Abbreviations and terms such as TQI, HIPAA, RBRVS, HCFA and NCQA should be clearly defined within the context of the comments you are making.
- If you are unsure of the answer to a question or if you need more time to think about a complex question, do not hesitate to say so. Tell the reporter you will find out the answer and call back with the information as soon as you can.
- Do not hesitate to steer an interview back on track. If the reporter seems to be missing the point, or veering off onto another topic, it is up to you to steer the conversation back to the topic at hand. Likewise, keep yourself on track as well. With the complexity of healthcare today, it's easy to veer off onto other topics. Check your notes from time to time to ensure you are communicating the information you need to communicate.
- Never go off the record, even if you know a reporter and have dealt with him or her in the past.
- Never get mad. It will only make you look unprofessional and reflect poorly on your organization. Again, keep in mind the reporter is only doing his or her job.
- Never say "no comment." This makes you look evasive and uninformative and this will be the comment that runs with a story. Even if you don't have all the information you need to give the reporter answers, say something. For example, "I understand your concerns and need to look into this issue. I want

- to make sure I get you the right information. Please allow me time to get the information you need and I will get back to you as soon as I can." Most importantly, follow-up with information as soon as you can.
- Don't make jokes during an interview that could be picked up as quotes; particularly during a phone interview. Even if your personality and your expression may clearly indicate to you that you are making a light-hearted comment, the reporter may not pick up on this. A comment made in jest could come off as flippant in a print interview.
 - Don't spread rumor, gossip or negative comments about the competition or another organization. Again, this reflects poorly on you and could cause additional problems for your organization.
 - Review what was said following an interview. If you believe certain facts could have been better communicated or if you are concerned a reporter didn't clearly understand an issue, send him or her a quick e-mail or fax.
 - As a courtesy, contact the reporter after the story has run, thank him or her for their time and pass along your opinion of the article. Your goal should be to develop a relationship with a reporter so that they will think of you again the next time they are writing about a related topic.
 - Update the reporter. If something happens after the story that you may want them to know, send them a note or additional information.

Even after following these steps, there may be occasions where you genuinely believe a reporter has not clearly communicated what was given to him or her in an interview. If this is the case, keep in mind that it may be a simple misunderstanding. Contact the reporter and let him know that you want to make sure his story is accurate and list specifically those areas of the story that can be verified as inaccurate. Again, reporters want to communicate good, solid information for their readers and chances are they will make the appropriate clarification.

These are basic recommendations that hold true for any media outlet and any topic. The key toward giving a good interview and ensuring that you are contacted again is to understand the needs of the reporter, give them information that will be of value and of interest to their audience and prepare yourself by researching the issues and media outlet.

Scott Public Relations, in Woodland Hills, CA, specializes in healthcare, benefits, insurance and technology public relations. The company can be reached at **818-610-0270**.