A guide to working with news reporters

Raising the UC Riverside Profile

For many people, the idea of being interviewed by a reporter is unnerving. It’s a natural reaction. But the interview itself could do a world of good for you and for your university.

UC Riverside is supported by tax dollars and part of our mission is to serve the public with quality teaching and research. Positive interactions with the media help build public understanding of, and support for, the University and its programs. That can result in private funding, successful grants, enhanced faculty and student recruiting and increased ability to pursue our research and teaching missions.

Even when UC Riverside is challenged or criticized through the media, providing a well-reasoned perspective on the issue in a thoughtful, responsive way almost always improves the chances of seeing a fair story.

The Office of Strategic Communications focuses on communicating the University’s story to the public and managing relations with the news media. We provide on-the-spot assistance when you need advice and we offer media training to help enhance your interviewing skills.

We hope you’ll be in touch. (951) 827-NEWS

Key Points for a Successful Interview:

- Reporters are nearly always on deadline. Return phone calls quickly, even if it is just to schedule when you will next be available. Even a delay of a few hours might indicate a lack of interest to a reporter, who may move on to the next university.

- Know what you want to say and say it upfront in clear, concise language. You can always add supporting information, but you need to think in terms of a “sound-bite” that gets to the point and would work as a quote.

- You are well versed in your subject matter, but the reporter probably is not. Try to avoid using “jargon” or acronyms. If the reporter looks confused, ask if you can clarify any of your points. Once in a while, a reporter might be highly familiar with a particular field, and will appreciate your expertise. The nature and
depth of their questions is the best clue. It never hurts to ask how long they have been covering the field to gauge their level of knowledge.

- Accuracy is a high priority for reporters. Their credibility as a journalist, particularly with their employer and within the media industry, depends on their reputation for accuracy. A reporter who gets it wrong doesn’t last long in the field. So lying to a reporter is playing with fire. **Never** lie to a reporter.

- Give the reporter a chance to ask questions. That way you’ll be able to tell if the reporter understands the information you are providing.

- Anticipate the tough questions and answer them in your own mind before the interview begins. If you know something that is confidential, just say why you can’t share it. “It’s a personnel matter” or “that is part of the negotiation process still” or “it could endanger the deal if I say.”

- Don’t just answer the question, use it to get back to your message. “That’s one part of the story, the other is [your main message.....]”

- Campus Communication Officers are available to strategize about an upcoming interview and to be present at in-person or telephone interviews. This has several benefits, the first being to keep track of any necessary follow up on particular data points that you may not have on hand during the interview. Another is to keep the strategic communications office up to date about your work for the next interview opportunity. We always like to know when the media has contacted someone from the campus. (951) 827-NEWS.

**What if the reporter...**

**... asks you to go “off the record” or “on background.”** Reporters use these terms in different ways and if you are not very careful your comments may still be traced back to you. Clarify what the reporter means. It is best to assume that what you say in an interview will be attributed to you. If you have developed a trusting relationship with a reporter and you want to offer something for their own background only, say that before you make the statement, not after.

**... asks a question for which you don’t have an answer?** Say you will look into it and respond soon. And then follow through.
... becomes hostile or tries to “bait” you? Keep your cool. Continue to respond in a reasonable, accurate manner.

...asks a question in negative terms, such as “Isn’t UC just short-changing the students?” Don’t repeat the negative characterization. Just indicate that you would say it differently, and then go ahead and put it in your own words.

...asks for a yes or no answer to a complex question, or asks you to choose between unacceptable alternatives? Recognize the device, say you see things differently and move on in your own words.

**TIPS FOR TV INTERVIEWS**

- You are on camera at all times. Always be professional and polite.
- Look at the reporter, not the camera
- If you conduct the interview while standing, then stand tall, with arms at your sides. Avoid distracting body movements.
- Make your answers short and targeted. Again, think of the sound bite you would like the story to include when broadcast.
- If you can, avoid white, plaid and any other distracting attire.
- As much as possible, be yourself.

**AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

- Don’t expect reporters to show a story to you before publication. It most likely violates their company policy. It is okay to ask for your own direct quotes to be read back to you. A reporter new to a subject may even appreciate that offer.
- If you refer the reporter to someone else, give that person a heads up so they can prepare for the conversation.
- Assess yourself. What did you do well? What skills do you need to work on?
- If you feel the reporter misquoted you, consult with the Office of Strategic Communications before complaining to the reporter or writing a letter to the editor. We can help you make your point in the most effective way.
- Never say never again. Learn from bad experiences with journalists and learn to side step the pitfalls next time.