



Meet the Press

A reporter's request for an interview provides an opportunity to put your store in the spotlight—but you need to be prepared.

BY SHARON ELAINE THOMPSON



Even if you're right at home talking to a customer over the counter, you may freeze up or start babbling the moment someone says "press." But a press interview is an opportunity to put your company in the public eye, says Caroline Stanley, president and chief executive officer of Red Jewel Inc., Redondo Beach, Calif., a marketing and communications company specializing in the jewelry industry. "It reinforces the image of you as an expert in your field."

An interview does not mean free advertising. "The press is looking for a story," says Ellen Fruchtmann, president of Fruchtmann Marketing, in Toledo, Ohio. Writers want something newsworthy to write about, or interesting information for their readers. "Don't make [the interview] sound like a commercial," says Daylle Deanna Schwartz, author of *Straight Talk With Gay Guys*. "The people who get the most good press are those who focus on giving quality suggestions or making interesting statements." Be sure you can discuss

the subject intelligently, says Stanley. "If you're not comfortable with the topic, or don't know enough about it, it's best to say no." Suggest topics you feel comfortable with and offer to help at another time, she says. You can also send a press kit. (See sidebar.) If you decline an interview, do it graciously. "No comment," says Fruchtmann, "is the worst thing you can say." She recommends doing the interview, if at all possible. "Turning [the press] down looks like you're not educated [on the topic] or you're guilty of something."



This doesn't mean you have to go into an interview cold. "The story has a slant and a focus," says Tampa, Fla., freelance writer Stephen Morrill. "Ask what those are." Some writers will e-mail a list of questions or topics they plan to cover so you can prepare.

Ask about length, recommends Tarrytown, N.Y., freelance writer Caitlin Kelly, author of *Blown Away: American Women and Guns*. "Even knowing it's a 500-word brief and not a 5,000-word opus can help you decide the most important thing to focus on in an interview."

"A lot of times you can ask for an hour or a day so you have time to gather and organize your thoughts," says Stanley, though this might not be possible if the writer is on deadline.

There's no reason to be nervous about talking to the press, says Morrill. "A reporter is usually not out to get you." At the same time, you should not see your interview as a road to stardom. "[Do] not be flattered by a reporter's request for an interview," warns Alice Shane, adjunct professor of journalism at New York University. "This can lead to ego inflation, which can generate foolish, self-serving comments you might regret."

When talking to the press, don't say "anything you don't want to see in print," says Stanley. "You should be willing to see it in print the next day and not be embarrassed by it—or wrong."

"When speaking with a reporter, everything you say

can be quoted and printed—so be careful," says Doug Rossi, editorial director of Rossi & Co., in New York, and a former newspaper editor. Unless you've agreed at the beginning to be quoted as an unnamed source, avoid saying anything negative. "People won't trust you with juicy information if they think it will appear in print."

Conducting yourself in an interview with the press is not unlike a job interview—or meeting your prospective in-laws for the first time. Think about the image you want to maintain, says Schwartz. Don't use turns of phrase, slang, or other language you don't want attributed to you.

"Remember that you are the expert in this field, and your job is to help the interviewer convey accurate information," says Joan Price, author of *Better Than I Ever Expected: Straight Talk About Sex After Sixty*. That includes the basics: Give the writer your full title, the correct spelling of your name, any special spellings of the company name, and the Web site address. Be sure she has contact information—phone number or e-mail address—in case of later questions.

"Be as specific as possible with numbers," says Morrill. "If you don't know the specific answer to a question, go get it, or have someone get it, or promise to have that information phoned or e-mailed by the close of business."

Be quotable. The writer wants to make the article entertaining as well as informative for the reader. But don't entertain at the

expense of accuracy and information. If you're not clever or funny, be clear and correct.

"Don't bluff. If you don't know an answer, or you're not the right person to address a particular question, say so," says Price.

"Don't lie," says Rossi. "If you're caught in one, your credibility is gone." Good reporters will have done their homework and may already know the answer to the question.

"Most people feel intimidated by being interviewed because they feel an odd mix of power and powerlessness," says Austria-based freelance writer Patti McCracken. "They are in the spotlight, yet do not have final say regarding how they're represented."

Try to make sure you're quoted correctly. "Think about what you want to say before you say it," says Chelsea Lowe, an essayist and former news reporter from Brookline, Mass. "But you shouldn't overthink what you're going to say. People can be overcautious."

Speak clearly and "in full sentences," says Schwartz. "It sounds better for you and has something substantial [for the reader]."

"Avoid jargon," says Lowe. "Use clear language."

"Make the main point succinctly first, then explain/define/amplify—rather than getting at the point in a roundabout way," says Price. "Realize that just a phrase might be quoted, so make every phrase as clear and powerful as possible."

If you've wandered a bit, or you think you may have been misunderstood,

"Don't say anything you don't want to see in print. You should be willing to see it in print the next day and not be embarrassed by it—or wrong."

—Caroline Stanley, CEO, Red Jewel Inc.