



## Ten Things You Should Never Say to a Reporter

By Bill Salvin

10) **"This really isn't newsworthy."** That's not your call. Would you appreciate a reporter telling you how to operate your business? Probably not, so what makes you think the reporter is going to feel differently when you try and tell them how to do their work? You can offer the reporter context so that they understand the story better. If you do that well, they may decide that there is no story, but the decision regarding newsworthiness is the reporter's, not yours.

9) **"That last part was off the record."** People tend to say this when they make a mistake or reveal too much during an interview. You can explain to the reporter that you really shouldn't have said what you did and ask for a little discretion. If you are up-front and honest with the reporter, you have got an even chance that they won't use the information. The best way to avoid the situation is to plan what you want to say ahead of time and then stick to the message.

8) **"Can you call me back tomorrow?"** Journalists live in the world of today's news and calling you back tomorrow, in most cases, is simply not an option. Reporters are expected to report a story *today* and the way business moves, what's to say tomorrow will be any more convenient than today? Reporters may feel as though you are blowing them off when you say that. If they let you get away with it, they probably won't call you tomorrow but they will call your competition today. One way or another, the story is going to be done. Your decision is whether you want to be part of it.

7) **"You're not going to interview me on camera, are you?"** (TV only) Television without pictures is, well, radio – and a television reporter will expect you to go on camera to answer questions. Most people ask this question because they are uncomfortable on camera and fear they will look bad. A bit of advanced media training ahead can do wonders for people's confidence.

6) **"Why are you covering this story?"** This is a derivative of number 10. The reporter is covering the story because either he/she or his/her editor or news director has deemed the story newsworthy. Reporters can respond to this question by getting very interested in why you are trying to dissuade them from the story. The best course of action is to decide if you want to be part of the story. If the answer is yes, then decide what you want to say. It is okay to ask the reporter who else they are talking to and what angle they are pursuing. Those questions can help you prepare, but asking why a reporter is covering a story can make a potentially positive interaction unnecessarily adversarial.

5) **"That's a dumb question."** To a reporter, there is rarely such a thing as an inappropriate question. There are horribly inappropriate answers. If you take every question as an opportunity to deliver your message, you will do a lot better with a reporter.

This doesn't mean that you have to let the reporter berate you, but when you agree to do an interview you agree to answer questions. And reporters get to decide what questions to ask. If they are asking uninformed questions, inform them – give them information that will help them think of the issue the way you think of the issue.

4) **"I just told you that."** Reporters will often ask the same question several times in a number of ways. They are doing this to see if the answer changes. Remember that your answer the first time had better be your answer the last time; otherwise you ruin your credibility with the reporter. Reporters also ask questions several times and in different ways because people tend to get more concise as they answer the same or similar questions. This gives the reporter some options in terms of choice of sound bites or quotes.

3) **"Are you going to use my name?"** The answer to this question is "probably." Unnamed sources, while common in political stories, are less so in business stories. Reporters are talking to you because they need your expertise and information. They expect to be able to name their source because that gives their report credibility. If you wish to be anonymous, ask yourself why you would even want to talk to the reporter. In general, reporters need a very compelling reason to use your information, but not your name.

2) **"I don't really watch your station (or read your paper)."** That may be the case, but do your customers read the paper or watch the station? In my years as a journalist I never understood why anyone would say that to me. A reporter presents an opportunity for you to deliver a message to people that matter to your business. If the media outlet reaches important audiences and you want to take advantage of the opportunity then do the interview. Whether you watch or listen is irrelevant to your decision to talk with a particular reporter.

1) **"No comment."** Decades after these two words became a signifier of underlying guilt to the audience, people routinely utter them to reporters. There are more creative ways of saying "no comment." The most effective way is to explain why you are unable to answer the question and then move to a topic that you can discuss. If you can give the reporter a more compelling response to a difficult question, you have a better chance of exerting positive influence on the story.

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