



NORTHWEST
MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

Tips for Dealing with the Media

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Introduction

Effective communication with the media is critical to Northwest Missouri State University's ability to carry out its mission and promote continued public support for the University.

Effective media relations best serve Northwest by:

- Informing the public of what we can do for them
- Promoting Northwest's achievements, activities and events of significance
- Expanding the general visibility of the University
- Ensuring that accurate information is conveyed to the public regarding incidents and issues of a controversial and/or sensitive nature

Print, broadcast, online and social media are powerful and influential and reach out to touch people in all walks of life. Just think of the millions of people who read daily newspapers; who get their news online through a number of news and social media sources; who listen to newscasts and talk shows on the radio; who view news events on television; and who subscribe to newspapers, magazines and trade journals.

One of the most effective and far-reaching ways to get that message across is through print, broadcast, online and social media. By communicating effectively with the press, Northwest faculty, staff and students obtain greater public awareness of their achievements and Northwest receives recognition for its efforts in the social, cultural and economic life of the community.

Stories that demonstrate how Northwest is energetically pursuing its mission of excellence and focusing on students not only make a persuasive argument for recruiting top employees and students, but these stories also encourage financial support.

By working with the media in the right way, Northwest can communicate its mission in the best light.

University Spokespersons

The President and the Vice President of University Relations – or an appropriate designee – serve as official University spokespeople and convey the official University position on issues of general University-wide impact or significance or situations that are of a particularly controversial or sensitive nature. Inquiries from the media about such issues should be referred to the Office of University Relations.

In the event of a crisis or emergency situation, the Vice President of University Relations – or an appropriate designee – serves as the official University spokesperson and, with the Media Relations Specialist, will handle all contacts with the media and will coordinate the information flow from the University to the public. In such situations, all campus departments should refer calls from the media to the Office of University Relations.

In many cases, depending on the specific circumstances, other Northwest administrators, faculty and staff will be designated by the Office of University Relations to serve as spokespeople on particular issues.

How to Prepare for an Interview

If a Northwest employee is contacted by a member of the media, first obtain the name of the reporter, the media organization and, if available, the anticipated time of release of information in print, broadcast or online. Provide this information to the Office of University Relations. In some cases, the Northwest employee may proceed with the interview and should notify the Office of University Relations following the interview.

When the media calls, you must decide whether you will grant the interview. To help you decide, here are some questions to ask:

- What is the subject of the interview?
- Are you the appropriate person to answer questions about the topic?
- Who is the reporter and where does he/she work?
- What will be the format of the interview? Live? Taped? Telephone?
- Is it a feature story or a news story?
- Where will the interview be conducted, and how long will the interview be?
- What is the reporter's deadline?

The best approach with the media is to be prompt, helpful and honest. All contacts from the media should be returned as soon as possible. At the most, a call should be returned within two to three hours. If that is not possible, contact the Office of University Relations and an individual within that office will make contact with the media.

Remember that in responding to the media, you can be seen as representing and speaking for the University. Personal opinions should be clearly and carefully identified as such.

Issues that should not be discussed with reporters are 1) legal issues, 2) personnel issues, 3) questions that involve University integrity, such as ethics or issues that may result in harm to others, or 4) a campus crisis or emergency. Refer all such inquiries to the Office of University Relations.

Media inquiries that involve information about specific students should be directed to the Vice President of Student Affairs. Such inquiries will be handled in strict compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This federal law protects the confidentiality of a student's education record. Information that may be given by the Student Affairs Office includes information found in a directory: the student's full name, local address and phone number, dates of attendance and degrees, honors and certificates received, class level (e.g. freshman), and academic major.

Ask the reporter about the general story angle in advance so that you can gather information, collect your thoughts and be better prepared.

Don't ask a reporter to submit written questions.

Consider bringing your own recording device to the interview.

Try to find out who else the media will be interviewing.

Attempt to take control of where the interview will be conducted.

Do plenty of preparation and work out what you want to talk about, and what you do not want to talk about.

Think of the one or two main points or responses that you want to get across before entering the interview, and have relevant facts at your fingertips.

Write down the questions (easy and difficult) you expect – and would like – to be asked.

Rehearse responses with a colleague, friend or an individual in the Office of University Relations.

Make sure your rehearsed answers meet the “sound-bite” test (very short, declarative sentences – about 8 seconds in length). If not, find alternative answers that contain positive assertions made succinctly.

While reporters may have a good knowledge of the background, do not assume this. If you can, offer to send the information to them.

Let the reporter know if a photo opportunity is available.

If makeup is offered for a TV interview, use it.

For TV interviews, avoid wearing pronounced stripes, checks or small patterns. Gray, brown, blue suits/dresses are best. Gray, light-blue, off-white or pastel shirts or blouses are best.

Tips During the Interview

Listen and make sure you understand each question from the media before answering. If you cannot answer the question, or are uncomfortable providing a response, take the reporter's number and advise him/her that someone who can provide the information will contact him/her as soon as possible. Follow up by contacting the appropriate individual or the Office of University Relations.

Do not offer speculations or gossip. Do not answer a reporter's question with “no comment.” According to the trade journal PR News, 65 percent of the public takes “no comment” as an admission of guilt. The rule of thumb for responding is to explain why you can't respond and then offer other useful information. “I can't respond directly to that because it would violate FERPA regulations (or whatever the reason is); however, what I can tell you is that”

Be careful of how you use numbers. They are confusing to the listener unless you help the audience to understand what the numbers mean. Why are the numbers significant? Is it a trend? Are things better or worse? Use an analogy to help the listener grasp the significance of the numbers.

Don't use jargon. Every industry or profession has its own unique language. Remember who your target audience is, and communicate in language they will understand. Do not worry about “talking down” to a journalist. It is far better to do this than to use technical jargon without any explanation.

Make sure the reporter understands your responses. Provide your phone number and/or email address for follow-up questions.

Don't be lulled into the idea that you are simply carrying on a conversation with the interviewer; you are not. An interview is more formal than a conversation.

Keep it simple. Most journalists are looking for clear, simple quotes that can be understood by a wide audience. In other words, speak in "sound bites."

Don't be afraid to answer the question you wish you had been asked rather than the one you were asked.

When conducting a television interview, pay no attention to the camera; maintain eye contact with the reporter at all times. Don't stare into space or look at the floor when making a point. Stay involved. Look attentive.

In television interviews, body language counts. Avoid obvious signs of discomfort or nervousness, foot tapping, clenched fists, frowning. Anchor yourself by sitting straight in your chair or in one comfortably alert standing position. Try to remain in or close to that position for the entire interview. Use small gestures and animated facial expressions. Lean forward in your chair and modulate your voice to emphasize key points.

In television and radio interviews, make your expression match your words. If you have "good news," tell it with a smile.

Never, ever lie. This may sound like an obvious statement, but it's not. Inaccuracies can creep in if you feel unprepared and want to say something – anything – in order not to appear uninformed. If you don't have the answer at hand, it's okay to say, "I don't know." Acquire the information and get it to the interviewer.

During the interview, stick to the key points that you want to get across. Remember, with the media a question equals an opportunity to say what you want. It does not equal an answer.

Be on the lookout for slanted questions, and don't repeat negative terminology.

Don't be afraid of silence. Say what you want in answer to a question, then stop. Silence is the interviewer's problem, not yours.

An effective technique that will "flag" the attention of the audience is to highlight key points with such phrases as, "The real issue here is ... " or "Well, the most important thing is" This will signal the reporter (and, hopefully, the audience, who, particularly when listening to the radio or watching television, may be focused on several things at once) that your priority message is about to be delivered. Reporters love these phrases and search for it in every story.

Oftentimes an interviewer will ask you a question that doesn't pertain to your agenda. Briefly respond to the question at hand and then bridge from the topic to the one that interests you by saying something like, "That's absolutely true, and ..." or "You may be interested to know that"

The best interviewee is the one who actively participates in the interview. If a topic that you would like to address does not arise, ask the question yourself. If you don't like the way a subject is couched, rephrase the subject. Initiate the information. For example, you can make the interview much more interesting by using concrete examples to back up your key assertions. This keeps you from speaking at a merely theoretical level.

Avoid complex statistics. Use percentages or fractions (one half of all students ...) because they are easier for people to understand.

Press the positive side of what you do.

Don't answer speculative questions.

Avoid going "off the record."

Don't let the reporter hurry you into hasty responses. The reporter may be on deadline, but you can still take your time in answering.

Post Interview Tips

Don't ask to see the finished story before it airs or goes to press.

Tell the reporter that you will be available for checking the accuracy of quotes and facts.

Keep in mind the reporter has absolutely no control over the headline or the picture caption and, if one or both is misleading, it is rarely the reporter's fault.

If you have been misquoted, first, be certain you have been hurt. If no damage has been done and only a slightly bent ego is involved, it is best to ignore the incident. "Fanning the flames" is rarely the best course unless the misquotation is extremely serious. If it is serious, contact Northwest's Office of University Relations and they will contact the media outlet if necessary. Your position will be explained and, if warranted, the reporter will be asked to publish or broadcast a clarification, a retraction or another story that would more accurately portray what you feel is the correct version.

Make sure any correspondence contains all your contact information, so if the journalist does want to follow up, he or she knows how to reach you.

Do not send gifts to reporters. It is considered unethical for them to accept them.

If you have not already done so, contact the Office of University Relations and let them know you were interviewed, the topic of the interview, the media outlet and when the story will air or be published. In many cases, the Office of University Relations will provide a link to the story on Northwest's online Media Center (www.nwmissouri.edu/media).

Miscellaneous Tips

Contrary to popular opinion, it is not illegal to record what someone says on the telephone. Most journalists will tell you if they are recording a conversation, but are not obliged to do so.

There's always a chance that you will need to deal with negative publicity. First of all, take the call from the media. Not responding to such a request creates the perception that you have something to hide or that the situation is worse than originally thought. A sense of secrecy will prolong the negative coverage. It may subject you to even more damaging publicity, and if you let someone else answer for you, chances are the answer will be wrong. Before you respond, however, ask: Do I have all the information I need? What can I say? Have I formulated a response strategy?

There's something to be said for releasing bad news yourself first. When you release bad news, you will defuse rumors, enhance your own credibility and, hopefully, shorten the life of the story. Admit culpability without saying you're "sorry." Say "We regret ..." or "We took a risk and made a miscalculation." Before releasing bad news, however, research the facts. Anticipate all possible questions and stress good news, if any, first. Tailor your message to those people it is most desirable to reach.

News conferences should rarely be called, and if so, only for news of great significance. Avoid afternoon or Friday news conferences.

If you are tempted to decline an interview simply because you are busy, remember that the journalist will go elsewhere. He or she may turn to someone who is your competition or who is less qualified to speak with real authority on the subject. If you are too busy, contact the Office of University Relations.

Don't even think about demanding that a news item be used because Northwest is an advertiser or because you "know someone." Nothing turns off a reporter or editor more quickly than the suggestion that because Northwest is an advertiser or has a personal connection or affiliation, your news should get special treatment.

Who to Contact at Northwest

Since positive media solicitation is an integral element of the Office of University Relations, any ideas for articles or pieces that would positively portray Northwest, its faculty, staff and students and their work in the community and beyond should be directed to the Media Relations Specialist. In a similar manner, the Office of University Relations should be notified about negative occurrences that are likely to rise to the level of a news story.

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Other helpful links:

University Relations staff
www.nwmissouri.edu/universityrelations/staff.htm

Northwest Media Center
www.nwmissouri.edu/media