

## **Why Work with the News Media**

News coverage about the University of Iowa helps others learn about your projects or accomplishments and creates support for your missions. Letting others know about the good things that you're doing also contributes to the reservoir of goodwill that exists among Iowans, alumni and friends. That translates into support that strengthens our ability to accomplish our missions of teaching, research and service.

There is no more efficient way to communicate your accomplishments to the general public than through the news media. Of course, as a public institution, we have an obligation to share information with the public, in good times and in bad. But for the most part, the UI—including individual faculty members, researchers, staff and students—and our programs all benefit from working with the news media.

Working with the media can pay dividends in many ways:

- People who would benefit from support programs, educational opportunities or advances in medical care can take advantage of these new services;
- Publicity may lead to productive collaboration, both within and outside of the university, which is an essential component of many scientific advancements or program success;
- Any time a research story appears, there's a chance that alumni and other contributors, venture capitalists and government agencies may want to know more about your project and how they can contribute;
- Your family, friends and colleagues will read about you;
- Most of your interviews with the news media will be easy and enjoyable because you have interesting information or special knowledge to share with the public.

## **Basic Tips for Working with the News Media**

### **What to do when a reporter calls**

*Ask questions first.* Before you agree to do an interview, ask a few questions:

- Who is the reporter and which news outlet does he or she represent?
- What is the topic of the interview and the angle of the story?
- How long will the interview last?
- What is the reporter's deadline?
- Will the interview be taped or live?
- Will anyone else be involved in the interview?
- If the interview is for radio or television, will the audience ask questions?

*Collect your thoughts.* Even if you are eager to do an interview with a reporter, don't do it if they call unexpectedly or if you're feeling unprepared. Ask them if you can call back in 10 or 15 minutes. Then use that time to think about what you will say.

*Prepare your key points.* Whether it's for a quick phone interview with a reporter for a national publication or a face-to-face session with a local reporter, know what the interview is about and what you want to say on the issue or topic. Pick three or four key points you'd like to focus on and write them down before the interview.

*Anticipate tough questions.* You'll be more confident in the interview if you anticipate potentially difficult questions and how you will respond. Feel free to call your public relations contact at the UI for help in anticipating potential questions. We also can help you rehearse your responses or discuss talking points, if you wish.

*Consider whether the query should be addressed by a university spokesperson.* University Relations has a crisis communication plan for emergencies and serious incidents. At the heart of that plan is the appointment of a single university spokesperson who is responsible for determining the nature and scope of the situation, and sharing accurate information with the media and the public. Media inquiries about policies and potential controversial matters are handled in a similar way, with questions being directed to a designated university spokesperson. In these situations, contact University Relations before granting interviews.

## **2. During the interview**

*Identify yourself.* Always identify yourself, your title, department, college and the University. Help the reporter out with the correct spelling of your name.

*Relax. Be confident.* Remember, you're the expert on this topic.

*Make your key points.* If the reporter's first question doesn't provide an opportunity to make your key points, you might say, "I'll be happy to get to that question in a minute, but first here are some things you should know..." If a question is confusing, politely ask the reporter to rephrase, or repeat what you think they're asking to make sure you understand.

*Keep your audience in mind.* Remember that the reporter is not your audience. The people you are really speaking to are the newspaper readers, radio listeners or television viewers. When you explain your research or programs, let your audience know how it benefits them.

*Say it in plain English.* As an expert in your field, there are many terms you use casually that the average newspaper reader or television viewer may not be familiar with. Don't talk down, but use simple language. As Winston Churchill once said, "Short words are best, and old words, when short, are best of all."

*Keep it short and sweet.* Practice stating your key points so that each is no more than 20 to 25 seconds. You can also provide supporting details, but it's better for you to summarize your key points than to leave it to the reporter's discretion.

*Don't rush.* Take a moment to think before you speak when answering questions. Even if you are doing a radio or TV interview, there's nothing wrong with giving yourself time to formulate an answer.

*Tell the truth, even if it is unpleasant.* If you don't know the answer, simply say, "I don't know." Don't guess or speculate. When appropriate, you can say, "I don't

know, but I'll try to find out and call you back with that information." If you are not the appropriate person to comment on an issue, say so.

*Be patient.* Most reporters don't have an extensive background in your area of expertise and need your help in understanding a subject. If they repeat questions, it's perfectly acceptable to repeat your key points. Don't be annoyed if reporters ask you to repeat something, or if they ask to record the interview. That's probably a good sign that they're striving for accuracy.

*Treat the interview as a conversation,* but don't ramble. Short, succinct answers are best. It's particularly important to get to the point when doing radio and TV interviews so they can get the quick-hitting "sound bites" they need. If you accidentally ramble, say something like, "I apologize for thinking out loud there. What I'm trying to say is \_\_\_\_ (then summarize your point)."

*When you finish your answer, stop talking.* If you've answered fully, there's no need to fill the silence; you may say more than you wanted or something you didn't want to say.

*There's no such thing as "off the record."* During an interview, anything you say is fair game. Asking a reporter to go "off the record" is no guarantee that your comments will not be used. A good rule to remember: If you don't want to see it on the front page of the paper, don't say it. Remember: Just because the tape recorder or camera isn't on, that doesn't mean you can't be quoted.

*Never say "No comment."* It tends to have a negative connotation. It's better to be more specific about why you can't comment, explaining that you don't have enough information to comment, you need more time to find out the answer, or in some cases, that the information is confidential because of a university policy or a law.

*To err is human.* If you make a mistake during an interview, don't hesitate to correct yourself, even if it's during a television interview. It's okay to say, "I don't think I answered that correctly. What I meant to say was..." Likewise, if you realize your mistake after the reporter has left, don't hesitate to call. It's better to make a correction before the story appears.

### **3. After the interview**

*You're not the editor.* Journalists are professionals, and it's their job to report as accurately as possible. To ask to preview a story suggests that you doubt the reporter's ability. Besides, many news organizations have policies against letting sources review stories before they are published. On the other hand, more and more journalists are willing to do fact-checking – basically, repeating the facts back to you to make sure you explained things correctly and they recorded the facts correctly. It's also a good idea to provide a number where you can be reached if they have further questions or want to double-check facts or figures.

*Don't expect that everything you said will appear in the story.* You might do a 10-minute interview and see just one quote in the newspaper.

*If you're misquoted.* Reporters are human and thus prone to occasional errors. If you feel you've been misquoted, before getting on the phone, consider whether the error

is major or minor. Then, if you feel the error warrants a correction, first call the reporter directly. Don't go over his or her head to an editor or publisher. If you get nowhere with the reporter, then go up the chain of command. Feel free to get in touch with your public relations contact at the university to discuss whether a correction is warranted or to ask for help in contacting a reporter.

#### **4. Special tips for television interviews**

Because television is a visual medium, you should take some time to think about your personal appearance. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Dress appropriately. Solid colors (they don't have to be dark) or simple patterns are best. When it comes to accessories, "Less is more."
- Don't start an interview until you are comfortable. For instance, if you're doing an outside interview and the sun is in your eyes, ask to be repositioned. Likewise, if the camera lights are too bright, ask for them to be adjusted. Be aware that the camera might be closer to you than you expect. Try not to let it bother you.
- Keep your face open and smile when appropriate.
- Always look at the interviewer, not the camera. The exception is the live "talk-back" interview. In those circumstances, the interviewer is not in the room with you, but is asking questions from another location, which means you should directly into the camera lens
- Gesture when natural and appropriate.
- Stand or sit up straight. Don't swivel your chair or rock back and forth on your feet. If seated, lean slightly forward.
- Avoid nervous habits, such as twisting hair, adjusting glasses or playing with a pencil. Viewers won't pay attention to what you say if they're distracted by what you're doing.

On TV, visuals are the story. You can help make your story more appealing to the reporter and potential viewers by suggesting "visuals." Visuals can include simple charts or graphs, scenes in a laboratory or classroom, with patients or students (provided the people being filmed have given permission), or footage of you working. (If the interview is in your office, you may want to neaten it up in advance.)

#### **5. Your Bill of Rights**

- You have the right to know the reporter's name and the media outlet he or she represents.
- You have the right to set ground rules for the interview, such as the place, time, duration; whether the interview will be taped or live; if other people will be participating in the interview; and whether audience members will be allowed to ask questions.
- You have the right to be quoted accurately.

- You have the right to tape record the interview, as long as you inform the reporter and anyone else whose comments will be recorded.
- You have the right to protect your privacy and that of your students, staff and patients by not speaking about what is not public. In fact, you are prohibited from disclosing confidential information such as academic, medical and personnel records.
- You have the right to maintain the security of your laboratory, office and classrooms.
- You have the right to make your main points.