



Breathes there a man or woman with soul so dead who's never said "Good grief-they want me to talk to the press." Hang around public life, serve on a committee, take a stand on some issue, put on a beef display, and the chances mount you'll face a microphone and mini-cam or at least a local reporter. You don't have to quake in your boots at the prospect or even stick one in your mouth if you'll keep a few keys in mind. Remember your speech class, your 4H project, judging class, or the debate team experience. More than likely you practiced in front of a mirror or even taped your presentation to smooth the delivery and headline your key points or rebuttal. Same fundamentals apply now as then. "Be Prepared," say the Boy Scouts and it's imperative you know your story. If you're taking sides on an issue, do you recall the advice from your debate coach? You were urged to know the opponents' position as well, if not better, than your own. Some basics to meeting the press and emerging unscarred

1. Keep to the subject, especially if being interviewed on television. If your remarks are to be condensed to a 20-second "sound bite", you can appreciate how editing can create a faulty impression. A hostile editor or reporter can reduce your comment to a telling admission or half-truth if you fumble for an answer or respond to a "what if hypothetical situation you may not be prepared to field.

a. Don't ramble. It's tempting to talk on after you've answered the question adequately or made your point. Apply the brakes and gear yourself for the next question which, it's hoped, you've anticipated. Try to set the stage for that next question with your previous answer.

Some reporters are schooled in the "pregnant pause" approach to inter-

viewing and know if given the chance, those folks who find the interview nerve-wracking or flattering will talk themselves into a corner. Avoid the trap.

b. Always be ready to state, restate, or state in a different way your key points. Return to them if at all possible during the course of the interview, and, it's always best to state the summary of your position at the beginning of the interview. You may not get the chance if the interview is short or shortened in the control room or when the story is in layout.

Conclusions first, then amplify if asked or the chance presents itself.

c. Don't be sucked into a hypothetical exchange. "What if some medical research warned beef, like cigarettes, might be hazardous to our health. How would the industry be affected...?"

If confronted with such a tactic, you might feign disappointment with the question and the reporter, but more important, shift the topic back to your key points or restate your policy on some true-to-life actual situation or issue, "Well, (reporter's name), beef producers have to deal and live in the real world. All the evidence coming forward from all over the country is giving beef very high marks for its iron level, B-vitamins, protein, and minerals. Beef can be an important part of everyone's diet.

'What's been reassuring to those of us in the industry is that beef has nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, nutritionists consider beef one of the most nutrient-dense foods available to the consumer!'

2. If you're on a television talk show of five, 15, or 30 minutes, you have some latitude and assurance the program will be

How to meet the media

By Jim Cotton
Editor



mom structured. It's fair to ask the interviewer what questions he or she will likely pose. Should there be a call-in portion somewhere in the program, you're liable to encounter something off the wall and potentially hostile from listeners—there are always cranks and those who want attention or a chance to plug their own opinions or positions.

Should the caller be antagonistic, steer the comment or question back to a key statement made earlier or take off on a new dimension to the topic. A new tack may prompt the host-interviewer to break in and lead the discussion away from the guy on the line.

3. Review your material and review it again. Facts, more facts, and ag facts impress an audience, especially if you can relate them to something urban audiences can understand. Facts make you believable, not just a spokesman with a position. Remember, you're informed about this issue or development and you have an obligation to present the facts and positions of your industry. Take the view the audience needs this information, and "I'm the one to give it to them." In most cases, keep your personal views to a minimum.

Today's viewers and readers want facts, respond to facts, and are suspicious of propaganda. They will warm to those items which offer life enrichment, shed new light, or make them more capable and informed.

4. Repeat the name of your host or reporter. Make them a friend or at least neutralize them. After all, they're your opportunity to tell your side of the story and set the record straight. They may use your best comment on a radio spot for no other reason than you possessed the courtesy and foresight to mention their name.

Should they express some inaccuracy or misconception, there's your golden opportunity to gently, pleasantly correct the assumption. You know, (reporter's name), many people labor under that very misperception and I can understand why. We beef producers haven't taken time to explain that grazing on public lands has produced more state revenue, better conditions overall, and improved wildlife habitat than if cattle were banned from these areas."

If the reporter uses language you find objectionable, try to restate the question



in more acceptable terms. Don't repeat their descriptions. "What if beef is found to be riddled with cancer-causing hormones and residues, won't these giant feedlots and packing plants stand to lose millions?"

"Well, (reporter's name), test after test has shown the hormone levels in nanograms produced naturally in the human body exceeds the level in beef by such great numbers that the two can't even be compared scientif-

ically. And some other encouraging findings are being published. There are factors in ground beef, for example, that actually appear to be cancer fighters on the order of cauliflower, broccoli, and cabbage that we've heard so much about."

5. Reporters may posture a bit before the interview and try a little intimidation by stating: "I hope you understand there's nothing here that's off the record." You might joke in return. "Well, (reporter's name), I guess you've had your interview." This may stimulate a dialogue and again-if handled deftly with humor-can make them warmer toward you if you're courteous and good-natured.

Before they have a chance to respond, you could gain ground by assuming a statesmanlike bearing and stating "That's fine, (reporter's name), I respect we're fair game and those are the rules you have to go by (which is true)." If-you suspect some hostile questions may be forthcoming, try to disarm the attack by diplomacy or being respectful of the reporter's pressure to get a comment and story.

Always consider you're "on the record". There's no legal or informal code, rule, or obligation for a reporter keeping anything off the record.

Likewise, be wary of a reporter setting you up with a question phrased "Off the record, isn't it traditional for beef producers to be careless about injections and vaccinations?" Don't bite. There's nothing off the record when



it comes to publicizing a choice bit of inside or damaging information.

6. Keep the information flowing. "You know, (reporter's name), Channel Four viewers might not be aware that beef by-products are a major source of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies which are shipped all over the world!" Fill any voids in the discussion with useful and pertinent facts. Write the reporter's story for him

or her-make it easy. But again, as mentioned earlier, don't ramble. Have a key point in reserve should a hole open up.

Being "quotable" requires some rehearsal. Plan those quotable comments beforehand and be able to state them with energy and spontaneity. Be newsworthy. After all, this reporter may need to look good in front of management. Help him or her and your next interview may be friendlier yet.

7. But in this vein, avoid jargon. Audiences or readers are not conversant with terms such as polled (use "hornless"), E. T.- A. I.- TDN, fats or fat (use "finished"), marbling (use juiciness and flavor"), and so on. Try to anticipate those terms that may send signals either favorable or unfavorable to a general, non-farm audience.

8. Never say "No comment". If you have information you cannot release at this time, say so. "(Reporter's name), that's a good question and I wish I could respond. But our policy is still under review in that area Or, "I'm not well-versed on that particular subject as there are legal or legislative questions still needing to be addressed Or, 'This subject falls under the review of the committee and they could more

committee and they could more properly answer your question."

If you have no information on the subject at all, again simply state you have no information. Then suggest you, some other department, agency, or individual would be glad to respond" . . . as we gather facts on that subject.

9. Don't stretch the truth or make assumptions or predictions. Facts and honesty are what shine through.

10. Don't use the opportunity to fire off charges or accusations at your opposition. Try to keep cool if provoked. Some reporters are masters at needling and probing for your hot triggers. Remember, seasoned reporters can gauge your defenses pretty well. If they see you're not a hot-head, they'll retreat to conventional questions. After all, they're expected to come back with a story, and while it may seem dull to them, you're under no obligation to supply the fireworks.

11. The National Cattlemen's Assn. suggests these additional techniques:

a. Don't grab the microphone. There's often no need to worry about a

mike in a studio situation as you'll most likely be "wired".

b. Block out all the 'equipment and talk to the host and interviewer. Focus there and the lights, signals, and activity from the production side of things will not be a distraction.

c. Step back from the microphone. If sitting, don't crawl up on it. Leave eight to ten inches of air. Too close, and you "pop" the mike and render a garbled statement.

d. If on radio, try to inject animation into your voice by pitch, rate, and with energy. Don't force the volume.

Additional hints: if on television, especially in a studio setting, you will need to exaggerate your gestures and expressions as television tends to exert a dampening, diminishing effect.

If you can prepare in advance for a television interview, wear a light blue or pastel shirt. or blouse and try to avoid white as it tends to "ghost". Also, those of us who've worked television find rubbing a little talisman such as a key chain, watch fob, or 50 cent piece in vest pock-

et helps relieve the tension when in front of the camera. Remember, when on camera you'll need to project and make your hand movements and facial language expansive and deliberately expressive. The box condenses everything within it.

Our family once had an aunt who functioned as advisor on any number of subjects. Whenever our horizons encompassed some awkward entanglement or development, she would think the matter over, then render an opinion on how the crisis should be handled.

"Well, I would simply ask if I could have a moment of their time and then I would simply say..

These little sessions on what to do and how to handle this or that became family lore. "Simply say" was applied to many situations. "The problem is, Aunt Bea," we would counter, "some of these things aren't that simply said."

This she acknowledged. And so with meeting the press. But given a sense of humor and determination to take and hold the lead-not in a combative sense -but in a spirit of assertive and friendly competition, it can even become enjoyable.

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