



## Professional journalists are not out to 'get' you

■ Friend or foe? Ally or enemy? They may help you or hurt you. Who is it? The media. You, however, have the ability to make an impact and possibly even direct the final outcome of a media encounter.

First, who is the media? A few years ago, they were as easy to spot as plantain in Kentucky bluegrass. If it were a broadcast (television) journalist, usually two people showed up, one lugging a big, heavy camera on his shoulder and the other a well-dressed man or woman carrying a microphone. Or a print journalist might be carrying a 35mm camera, a tape recorder and a notepad. They might even have had a press card if they were with the local newspaper or a staff writer for a national magazine. No more.

Over the past 10 to 15 years with the growth of computers and hand-held video cameras and the popularity of journalism as a profession, the media can now be almost anyone—including a student on the local school or university newspaper.

What's the big deal about that? Student journalists—or any journalist for that matter—can be persistent in their search for a "big" story. They want that byline even though it might mean sneaking up on you to find the next Super Fund site on your property.

But most professional journalists are not out to get you. This insight may be helpful to you the next time you are called for an interview or a camera crew or writer shows up at your office or job site.

While environmental concerns may not seem to be first on reporters' lists at the moment, what with health care reform and

the problems in eastern Europe, they are not far from being brought back to the front burner.

So is it best to stall, hide or deal with the media in a straightforward manner? Here are some suggestions:

**1) Develop a plan.** Presume that at some point you are going to be interviewed by a reporter. A television reporter, of course, has the capacity to do you the most immediate harm or show you in the best light. Chances are very good that only 30 seconds of what you say—a "sound bite"—is going to be used.

Assistants and other employees should be included in the plan. Rather than letting one of them be interviewed—unless you have an articulate and knowledgeable staff member and have already worked with the person on possible interview scenarios—it would be better to stress that they direct the media to you.

Remember, journalists are trained to ask probing questions and do not like taking no for an answer. But many of them are impartial and will work with you if at all possible.

What happens in an "ambush" situation? Be courteous, but tell the reporter that you are busy and ask them to come back at an agreed-upon time. If possible, find out what direction the interview will take; if not, be wary of granting the interview. You might also ask for time to collect your thoughts rather than getting antagonistic with someone who may be looking for a negative response.

**2) Keep a file of the positive things you are doing.** Then all you have to do is use the information as a guide. This does not have to be elaborate: just hand-written notes on scraps of paper, reminders of successful projects or new things the company has done.

**3) Admit you don't know the answer.** What if you are asked a question you don't have an answer to? Say so. If you can suggest someone else for the reporter to talk to (for example, an 800 customer service telephone number), be helpful.

Many times, an initial request from the media is for background. The journalist might just need help getting information, and chances are that you won't be quoted.

**4) Go off-the-record.** During an interview, if there is something you want to tell the reporter, but do not want included in any articles, ask the reporter to turn off the video camera or tape recorder. Usually, your request is respected.

**5) Be yourself.** An interview with the media can be positive. Be helpful if you can. The time you take with the journalist may turn into some great free advertising.

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