

Courting the Media

It's more than getting the interview.

BY KELLY MORRIS

Have you ever seen an article in the newspaper or heard a story on the radio in which an attorney—maybe even a colleague or competitor of yours—commented on a topic in your field of expertise? Maybe he or she weighed in on a recent Supreme Court ruling or a new law and described the impact it may have on employers, taxpayers, retirees, companies, or entrepreneurs, and you thought, *Wait! That's my specialty.*

Did it stand out to you that those 10 seconds of airtime gave that attorney instant credibility on the subject? If you answered yes, you're right. Was your next thought, *That should have been me?* With some planning and preparation, it can be.

Despite squawking over perceived media bias, people still trust what they hear or read in the news,¹ and they tend to believe that professionals who are quoted in stories must indeed be experts in their fields. It should almost go without saying that this can be a major building block to growing your practice. Clients aren't just searching Google for legal counsel. They want to do business with an attorney who is knowledgeable and skilled in the area where they need help. In fact, according to a 2014 FindLaw study,² 4 percent of respondents said that they consider a potential attorney's expertise in a particular field, and 29 percent of respondents said that expertise is the most important factor.

Just as producing great work often results in word-of-mouth referrals, getting quoted in a news story—assuming that you're not being accused of a crime or malpractice and that you do a good job in the interview—is one of the fastest and most efficient ways to brand yourself as the “go-to” attorney in your field. If you are trying to attract clients in an area that is new to you, or if you just want more business, interviews are a great way to have your name associated with a particular practice area.

Getting someone in the media to

interview you isn't hard; any good public relations person can do it for you. Converting those short five minutes with a reporter into a strategic business opportunity, however, takes some planning.

The two biggest stumbling blocks that attorneys face in making media interviews work for them are not taking the rules for engaging with reporters seriously and assuming that their knowledge of the subject matter will naturally come across in the finished story.

10 Rules for Media Success

Remember, a media interview is a high-stakes undertaking that can help or harm you, your reputation, or your firm. Here are some things to consider:

- 1. Be prepared.** An interview with a reporter is not a conversation, and it's not a deposition. You aren't there to just answer questions.
- 2. Remember that reporters are not out to get you.** (Unless you've done something wrong or made them angry.) Take on a tone that is friendly yet professional and confident.
- 3. Controlling the encounter is less important than controlling the outcome.** In large part, you will control the outcome simply by how prepared you are and the words you choose.
- 4. Hone your nose for news.** Understand what kinds of stories reporters are interested in and be ready to weigh in with an opinion or the “here's-what-you-need-to-know” details.
- 5. Learn the dos and don'ts of a media interview.** Just as a courtroom has rules, so does an interview, and they aren't always obvious. Not knowing ground rules can deep-six your chance for success.
- 6. Understand that a reporter's deadline is your deadline.** If a reporter is calling you, he or she needs to talk with you now. If you aren't available, the reporter will often

move on to someone else.

- 7. Before you pick up the phone, take the time to craft two or three main points.** Convert those points into memorable sound bites. Unleash your inner litigator, and let the metaphors and analogies fly. Attorneys can be great communicators, trained to condense complex subjects into short, digestible points and memorable phrases that audiences pay attention to.
- 8. Use a reporter's question as a potential springboard to deliver one or more of your messages.** You are there to get your message across. If the reporter is moving off-topic or going down a path you don't want to follow, you can use a “verbal bridge” to transition back to your point. My favorites are: “Yes, and” ... “No, but” ... “Maybe. Let's look at it another way.”
- 9. Don't talk off the record.** There are too many potential pitfalls.
- 10. Establish relationships with the media.** Reporters are creatures of habit. Be available when they need you. Give them good quotes and they will come back to you.

Bill Gates is quoted as saying, “If I was down to the last dollar of my marketing budget, I'd spend it on PR.” If one of my clients were down to the last dollar of his or her PR budget, I'd counsel them to spend it on making sure that when a reporter called, he or she would be wholly prepared to turn it into a strategic business opportunity. **TBJ**

Notes

- Views of the News Media: 1985-2011. Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More than Other Information Sources.* The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (Sept. 22, 2011), available at <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/>.
- FindLaw 2014 U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Survey. FindLaw, Thomson Reuters (July 16, 2014), <http://www.slideshare.net/FindLawLawyerMarketing/findlaw-2014-us-consumer-legal-needs-survey-37061283>.



KELLY MORRIS

has been in public relations for 35 years and a media interview trainer for 25. She can be reached at kellymorrispr@gmail.com and on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter (@kellymorrispr).