



ARE YOU READY FOR YOUR CLOSE-UP?

Tips for the sole practitioner on dealing with the electronic media.

BY BRIAN WICE

In the future where Andy Warhol predicted we will all be famous for 15 minutes, sooner or later you will land that big case that puts your face on the news at 5, 6, and 10. You don't have to be a crime-busting prosecutor, high-powered partner in a big civil firm, or superstar criminal lawyer to suddenly find yourself on the air. Indeed, most lawyers thrust into the spotlight are sole practitioners, unknown and unsung until their BlackBerry buzzes with a local reporter or network booker on the line.

Of the myriad things that law school taught you, how to make the most of your fleeting fame by being a compelling interview on television was certainly not among them. To make up for this palpable gap in your learning curve, what follows are some tips on how to make sure you're ready for your close-up.

First, and perhaps, sadly, television is a visual medium, long on style and short on substance. As Dominique Sachse, my good friend and marquee anchor at KPRC, the NBC affiliate in Houston where I've done legal analysis for the past decade, is fond of saying, "I get more calls and e-mails from viewers about what I wore or how my hair looked than for what I said on the air." This tenet is no less true for you as a lawyer than for an anchor or reporter. The typical viewer cares less that you were on law review or clerked for a federal judge than about whether your tie was crooked or an unseemly strap was showing.

For you guys who tend to sweat like Mike Tyson at a spelling bee and have a perpetual shine on your foreheads that could shut down traffic on I-35, think about buying some powder and base at the mall or, at least, borrowing a co-worker's makeup compact before your interview. Whatever grief you might get from your buddies will be worth it when viewers are spared from seeing the Colorado River-like torrent of flop sweat on your brow.

Second, nowhere is the maxim "less is more" more apt than when it comes to framing your on-air answers. Because the typical local news story is a whopping one minute and 25 seconds, your mission is to take a complicated legal issue and break it down in plain, simple, and unadorned non-legalese, and do so in no more than 25 to 30 seconds, what's known in TV as a sound bite. If you don't, two things are certain: either your long-winded or obtuse response will wind up on the editing room floor like Kevin Costner in *The Big Chill* or it will be edited in a way that will have your friends questioning whether you stopped off at happy hour before your interview. Remember, in TV land, where today's media gaffe is fodder forever on YouTube, a card laid is a card played: if you don't want it on the air and in cyberspace forever, don't say it.

By the way, if you haven't looked at Rule 3.07 of the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct, the ethical guidelines that govern what lawyers can and cannot say to the media, since you took the MPRE, consider brushing up on what it says before your moment in the spotlight.

Third, if at all possible, avoid being interviewed on a busy street or in front of the courthouse where driving rain, blowing hair, unruly crowds, smoke-belching buses, and blaring car horns call to mind Christiane Amanpour reporting from Afghanistan. If you are interviewed in a studio or

your office, things will be much more sedate and controlled. After you are seated and your microphone is fitted, try to relax, take a sip of water, a deep breath, and remember to smile. If you are wearing a jacket or a coat, sit on it to keep it from bunching up. Make sure your pager and cell phone are off or, better yet, in your glove box or desk drawer.

Finally, in a world driven by the 24-hour news cycle and social media, it is too late in the day to deny that television impacts the way potential jurors view both the client and the lawyer long before the venire is ushered into the courtroom for voir dire. Being able to effectively and ethically represent your client on the courthouse steps, in my estimation, is almost as critical as representing them inside the courtroom. As legal legend Rusty Hardin, no stranger to high-profile cases, has remarked, in stressing the importance of candor and fairness with an oftentimes adversarial electronic media, "I always return their call. I never lie to them. If I can't talk to them, I explain why."

While criminal cases usually provide the best opportunity for lawyers to make their mark in TV, there are also high-profile cases at the local and national levels where expertise in family law, intellectual property, aviation, personal injury, and even probate can get you face time. And you don't need to live in a top 10 TV market like Houston or Dallas to have your 15 minutes, or at least 30 seconds of on-air fame. In my travels across Texas, I learned from news directors and reporters in smaller markets that they found their go-to guys or gals to comment on legal stories for their stations simply because they were impressed with the way the attorneys handled themselves talking about their own clients' cases.

Few of us are blessed with Matt Lauer's or Katie Couric's on-air charisma. But with a little preparation and hard work, your on-air performance will reflect well on you, and by extension, your client. Besides, appearing on TV is client development—free advertising—that might well yield future business. And you never can tell what that one local, or even national TV appearance, can do for you or your practice. After all, household names like Savannah Guthrie, Greta Van Susteren, and Kimberly Guilfoyle were all practicing lawyers before they became TV stars. Like the good folks who run the lottery love to tell us, "Hey, you never know." All it takes is that one shot, a little luck, and a trip to the makeup counter.



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