



Independent Courts Toolbox™ created by The Constitution Project's COURTS INITIATIVE



Working with the Media

Tips for Dealing with the Media

#1 A reporter is not your buddy.

A reporter's job is not to make you look good, but to gather information for his or her news outlet and write it in a way that is interesting and saleable. If you don't want to see it in print, don't say it.

#2 Reporters, particularly at smaller papers, are overworked.

They are also besieged by numerous petitioners. Do not waste their time. Package your story so that it is interesting. Know what you want to say and say it concisely and accurately.

#3 Narrow your message to the one or two most important points you want to get across and stick with them.

You cannot control what a reporter writes. If you bombard a reporter with several themes, the reporter chooses the message and, chances are, the article will be off the mark.

#4 Do not speculate.

Do not answer hypothetical questions. You get locked into an answer without knowing what all the variables will be.

#5 Respond quickly to a reporter's call (minutes, not hours).

If it's hard news, a reporter is on deadline. You don't want your opponents to have a news story all to themselves.

#6 Protect your credibility as a good source of information.

Always be truthful. Provide complete and sound information. Don't try to "snow" a reporter. "Spin" is okay; embellishment is not. If you don't know an answer, don't guess. Ask if you can round up the information and get back to the reporter.

#7 Prepare complete media kits.

The more back-up material that you can provide a reporter, the less research he or she will have to do. This increases your chances of coverage. Include fact sheets, graphs, charts, photos, etc.

#8 Make yourself available.

Check in with reporters from time to time to see if they are working on anything for which you might provide information.

#9 If you are ambushed by a negative story, buy time.

Simply tell the reporter you want to gather information to be accurate and that you will get right back to him or her. Use the time to regroup and prepare and then get back in a timely fashion.

#10 Only respond to published comments of your opponent, not those verbally relayed to you by a reporter.

If you are not sure of an opponent's comments or position, decline to comment on them other than to summarize your position on the issue. (e.g., "I haven't seen those remarks, so I can't comment on them. Our position is that...")

#11 Keep good notes on conversations with reporters.

#12 Don't let an error go unchallenged.

Stories are often complicated and (as we've said) reporters are overworked. They sometimes get the facts wrong. Correct it right away with the reporter. Even if they don't offer a correction, they'll get it right the next time.

#13 It's okay to disagree with an article.

Keep it constructive, though. A wise person once said, "It's always a mistake to get into a fight with people who buy their ink by the barrel."

#14 Think of interesting ways to say dull things.

Often you can frame a story to make it newsworthy. Remember, you can sell sand in the desert with the right packaging.

#15 "No comment" is never a good response.

It indicates a weakness or evasiveness. If you're not comfortable crafting a response *extemporaneously*, see point #9.