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MEET THE PRESS

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Are you prepared to answer a reporter's request for an interview? Here are tips from interviewers and from public relations experts.

by

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Even if you're right at home talking to a customer over the counter, you may freeze up or start babbling nervously the moment someone says "interview" or "press." But a press interview is an opportunity to put your company in the public eye so that people think of you first when it comes to buying jewelry, says Caroline Stanley, president and CEO of Red Jewel, Inc., in Redondo Beach, California (www.redjewel.com), a marketing and communications company specializing in serving the jewelry industry. "It reinforces the image of you as an expert in your field."

An interview opportunity does not mean free advertising. "The press is looking for a story," says Ellen Fruchtman, president of Fruchtman Marketing in Toledo, Ohio. Writers want something news or noteworthy to write about, or interesting information for their readers. "Don't make [the interview] sound like a commercial," says Daylle Deanna Schwartz, author of *Straight Talk with Gay Guys*. "The people who get the most good press are those who focus on giving quality suggestions or making interesting statements."

Just getting a press mention is not enough. You want to be able to talk intelligently on the topic, says Stanley. "If you're not comfortable with the topic, or don't know enough about it, it's best to say no." Suggest other topics you feel comfortable with and offer to help at another time, she says, or even follow up by sending a press kit. (See sidebar.)

If you decline an interview, do it graciously. “No comment,” says Fruchtman, “is the worst thing you can say.” She recommends that, if at all possible, you do the interview. “Turning [the press] down looks like you’re not educated [on the topic] or you’re guilty of something.”

This doesn’t mean you have to go into an interview cold. “The story has a slant and a focus,” says Tampa, Florida, freelance writer, Stephen Morrill. “Ask what those are.” Some writers will e-mail a list of questions or topics they plan to cover so you can prepare.

Ask about length, recommends Tarrytown, New York, freelance writer Caitlin Kelly, author of *Blown Away: American Women and Guns*. “Even knowing it’s a 500 word brief and not a 5,000 word opus can help you decide the most important thing to focus on in an interview.”

“A lot of times you can ask for an hour or a day so you have time to gather and organize your thoughts,” says Stanley, though this might not be possible if the writer is on deadline.

There’s no reason to be nervous about talking to the press, says Morrill. “A reporter is usually not out to get you.” At the same time, you should not see your interview as a road to stardom. “[Do] not to be flattered by a reporter’s request for an interview,” warns Alice Shane, Adjunct Professor of Journalism at New York University. “This can lead to ego inflation which can generate foolish, self-serving comments you might regret.”

When talking to the press, don’t say “anything you don’t want to see in print,” says Stanley. “You should be willing to see it in print the next day and not be embarrassed by it—or wrong,” says Stanley.

“When speaking with a reporter everything you say can be quoted and printed--so be careful,” says Doug Rossi, Editorial Director of Rossi & Co., in New York, and a former newspaper editor. Unless you’ve agreed at the beginning to be quoted as an unnamed

source, avoid saying anything negative. “People won't trust you with juicy information if they think it will appear in print.”

Conducting yourself in an interview with the press is not dissimilar to your first big job interview—or meeting your prospective in-laws for the first time. Think about the image you want to maintain, says Schwartz. Don't use turns of phrase, slang, or other language you don't want attributed to you

“Remember that you are the expert in this field, and your job is to help the interviewer convey accurate information,” says Joan Price, author of *Better than I Ever Expected: Straight Talk about Sex after Sixty*. That includes the basics: give the writer your full title, the correct spelling of your name, any special spellings of the company name, and the website address. Be sure she has contact information—phone or e-mail address—in case of later questions.

“Be as specific as possible with numbers,” says Morrill. “If you don't know the specific answer to a question, go get it, or have someone get it, or promise to have that information phoned or e-mailed by the close of business.”

Be quotable. The writer wants to make the article entertaining as well as informative for the reader. But don't entertain at the expense of accuracy and information. If you're not clever or funny, be clear and correct.

“Don't bluff. If you don't know an answer, or you're not the right person to address a particular question, say so,” says Price

“Don't lie,” says Rossi, more bluntly. “If you're caught in one, your credibility is gone.” Good reporters will have done their homework and may already know the answer to the question.

“Most people feel intimidated by being interviewed because they feel an odd mix of power and powerlessness,” says Austria-based freelance writer Patti McCracken. “They are in the spotlight, yet do not have final say regarding how they're represented.”

There are many things to do to ensure, as much as possible, that you're quoted correctly.

“Think about what you want to say before you say it,” says Chelsea Lowe, an essayist and former news reporter from Brookline, Massachusetts. “But you shouldn't over-think what you're going to say. People can be over-cautious.”

Speak clearly and, “speak in full sentences,” says Schwartz. “It sounds better for you and has something substantial [for the reader].”

“Avoid jargon,” says Lowe. “Use clear language.”

“Make the main point succinctly first, then explain/define/amplify--rather than getting at the point in a roundabout way,” says Price. “Realize that just a phrase might be quoted, so make every phrase as clear and powerful as possible.”

If you've wandered a bit, or you think you may have been misunderstood, ask the writer to paraphrase what you've said, or to read back what he's written down. Correct any misstatements or misunderstandings immediately.

It's important to get it right the first time, because once an interview is done, it's done. You can ask to see your quotes before the article goes to press, but the publication may have a policy prohibiting that. And most writers won't want to release their drafts.

Because you want to get it right, “every company should designate a spokesperson,” says Fruchtmann. “Make sure they're the person most intelligent about the industry, and who presents him or herself well.” Be honest. This person may not be the owner of the company, but the owner's spouse, a manager, or a son or daughter coming into the business. “Choose someone who is comfortable and knowledgeable and will represent the firm well,” says Stanley.

The spokesperson should be “fairly well educated about your business, and the jewelry business,” says Fruchtman. “You need to be prepared to answer difficult questions. Be aware of what’s happening that affects the industry. Be up on what the consumer press is saying. Know what the chatter is about the industry.”

Whoever your spokesperson is, says Fruchtman, work with a PR or marketing company to get media training. “And don’t take it lightly,” she says. Once you’ve appointed and trained a spokesperson, no one else should speak to the press, she adds.

The result of a successful interview is that the reader gets an interesting story, and your business gets positive exposure. Everyone wins.

Making up a Press Kit

A press kit outlines your company’s background and focus, says Caroline Stanley, president and CEO of Red Jewel, Inc., in Redondo Beach, California (www.redjewel.com). It can include a description of the company’s history, with profiles of founders or current owners. Add information about your products and services, maybe in the form of a brochure or copies of print ads. Details of your business philosophy, mission statement and areas of expertise are excellent. Other press clippings serve as a third party endorsement. Remember to include contact information, especially if the company spokesperson is different from the company owner. Put it all in a neat folder, imprinted with your company name and logo.

Use the kit to introduce your company to the press, or to a designer whose line you want to carry. No two kits have to be identical. Add and subtract information in the kit to suit the situation—for a writer, you may or may not include print ads, but you’ll want to include your areas of expertise and some background information. Keep a few press kits ready at all times. For more information on assembling a press kit, see Caroline Stanley’s website: www.redjewel.com.