

# WORKING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

*A guide from UW Medicine Strategic Marketing & Communications  
and UW Health Sciences  
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Online and print news articles, television interviews, radio programs and talk shows are all excellent conduits for increasing the visibility of your program or practice, educating the public and alerting the community to advances in research, clinical care and education at UW Medicine and at the University of Washington.

With expertise spanning many realms, we also are frequently called on by news media to shed light on news topics of broad interest. Sometimes questions involve personally or politically sensitive issues or unfavorable assertions. In most instances, there is an opportunity to communicate effectively.

The media relations staff at UW Medicine/UW Health Sciences can help you prepare to interact with media in any situation. The purpose of this guide is to make your experiences with the media successful.

## Before the interview

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If a reporter calls you, please notify the UW Medicine/UW Health Sciences media relations office before you respond. It is our responsibility to arrange interviews between you and reporters and escort reporters if the interview takes place in one of our facilities. We can also help you prepare for an interview, draft a statement, summarize research findings, arrange interviews, share your newsworthy developments with media and more.

### What you can do:

- If time allows, **give the reporter information in lay terms** (for example, an article previously written about your work, a fact sheet, news release, photos or contextual background). This info can clarify difficult concepts and help a reporter ask better questions. Do not expect reporters to wade through technical publications or textbooks.
- **You do not have to respond immediately** if a reporter calls without an appointment. However, be aware that reporters on deadline and will seek another expert if they can't reach you. If you are caught off-guard or busy when the reporter calls, take 10 minutes to collect your thoughts before calling back or try to arrange a mutually convenient interview time.

- **Think in terms of explaining your work to a neighbor** who knows little about your field. Use relevant, real-world examples. Be conversational. Concise responses are desirable and carry more impact than a long explanation. If a writer wants more details, s/he will ask for them.
- **Know three points** you want to make and jot them down before the interview. One key to a successful interview is conveying your messages clearly and briefly. Repeat your key message near the end of the interview and stress to the reporter its importance.
- **Put a sign** on your door and in the hall to indicate an interview is in progress.

### What the media relations team can do:

- We can help you **anticipate questions**, including questions you hope nobody asks.
- If a broadcast reporter or photographer is meeting you in person, we'll help you **think of an appropriate visual setting for the interview**. A conference room lined with books or a research laboratory are good options. Don't go on a cleaning binge; sterile settings make boring TV. If weather is good, consider an outdoor setting.
- We can **research your interviewer** and his/her work and inform you about their reporting style – direct, thoughtful, comprehensive, confrontational, provocative, and so on.

**Tip:** Prepare a 3x5" card with your full name and most important title to give to the reporter. Keep in mind that if you're a UW Medicine employee, you should indicate so.

### Summarizing research findings

If you are about to publish research findings or commentary that might be of interest to the news media, contact Strategic Marketing & Communications. Please note: Journalists are selective about what they cover. In order for our office to maintain credibility with journalists, we must "pitch" only those findings that we think will meet journalists' standards of newsworthiness.

It can be helpful to prepare a lay summary of your research findings for reporters:

- Make the most important points first, (one page) including:
  - Top findings (using simple English) and why readers should care
  - How does this study advance knowledge or understanding of the topic?
  - When/in what publication your research will be published
  - Number of study participants, span of study and next steps
  - Next steps
  - Public and private funding sources

## Preparing a statement

If an interview is not in you or your institution's best interest, we can help you issue a statement. If you choose this route or we advise it, note that reporters often will not quote a prepared statement in its entirety. Advantages of prepared statements include:

- Your information is presented concisely.
- You are unlikely to be misquoted.
- You may lessen the media outlet's perceived news value of the story since you have limited the information.

**Tip:** Be prepared to inform reporters about funding sources and amounts, as well as any potential conflicts of interest. All such information is accessible via public records requests, so reporters have a right to ask.

## Interview tips

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- **Nothing you say is "off the record."** While you may want to share background information, make sure you only share things you don't mind being quoted on. Even "off the record" material can be used, purposely or mistakenly.
- **Make your key points** early and often. The more you emphasize something, the likelier it will be included in the final story. If a reporter asks an off-topic question, steer the conversation to what you want to talk about. Some good **bridge phrases**:
  - “That is an interesting thought, but in my opinion the real issue is . . .”
  - “It’s important that patients know . . .”
  - “You should also know that . . .”
  - “I think the important issue is . . .”
  - “I don’t have a crystal ball, but I do know . . .”
- Keep answers **short and simple**. Try to answer the question in one sentence, then elaborate.
- **Don’t become too chatty**. Be more conversational than you might in presenting at a conference of peers – but be mindful that jokes and casual asides may be misinterpreted. Don’t let friendliness edge into unprofessionalism.
- **Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.”** Tell the reporter you’ll get an answer before his or her deadline, or direct the reporter to the appropriate person to answer.
- **Don’t answer a question you don’t understand**. Ask the interviewer to clarify or rephrase.
- **Don’t feel compelled to say more than you would like**, or to fill silence. Sometimes, repeated questioning is an attempt to get you to say more. If so, repeat the same answer or say that you think you’ve already answered the question. If the exchange gets to this point:
 

*Q: “I don’t believe you’ve answered the real question at hand.”*

A: “I’ve given you my answer.”

- **Speak in full sentences to be quoted.** Writers will quote you on insights that only you can provide, your opinions or beliefs, and other information they can’t easily summarize. They will often paraphrase descriptions, summaries, background information, and details of how a procedure or study works. **If you don’t want your answer quoted, consider an exchange like this:**

*Q: “Was the coach arrested for DUI?”*

*A: “That is correct.”*

- If the interview is by telephone, **have notes in front of you.** Close your door and remove potential distractions from the room. If you aren’t using your computer for the interview, consider putting it in sleep mode. Silence your cell phone.

**Tip:** Per the state Executive Ethics Board, it is a violation of state ethics law to endorse a product, ballot measure or legislative initiative using your UW Medicine title. Using your professional degree (such as M.D. or Ph.D.) is fine. Be aware of the growing number of companies that advertise or sell services under the guise of news reporting or media relations work. Working with one of these agencies could violate the aforementioned state law.

### Tips for TV and radio interviews

- **Prepare sound bites.** Rehearse remarks of 15 seconds or less on your main points. In TV jargon, these are called sound bites, and they are the building blocks of broadcast news stories.
- **Don’t be afraid of the pause.** Any dead time probably will be edited out of the recording. Likewise, don’t be afraid to stop in mid-answer and start again.
- **Take advantage of second chances.** Usually when broadcast reporters repeat a question or ask it in a slightly different way, they are giving you a second chance because they realized that your first answer was not a good sound bite or they want a different answer. Stick to your main message.
  - Incorrect:** “*Well, obviously the fire did a lot of damage. Look for yourself.*”
  - Better:** “*The fire destroyed the building. Several vital pieces of equipment nearby received smoke damage.*”
- **Your voice says everything.** Try to radiate warmth, enthusiasm and authority. Smile.

### Tips for radio interviews

- **Turn off the radio in your office** or on your computer if the interview is live. The voice delay can be confusing. Use a landline when possible for the best audio.

- **Avoid the tendency to relax.** Energy disappears somewhere between the microphone and the listeners' ears, so increase the usual amount of energy in your speaking voice.
- **Avoid small noises** that you are usually not aware of, such as clearing your throat, tongue-clucking and space-fillers such as “um” and “ah.”
- **On a listener call-in show:** Remember that the calls are being screened by a producer to reduce the likelihood of an off-beat caller. Answer the questions in a straightforward manner.

### Tips for TV talk shows

- **Get to know the host of the program** and make sure you know the focus and length of the interview. Suggest a few angles for the media relations team to pursue.
- **Look at the interviewer,** not the camera or TV monitor.
- **Take advantage of commercial breaks** to ask your host what questions are coming up next.
- **Assume you are always on camera and all microphones are live,** even when you're not talking.

## Body language and physical interview tips

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### Do:

- Dress professionally. Avoid wardrobe extremes, like busy prints, stripes or shiny jewelry. Note that white coats don't always show up well on camera.
- Have a glass of water nearby
- Get comfortable
- Keep breathing
- Use your hands, but don't gesture higher than shoulder level

### Avoid:

- Slouching
- Sitting in a swiveling chair
- Bouncing your leg while sitting cross-legged
- Rocking side-to-side while standing
- Jangling change in your pocket
- Nodding your head in anticipation of a question, which can be perceived as a “yes” answer even if it isn't
- Excessive blinking

## The news conference

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If you are involved in breaking news or reporters call requesting comment from you, Strategic Marketing & Communications may organize a news conference. This allows multiple reporters to be accommodated at once and saves you the time required for a series of individual interviews. You can expect to see representatives of print, television, radio and digital media.

- You may be asked to bring **visual aids**, such as X-rays, examples of the medical device in question or charts. If the news conference involves a clinical research or patient care matter, you may be asked to **identify a patient** willing to attend and talk about his or her experience. The patient will need to sign a consent form (UH 1874) for publicity and recording.
- You and others participating in the news conference will be introduced by the media relations coordinator, who may ask you to give an **opening statement**. This should be brief and in lay language.
- After opening statements, the media relations coordinator opens the floor for reporter's questions. The media relations coordinator will bring conference to a close when it appears that most reporters' questions have been answered. If time allows, you should remain in the conference room to **answer follow-up questions** from reporters who want to talk one-on-one.

## After the interview

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- Offer to check technical points, but **do not ask or expect to review the story** before it is published. This is not customary and could indicate that you are not comfortable with the information you provided.
- **Be available for fact-checking.** Let the media relations coordinator know the best times and the best way to reach you. This could make the difference between a reporter succeeding in reaching you to check crucial information or publishing the story with errors.
- **Use follow-ups** to your advantage. A reporter may follow up with a phone call a day or so later to ask an additional question or ask for clarification of a point you made. Use these opportunities to re-emphasize your main message(s).
- **Evaluate your performance.** Find out when and where the interview will be printed or aired, and read it, record it or tune in.
- If you think mistakes have been made, **be thoughtful about requesting corrections.** Talk over your concerns with the media relations team. Keep in mind that stories may not provide as much detail as you may want. Don't ask them to expand on a study or technique if all the information they provided is accurate. Additionally, if it is a bad-news situation, a correction rehashes the bad news. The media relations team can call the reporter to correct factual errors

in a story. Even if the paper or station won't run a correction, it's worth educating the reporter so that errors aren't repeated.

## Social media

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As with traditional media, if a journalist or a representative from a national news media outlet contacts you personally about conducting an interview via social media, **please call the media relations office**. Even if you consider yourself a social media expert, there are unique elements to social media that we can help you prepare for.

Social media includes online social networks like Facebook and Twitter. It is now established as a major form of communication for news media and the public alike. Expect that *any* media coverage you have will be shared via social media by the outlet or an interested reader or both.

Additionally, many news outlets have begun using social media platforms as a primary outlet for stories and interviews. One such example, used by outlets like NPR and *USA Today*, is a live interview through Twitter — these are called “Twitterviews,” or “Twitter chats.”

- Twitterviews are live and generally organized topically by a #hashtag. This allows for people to search for the keyword later and still catch the conversation; it also allows journalists and our office to aggregate a sequence of tweets into a chronicle using Storify ([www.storify.com](http://www.storify.com)). Examples of a hashtag include:
  - #heartdisease
  - #sleep
  - #coloncancer
  - #stemcells
- Twitterviews are often organized by a series of questions, such as: Q1: what is the importance of 8 hours of sleep? Your response should include the question number (Q1) and whatever #hashtag has been chosen to organize the interview.
- Remember that Twitter interviews are as public as a live press conference. Nothing you say can be unsaid. Tweets *can* be deleted, but live Twitter chats mean lots of eyes on the offending tweet. Deleting is rarely a sufficient remedy for an inappropriate or problematic comment.

**Tip:** There are free online platforms to facilitate Twitter interviews. Please call the media relations office for an updated list, as these websites tend to change.

## Tips for dealing with sensitive subjects

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Work with the UW Medicine Strategic Marketing & Communications/UW Health Sciences. You have options for interacting with media, and we will help choose which is best for your situation.

- **Remember: Patients are first.** If you are a care provider, prioritize answers that convey your care for patients' health. If you cannot respond to a reporter's question because of patient privacy laws, say so.
- **“No comment” or “unavailable for comment” often weakens your position.** If confidentiality or ethical considerations prevent you from answering, say so (examples below). To remain silent or refuse to comment can make you appear untrustworthy.
  - “Because the case is under investigation, the university can't comment at this time.”
  - “The case is before the courts, so I am unable to comment at this time.”
  - “I haven't seen the story/paper/study you refer to, so I'm unable to comment.”
  - “Patient privacy concerns prevent me from commenting on that.”
- **Show empathy and sincerity.** If you must address a delicate or emotional situation, do so with sensitivity in *what* you say and *how* you say it.
- **Try to stay calm and pleasant** in the face of difficult questions. Getting irritated won't help you convey accurate information. Remember, your audience is the public, not the reporter or anyone else in the newsroom. Remind yourself that part of a reporter's job is asking difficult questions. And your job is to stay calm, be sincere, empathetic, and on message.
- **Keep the big picture in mind.** Consider your long-term relationship with reporters. It may be to your advantage to establish good rapport during a tough interview so you can reach out to that reporter again when you want to publicize something.
- **Correct wrong assumptions.** Everyone makes assumptions, including reporters. Don't let it slide if a question contains erroneous information. Instead, gently correct it and remain approachable, calm and confident to help get your message across.
- **Avoid being drawn into spats or disputes** in front of the media.
  - Q: “The state teachers' association is complaining about higher education's lack of involvement in the lobbying campaign.”*
  - A: “I plan to work closely with that association, and I am certain I will have an opportunity to discuss this issue with them.”*
- **Don't accept imposed limitations.** If a reporter asks you an ‘either A or B’ question and neither A nor B is correct, you needn't choose either. Answer with correct information.
  - Q: “Is this a case of dishonesty or sloppy bookkeeping?”*
  - A: “We are extremely pleased that our accountants caught this mistake early. That is the purpose of an internal audit.”*

- **Never repeat buzz words.** Don't echo a reporter's negative statements. Restating the negative legitimizes the reporter's assertion.

*Q: "PAWS says the bone marrow transplant experiment on monkeys is tantamount to torture."*

*Incorrect: "We are not torturing animals."*

*Better: "Bone marrow transplants can be a lifesaver for people with deadly cancers like leukemia. In this study, monkeys are prepared for bone marrow transplants in the same way that young children are prepared when they receive this treatment. We are studying the effects of enhanced bone marrow treatments on a primate model whose immune system is similar to ours."*

**Tip:** Expect a story to run whether you commented or not.

## About the media

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Media relations differs from advertising in that the message and its prominence are not controlled. Advertising is purchased; inclusion in a media outlet's story is earned. **Proactive media relations** involves contact initiated by a journal or the media relations team, whereas **reactive media relations** involves contact initiated by journalists.

### The media:

- must meet tight deadlines and are businesses that need to make money
- aim to stimulate, interest, persuade and entertain their audiences; often look for conflict, controversy and innovation to attract an audience
- look for an angle that will make their story distinct from other published reports

### Defining "news":

Journalists must be selective with the stories they cover due to time, space and resources.

Newsworthy means:

- new information
- relevant to many people
- timely – not something that happened three months ago
- emotionally compelling: sad, happy, serious, silly, dramatic
- different, unusual, unique, controversial or provocative