

Talking with the Press

To improve your institution's news coverage, you can become a first-rate, professional news source

By **Kandice L. Salomone** and **Paul B. Gandel**

What's the first thing that comes to mind when someone tells you a reporter wants to talk to you? If you thought, "How can I make this quick and painless?" you're not alone. It's not uncommon for professionals to equate talking to a reporter with a visit to the dentist. Neither is pleasant, but both are often necessary.

Many professionals—not journalists, of course—complain about their news coverage. Perhaps you've heard a colleague say, "That story doesn't get the facts right." Or maybe, "Reporters always quote me out of context." "Journalists don't understand our field well enough to report on it accurately." And the kicker, "If journalists weren't always looking for a sensational story and misinterpreting the facts, audiences wouldn't get so upset about situations that aren't really serious." Sound familiar? Still, the answer is not "If it's a reporter, tell her I'm not here."

Why Talk to Reporters?

A reasonable question is, "Why should I talk to reporters at all?" Most information gatherers have told research organizations for decades that they use national and local news to keep up with current events and social trends.¹ You need to talk to reporters because your stakeholders keep up with trends in IT, and with your IT organization to some degree, by monitoring the local and national news organizations. If you don't talk to reporters, you run the risk of helping to create a story where no story exists.

Herein lies a critical lesson for all professionals who do not embrace every

chance to talk to reporters:

Lesson One: Reporters, and the news organizations they represent (even student-run, campus news organizations), provide good opportunities for you to get your positive IT messages out to a wider audience and perhaps gain important supporters.

If you don't engage reporters when asked to do so, you will likely feel that the resulting coverage is unsatisfactory. Also, reporters may perceive you as uncooperative—causing more harm than good if you ever face a newsworthy IT crisis.

We all know that news organizations do not merely parrot the events of the day back to news audiences, but we rarely consider how news stories are selected and then framed by reporters and editors. Reporters do not work in a vacuum. In fact, the professional practices of journalism just about mandate that reporters interact with news sources who can provide audiences with the information needed to place the events of the day into context.

Lesson Two: News sources are at least 50 percent responsible for how they are covered in the final news product.

You should feel empowered by this statement, but be filled with trepidation at the same time. That's because good news sources are created, not born. And just as many reporters may not have a thorough understanding of the IT professionals' world, it's likely that IT professionals know even less about the professional world of journalists. This mutual lack of knowledge leads to unsat-



isfactory news coverage. However, news sources who take mindful responsibility during the reporting process will significantly lessen the impact of a reporter's lack of knowledge about IT.²

What to Know Before Talking to Reporters

It's the reporters' job to know what they're doing, right? True—and they do. News sources often think otherwise because their own professional practices conflict with the professional practices of journalism. News sources must understand that reporters *know* how to report on stories. What reporters don't know (and aren't trained to know) is the detailed, factual information for which they rely on news sources.

Lesson Three: Journalists are trained to recognize and organize news stories based on traditional news values, not scientific truths or the professional practices of news sources.

Moreover, reporters have little interest in educating news audiences, although this often happens as a byproduct. Journalists are trained to recognize events that make good stories; evaluate these events based on traditional news values (timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence, and human interest) and the

information they gather from news sources and other information sources; and provide news consumers with the most up-to-date and interesting morsel of information possible—the news peg.³ News pegs are crucial for sustaining newsworthy stories across multiple news cycles.

If you want satisfactory news coverage, be a good news source. Embrace this new role with an open mind, and you might even start looking forward to your conversations with reporters.

Lesson Four: Treat journalists with the same degree of professional respect that you expect from your IT team.

When news sources understand the professional practices and constraints of journalism, reporters notice. You will be treated differently. Suddenly you're not talking *to* reporters (or *at* reporters), you're talking *with* reporters. You are also building important professional relationships that will serve you well when a serious IT crisis hits your organization.

News sources whose profession is technical in nature, like IT, and who are familiar with professional publication often find it difficult to adapt to two relentless journalistic constraints—deadline pressure and story length.

Lesson Five: Journalists produce news stories under severe time and length constraints.

Journalists often move from story idea to completed product in a matter of hours, so deadline pressure is something successful news sources consider every time a reporter calls. Also keep in mind the second constraint, brevity. News stories are short. Reporters manifest these constraints in predictable ways—they're always in a hurry, they're always thinking about when they have enough information for a good story (not whether they have the whole story), and they're often thinking about the other stories they need to file.

Getting *a* story is a very different goal than getting the *entire* story. Reporters don't have time to get entire stories, and it's not in their job description to do so. The rest of the story will have to wait for another news cycle, if it remains newsworthy. Reporters working on

breaking news are primarily interested in satisfying the news audience's curiosity about the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the event being covered. They typically won't go beyond this information in an interview.

On the other hand, technical news sources, once they have a reporter's attention, typically want to get as much factual information and nuance across as possible without taking a firm stand on anything or offering an informed opinion based on best available evidence. Can you see how this situation might end up in a standoff? The reporter is frustrated because you're not contributing anything usable to the story, and you're frustrated because the reporter is not paying much attention to what you feel is important.

Lesson Six: Frame what you see as important in ways that fit traditional news values.

The only way to end these standoffs is for news sources to reconsider how they answer reporters' questions. Reframing how you provide information to reporters does not mean giving reporters *what* you think they want (appointing blame, providing conflict where none exists, or turning a solvable event into a crisis), but *how* they want information so that it can be more easily integrated into news stories.

Reporters have experience with reluctant news sources and often enter an interview expecting less than full cooperation. By necessity, reporters have developed successful ways around reluctant news sources because news sources are crucial to a reporter's ability to achieve a key professional norm as stated by the Society of Professional Journalists—to seek truth and provide a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.⁴

Seeking truth does not mean trying to provide ultimate truth—that's impossible. For reporters, seeking truth means making sure that a story always includes a balance of viewpoints (given deadline and space constraints). Reporters also have a professional responsibility to "give voice to the voiceless" and believe that unofficial sources of information are sometimes as valid as official sources (and provide human interest to the story as well).⁵

Lesson Seven: Journalists seek "truth" by including a balance of viewpoints in their news stories.

Presenting a balance of viewpoints often means providing opposing viewpoints, whether or not the news sources who hold the opposing viewpoints carry the same credibility or professional knowledge. This news-gathering practice is often frustrating to professional news sources, as it can result in stories that include as much anecdotal information as factual information.

Strategies for Getting Your Story Reported Straight

Understanding the nature of journalism and the constraints faced by journalists are the first steps toward developing a set of strategies for ensuring that reporters get your story straight.

Strategy 1: Make Yourself Available

The first mistake novice news sources make is to be unavailable. All of us in IT have incredible demands on our time. When faced with an immediate crisis like a system failure, network outage due to a virus, or a system security failure involving student credit-card information downloaded to a site in another country, fixing the crisis is foremost in our minds, not responding to reporters. However, if your crisis management plan doesn't include strategies for talking with reporters, think again.

It's during a crisis that you are most likely to hear from reporters, and reporters can't wait until the crisis is over to tell the story (and won't, even if you're unavailable). Moreover, it's important to understand that reporters are always in crisis mode, since they only have hours to file stories. In crises or otherwise, it is essential that CIOs and other knowledgeable IT professionals in your organization are available to reporters. In fact, the savviest IT organizations have a media communication plan already in place.

Being available to reporters doesn't mean dropping everything when one calls. Reporters do understand and appreciate that news sources have

tremendous demands on their time as well, especially during a crisis. What reporters don't appreciate, however, is hearing, "I'll get back to you when I can." Or worse, being screened out altogether by your administrative assistant, who says, "I don't know when she will be available; you'll have to call back later." Make sure that all calls and messages from reporters get handled in a timely fashion.

If you can't talk when the call comes in, don't despair—you will win points with reporters if the first thing you say is, "I know you're under a tight deadline, and I do want to talk with you. What times are convenient for you before your deadline?" By asking this, you're telling reporters that you know, and respect, the constraints they face. Be flexible. Offer them the opportunity to talk at odd hours. Show them that your world, like theirs, isn't eight-to-five. The goal, no matter the time or what's going on at the office, is to provide reporters with the information they need by their deadline.

It is also imperative to set a clear media policy throughout your organization and see that it's followed. How this policy is implemented is especially important for the support staff, who are most likely to receive the first contacts from reporters. Author Paul Gandel makes it a policy that his staff contact him immediately when a reporter calls, including interrupting meetings. The staff is also instructed to give reporters his cell phone number when he's out of the office or away from campus. He instructs his professional staff to follow similar procedures. In Gandel's organization, calls from reporters are never "filtered."

After interviews, let reporters know that you're available for any other questions they might have as they're writing the story. This helps both of you. Questions always arise when writing begins, and if you make yourself easily available, reporters will often call for clarification. Follow-ups like these give you another chance to make your point and to clarify factual information. You might also get a chance to provide the reporter with new information that will update the news peg for the story—something reporters always appreciate.

Not making yourself available means that reporters will go with what they have, and you will lose an opportunity. Gandel often hears from reporters after the initial interviews and feels that his news coverage is more accurate and positive as a result of his ongoing availability to reporters.

Strategy 2: Explain the Basics

Assume reporters know nothing about your IT organization or IT issues. Remember that almost all reporters are general assignment, not specialized. You might encounter a specialized science and technology reporter in a large media market, but hardly ever on the first day of a breaking story. With few exceptions, the reporter asking you for an interview will know very little about your IT organization and have little technical background in IT.

Most novice technical-news sources make the mistake of overwhelming reporters with information they can't use, obscuring answers in technical jargon and scientific uncertainty, and providing answers that focus on getting personal points across rather than helping reporters tell a good story. Simplifying complex concepts is always difficult for professionals used to talking in technical terms. It becomes even more difficult to step out from behind technical jargon when speaking "on the record" and trying to be very precise.

When explaining a technical concept or issue, talk slowly and try to keep to the point. Don't confuse things by adding extraneous material. Keep your goals in mind. What are you trying to explain? A good technique is to get an outline in your head beforehand. Make sure that you have a clear idea of the message and points you are trying to get across. Also make sure you have a clear priority on the most important points. Don't come into an interview expecting that a reporter will want details. It's better for you and for them if you stick to the basic, most important facts.

When reporters call, they're looking for the best information available *now*. They want to know first what you know that's unequivocal. In almost all cases, you will have unequivocal knowledge,

so don't hedge. If you try to provide a reporter with as little useful information as possible by hedging and obfuscation, the reporter will come to the completely understandable conclusion that you're trying to hide something. When this happens, you may become a central figure in the story and not just an expert news source providing information to put a story into context.

When talking with reporters, don't use qualifiers unless necessary. Reporters understand the need for technical precision and qualifiers when dealing with complex issues, of course. Be honest about what you know and don't know, and what you can be frank about. For example, if you think the risk of a system failure is low, say so. Don't hedge by saying, "We think the risk is low, but there's no way to say for sure."

If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't try to change the subject, and don't provide a meaningless answer. Don't refuse to answer a question because you need to check on something, especially if it's something you *should* know. Just tell the reporter that you need to check your facts and ask for a way to contact the reporter once the interview is over. Never offer to provide additional information that you can't deliver by the reporter's deadline, and be sure you get back to the reporter quickly.

Strategy 3: Verify Understanding

Skilled reporters will stop you and ask for clarification when they don't understand a technical concept or problem, but novices might not (especially reporters of student-run news organizations). It's important to look for signs of confusion. For example, pay attention to how a reporter follows up on an answer you gave. If the next question is an important extension to what you've been talking about, it shows that the reporter has grasped what you've already said. If the next question is on an entirely different topic or a nonsequitur, the reporter might be off track. More obvious signs are if the reporter sounds or looks confused and stops taking notes.

Many polite and unobtrusive techniques can help you find out if a reporter understands your key facts. Many

reporters will paraphrase key points in an interview to make sure they have captured the intended meaning. If they don't, however, there's nothing wrong with eliciting feedback. A technique that has worked for Gandel is to say, "Would you mind summarizing what I just said? Now that I think about it, I may not have explained that point correctly." If you find that a misunderstanding exists, you have another chance to clarify your point.

You need to be on guard for reporters with some technical knowledge. Lots of people today think they know something about technology. In fact, one of the difficult parts of managing IT in higher education is that we often have too many self-declared campus experts second-guessing our decisions. Reporters are no different. Many have some IT knowledge but not a complete understanding of IT issues. They may have just enough information to jump to a wrong conclusion. What often seems like bias in a story is, in fact, technical misunderstanding.

One way to identify incomplete knowledge is to ask the reporter questions from time to time during the interview. When you find knowledge gaps, you can easily weave the correct information into your conversation.

One sure way to sabotage a relationship you're building with a reporter is to ask to see the story before it's printed or aired. News sources never get "final approval" of the quotes used or of other story content, so don't ask. Period. You can be proactive in making sure that reporters have all the information they need for a story (including good quotes) and a good understanding of the key issues in the story by placing a follow-up call before deadline.

Always make sure you can contact reporters through multiple modes after the initial interview (newsroom, cell phone, e-mail, instant messenger). Ask which method the reporter prefers. Tell reporters that you'd like to be able to contact them before deadline just in case new information becomes available.

When time permits, give some additional thought to the reporter's story and come up with something extra that a reporter would find useful and germane. Then make the follow-up call to

provide the additional information, to clarify a key point that you don't think you articulated well during the interview (even if you did), and to answer any other questions that have come up meanwhile. When using this strategy, never question the reporter's understanding; instead, suggest that you're concerned you didn't clearly communicate a key point. In either case, whether to clarify a point or to provide additional information, a follow-up phone call is one more opportunity to improve your news coverage.

Strategy 4: Guiding the Interview

News sources have an important role in guiding interviews with reporters. Remember that almost all reporters you will face are general assignment reporters who are not expected by their news organizations to understand IT in detail. With this said, it is important for IT news sources to unobtrusively guide the interview to make sure that all the key points are covered to the reporter's satisfaction and that the reporter has a clear understanding of what's been said. Once again, the trick is to do this without giving offense.

Before reporters start asking questions, Gandel often summarizes what he feels are the key points of the IT issue under scrutiny. He will follow the summary by asking, "I know this is your story, but I was wondering if you see these as the key issues, or am I missing an important issue that you'd like to address?" How this opening summary is conceptualized is very important. Good news sources always consider the issues under scrutiny from the perspective of the reporter and the intended news audience. This takes practice. For example, if you're talking with a student reporter and the topic is increasing student fees to improve bandwidth in dormitories, focus on how you're soliciting student input to help you make the best decision and how more bandwidth will give students more of the IT services they want for a price that's competitive to what the same services would cost them if they lived off-campus. You might even ask for student help to get approval at the Board of Governors.

If Gandel were talking to a reporter from a statewide news organization about the same topic, his summary would focus on items of interest to state taxpayers and to the parents of students—same story, different opening summary, depending on the intended news audience. If he only considered the perspective of IT and his IT organization, the summary might be similar for both interviews. That would be a mistake.

Later in interviews, Gandel always asks reporters whether all the points of interest to the reporter and the news audience have been covered. This is also a good time to suggest additional people that the reporter might want to interview. Reporters are always looking for corroborating information and any additional viewpoints that are germane to the story. Gandel typically offers to make phone calls for reporters to see whether the additional news sources are available within the reporter's time frame.

Almost all breaking IT news stories include a "bad news" angle. If there weren't at least the potential for bad news, there wouldn't be a story. When asked to address bad news, don't try to steer a reporter away from it by focusing on the uncertainty of the situation. All IT break-ins have potentially serious consequences, for example, and you must show proper concern to be considered a credible source of information. Tell reporters about the steps your IT organization is taking to improve the situation and when you expect it to be resolved. Confront the bad news head on. If it was your organization's mistake, admit it and take responsibility. As happens many times in breaking news, the truth will come out—eventually—and it's much better if it comes from you. Accepting blame when necessary tells a reporter that you're honest and forthright, which is especially important when you outline the steps you're taking to prevent or minimize similar risks in the future.

Conclusion

Just as creating good relationships with our campus community requires an understanding of that community and

its needs, the same holds true when dealing with the news media. Talking with reporters need not be a negative experience, even when explaining IT problems or failures. A successful relationship between IT news sources and reporters requires that IT professionals have a true appreciation and understanding of journalism.

We've explained some key lessons learned about reporters and the practice of journalism, along with several strategies we've used to improve our news coverage. One last tip: remember that your institution's own news bureau or public relations staff are experts in dealing with the media and may have tips for you when working with particular reporters. Use them as a resource. Consider inviting them to participate in on-campus professional development opportunities for your staff to strengthen their technical knowledge.

As you build your own relationships with reporters, you may find additional successful strategies. Remember, however, that building successful relation-

ships takes time. And yes, sometimes despite all our best efforts with reporters, we may find inaccuracies in their stories and feel that we've been portrayed in a less than flattering light. Success cannot be guaranteed. All we can do is improve the probabilities of success by developing and practicing good strategies. **e**

Endnotes

1. One of several places to learn more about the current news consumer is *News in the Next Century: Profile of the American News Consumer*, Radio and Television News Director's Foundation, 1996, available at <<http://www.rtndf.org/resources/consumer/testpr~1.htm>>.
2. Author Kandice Salomone acknowledges the contributions of her colleagues David B. Sachsman and Peter M. Sandman. All three journalism educators were part of the Environmental Risk Reporting Project while at Rutgers University. This National Science Foundation Industry/University Cooperative Research Project had as its goal the improvement of news coverage of environmental risks, and much of the knowledge gained during this project is reflected in the advice given in this article.
3. A well-respected journalism educator who informed much of Salomone's understanding of traditional news values and reporting practices was the late Curtis D. MacDougall of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. MacDougall published his first edition of *Interpretive Reporting* in 1938. The ninth edition was published posthumously in 1987, with co-author Robert D. Reid. See C. D. MacDougall and R. D. Reid, *Interpretive Reporting*, 9th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1987).
4. Society of Professional Journalists, *Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics*, available on the Web at <http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp>.
5. Ibid.

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