

Working With The Media

Each year, more than 2,600 news stories are written about NAR. Some simply cite a NAR statistic. Others report at length about the critical role REALTORS® play in the American system of homeownership. Outlets that cover us regularly range from real estate trade media to USA Today, the Wall Street Journal and CBS Marketwatch. The vast majority of this coverage is positive,

Seldom is consistently good press coverage accidental. Years of hard work went into establishing our credibility, responsiveness and high profile. Year after year the reporters who cover us rank NAR over every other national association in the housing and real estate field.

Why does NAR place such a premium on good media relations? The answer's obvious. REALTORS® rely upon the news media to educate customers about the home buying and selling process. By reading the real estate sections of their daily newspapers, the vast majority of homebuyers and sellers first learn about financing, neighborhoods, the transaction itself and the value that REALTORS® bring to the transaction. Policy-makers learn about issues important to us through the media as well. REALTORS® and other real licensees keep up on real estate issues through real estate trade publications. The media reaches every important audience and does so in a way that is more credible than advertising—and cheaper, too. If NAR had to pay for the coverage we get in the news media, it would cost about \$1 billion a year!

The fact is that the media needs REALTORS® as much as we need them. Real estate classified advertising generates more than \$3 billion annually for newspapers and magazines. Equally important, news executives know that their audiences are eager for information about housing and real estate. Working with local market experts like REALTORS® improves the value of their editorial product.

Spokespeople who understand the ground rules of newsgathering and who have mastered a few simple techniques about how to be interviewed find that they can turn the media into a terrific ally. There's more to becoming a good media spokesperson than meets the eye. Yet, like driving a car or learning to swim, virtually anyone can learn how to do it with some education and practice.

How the Media Really Works

Hollywood portrays journalists about as accurately as it portrays real estate professionals. Consequently, many myths about reporters and the news media have developed. Below are a few.

Myth: If it's in the newspaper, it must be true.

Fact: Journalists seek balance, not necessarily the truth.

Journalists strive for getting the complete story, but considering the conditions under which they work, they know that's usually impossible. Rather, they work hard to see that stories are balanced. If they cite a spokesperson for one side of an issue, they will go out of their way to find someone on the other side. Both sides might be dead wrong, but the theory is that the truth lies somewhere between two poles of opinion.

For spokespersons, the media's need for balance poses both challenges and opportunities. Sometimes you may get a call from a reporter working on deadline who only wants your reaction to a story that is already written. You should expect only a small citation in the story. Make sure it's the best possible statement by preparing carefully.

Myth: The news media is only interested in negativity and sensationalism. That's what sells newspapers.

Fact: Every outlet researches its audience carefully and creates an editorial product to fit.

There are plenty of opportunities for positive stories about companies and industries. News outlets conduct market research just like any other business. They know people tire of negativism.

A news outlet's greatest influence is not just the stories it covers but the stories it chooses not to cover. Deciding what makes news and what doesn't begins with what the news staff knows and understands about its audience.

News is several things. First, it's something new that has just occurred. Second, it is important or interesting to a large segment of a news medium's audience. Third, news is what an editor or news director says it is. If that sounds dictatorial and arbitrary, it is. There's nothing in the First Amendment that says the news media has to be fair and just.

Myth: The media is monolithic. They all cover the same news.

Fact: Media outlets compete with each other. To understand what they cover, understand their audience.

After watching several different network newscasts, it's easy to get the feeling that somewhere in New York the heads of the networks and leading newspapers get together every day and decide what the news will be.

The fact is that the news media is a highly competitive business. If a television show or publication can't find its audience, it undergoes radical surgery or dies. Big stories are covered by many outlets, but every outlet will try to add value.

Successful spokespersons help reporters reach their audiences. They tailor their statements to fit demographic or geographic boundaries. They translate trends to appeal to viewership and readership.

Myth: If something doesn't make the news, it can't be important.

Fact: There are fewer news gatherers to covers the news.

Few Americans are aware of the dramatic reduction of the number of news gatherers at work today compared to 30 or 40 years ago. Few American cities support more than one daily newspaper. Most newsmagazines and networks have reduced their editorial staffs significantly. Thirty thousand journalists have lost their jobs in the past two years. The only exception to this trend is in the field of business and financial news, where the services like Bloomberg, FNN, CNBC and Bridge News have added professionals on the street. In general, fewer reporters are at work in the average American city today than there were at the turn of the 20th Century.

Even at the nation's largest newspapers, seldom are more than two or three full-time reporters assigned to the real estate beat. Much of the copy for weekly real estate sections is free-lance written.

Reporters are spread thin, covering twice the territory as their predecessors and meeting the needs of America's growing appetite for news. More time is devoted to newscasts on local television broadcast outlets. Many cities host all-news television or radio stations. Every news outlet now has a Web site. Deadlines today are 24 by 7. Stories appearing in the morning paper are repackaged for broadcast and repurposed for Web sites.

The thinning of newsgathering troops has important implications for spokespersons. It's more important than ever to make you and your message easier to cover. Every news outlet has limited

time and space for news; decisions are made every day to cover or not to cover stories of marginal news interest. Those stories that are easiest to cover will get covered. Spokespersons who know how to be interviewed, who return phone calls, and who get down to business will be the ones who are most successful getting their messages through to the media and to the millions of people whom the media reaches.

Tips on Being Interviewed

Preparing for an interview properly involves doing a little research and a lot of planning. Before you pick up the telephone to return a reporter's call or sit down in front of a camera you should know who the audience is. You should know the general topic to be discussed and as much as you can about what the reporter is looking for from you.

More importantly, you must know what your answers are going to be long before you're asked the questions. You should have them worked out and organized in your mind before you say hello.

How can you possibly know the answers before you know the questions, you ask.

It's really much easier than it sounds. The questions aren't the important part. Only the answers count. When was the last time you read or watched a news story where the reporter listed his questions as well as your answers? Only your answers will make it into the story, and all your energies should be devoted to making those the best answers you can manage.

Moreover, for virtually every interview you conduct, you can anticipate the questions well in advance. You probably won't know the specific wording, but you will know the general topic. Speak to that. Know your messages and concentrate on delivering them, not just on answering questions. After all, an interview is a joint agenda.

Prepare for the interview by crafting answers in advance using the techniques outlined in the chapter after next. Before doing that, however, you should review some important qualities shared by effective spokespersons.

What Makes a Good Spokesperson

Spokespersons are made, not born. Often, the slickest, smoothest speaker -- someone who seems to be a natural -- makes the worst media spokesperson. On the other hand, a quiet, shy type may be excellent if he or she will take the time to learn how the media works and how to be interviewed.

Good spokespersons:

Have something newsworthy to say. They research the outlet interviewing them to get a sense of the audience, and they tailor their remarks to fit the outlet's readership or viewership. When crafting answers, they try to anticipate the reporter's agenda. They stay current on news coverage of issues in their field of expertise.

Build upon their expertise. They always know more about the subject at hand than the reporter and they use their expertise to become a valued source. They share their knowledge with reporters to help improve the quality of the story that will result.

Are accessible, candid and honest. Reporters are trained to spot a phony at first sight. Good spokespersons are straightforward and honest. They never try to mislead or confuse a reporter. They know that their relationships with reporters begin and end with their credibility.

Recognize that relationships with the media are a two-way street. Reporters cover both the bad news with the good. Good spokespersons are just as accessible when news is bad. They take a long view of the relationship and they know that an occasional negative story will not matter in the long run. Often they find that by participating in a negative story they can turn it around. For example, a reporter might call during a time of rising interest rates. She's working on a story recommending buyers wait several months to see if rates will improve. When you return the call, don't just say "buy now anyway." Talk about alternative financing packages you're using and programs for first-time and low-income buyers.

Never go "off the record." Forget about Hollywood newspaper movies. Forget about trying to initiate special ground rules with the press and never allow a reporter to do it to you. Assume *EVERYTHING* you say to a reporter at any time, anywhere, might end up on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. Setting special ground rules only complicates your relationship. As a spokesperson, your job is to speak on the record all the time.

Never say "no comment." "No comment" is never interpreted by the audience neutrally. It's a statement of guilt or obfuscation. If you can't talk about a subject, explain why. Most reporters will understand. Move the interview to a topic that you can talk about.

Don't use jargon and limit their use of statistics. Most of the time, you're going to be speaking to consumers. They don't know what a FSBO is, and they don't care. Avoid insider terms and jargon. In real estate, numbers are important and many of the talking points in this document are statistical in nature. Use them carefully to make your most important point. Make them relevant to the average person. Don't say "76.7 percent." Say "three out of four."

Do use anecdotes, images, metaphors and colorful phrases. There's no better way to personalize your message than to use an anecdote from your own experience. Not only does it bring home what you're saying to the average person, but also it humanizes you as a spokesperson. Give some thought to the words you use. Good sound bites often have a ring to them – e.g., "REALTORS® don't just sell houses, we sell neighborhoods."

Know it's OK not to have all the answers. Never make something up. Instead, try to find out and get back to the reporter before deadline.

Never take media calls cold. Instead, find out why they are calling, find out their deadline and call back after you've crafted your answers in your head.

Never ever repeat a negative or speculate. Never answer a "what if" question. Recognize that often reporters ask you to speculate simply to draw you out. Instead, get to what you want to say. Repeating a negative can be deadly. Will we ever forget Richard Nixon's famous comment, "I'm not a crook"?

Correct misstatements or errors quickly. Don't let a reporter's mistakes linger. Whether it's something minor or major, correct a misstatement or factual mistake. Do it graciously but promptly. Reporters are interested in accuracy first and will appreciate your help.

Keep answers brief and never ramble. Stick to the point and don't be afraid of repeating key messages. President Wilson once said he could talk on any subject for an hour without much preparation, but he would need a week to prepare a five-minute talk on the same subject.

Crafting Effective Answers

Few of us were born with a God-given inclination to speak in sound bites. That's definitely a good thing. We would be incomprehensible most of the time.

Being interviewed by the media is unlike anything else you will experience. By the very act of participating in a news story, your words will be taken out of the context in which you spoke them. The vast majority of what you said will be thrown out. Only a small, juicy chunk will be examined, sliced from the body of what you said and diced to fit another agenda.

The average sound bite aired on television and radio today is less than eight seconds long. The average newspaper quotation, if read aloud, is probably no longer. The trick is to learn how to formulate an eight-second answer that will meet the reporter's need for news and interpretation and meet your agenda as well.

The Phenomenon of Filtering

Everything you say to a reporter will be taken out of your context and inserted in an entirely different context created by the reporter. Everything. Effective spokespersons learn how to speak in sound bites that survive the process of filtering that takes place between the interview and the publication or broadcast of the news story.

When you are interviewed by a newspaper or magazine reporter, what you say goes into her ears and comes out in handwritten notes. When the reporter writes the story, she rereads her notes and decides what to use for direct and indirect quotation. She places your quote in an entirely different context than the one you created when you were interviewed. When her story is finished, it's reviewed and changed by an editor, who you may never meet. Parts are cut out. Facts are checked. Other parts of the story may be expanded. Someone else writes a headline for the story and captions for the photos and graphics to accompany the story. In terms of filtering, print filters spokespersons more than any other type of media.

Broadcast news filters what you say in a different way. From an interview that might have taken as long as 40 minutes, just a few seconds will be used in the story. As with the print interview, what you say will be taken entirely out of context. Unlike the print interview, your actual face and words will be used; your direct quote is not filtered through a reporter's brain and note pad in order to make it into the story. In this sense, broadcast news filters you less than print.

At the other end of the spectrum are opportunities to speak directly to audiences with little or no filtering. These include talk show appearances, letters to the editor, op-ed articles, by-lined articles, and the Internet.

As filtering decreases, something interesting happens to credibility. It also decreases. The more filtering, the greater the credibility. Most of us give greater credibility to an article in a newspaper than what someone says in a chat room or on a Web site because we know anyone can say pretty much anything they want on the Internet. When a spokesperson is quoted in the legitimate news media, it carries an inherent endorsement by professional journalists that the source is newsworthy and credible.

The Anatomy of an Answer

Good answers always begin with the general statement, or "headline" if you will. That makes it easier for the print reporter to get the main message and for the broadcast reporter to edit your answer into a cohesive sound bite. The general statement is the most important part of the answer. If you leave it until the end of your answer, you are increasing the odds that it won't be picked up.

Supporting data should be convincing but not overwhelming. Find the best, most relevant statistic or fact to make your point.

Examples add color and depth to your answer. They give journalists the human interest they need to make a better story. Using your own examples may win you more space in the story that results.

Below is an example of how you might answer a question on technology and real estate:

General Statement: Most homebuyers are using the Internet to search for a home because REALTORS® are using the new technology to make the real estate transaction faster and easier for their customers. We're moving from being just providers of information to being interpreters of information.

Supporting Data: Today, seven out of ten homebuyers use the Internet to search for a home.

Homebuyers who shop for a home on the Internet are more likely to use a real estate professional.

Four of five REALTORS® use e-mail and a similar proportion uses the Internet to market properties.

Example: Just last week I sold a house to a young couple who toured only three properties. When they found the house they liked best, the husband said, "I've already looked at every room from my own computer, wearing my bedroom slippers."

Using the Talking Points

Talking Points in this "For the Record" booklet are organized to help REALTOR® spokespersons prepare answers with general statements and supporting data. General statements are published in boldface. Supporting data and secondary points are published in roman face.

Consider the Talking Points to be a starting place to prepare your answer. Before you talk to a reporter, you should:

1. *Do some research on the outlet and on the reporter.* Who is their audience? Homebuyers? Real estate professionals? Policy-makers? How can you tailor your message to fit? What's the nature of their coverage? Have they covered the topic at hand before? With the Internet it's easy to call up an outlet's Web site and quickly get a feel for the outlet, whether it's broadcast or print.
2. *Update yourself on the issue.* NAR Public Affairs is updating these Talking Points continuously, as developments merit. Go to Realtor.org and look up "For the Record." Also, check NAR News Releases. Check the NAR Research Center for the latest NAR statistics and studies. For the latest information on a federal issue, go to the Federal Issue page.
3. *Personalize your answer.* These talking points are missing one very important element—you. The more you can personalize your answer, the more successful you will be in connecting with the people you want to reach. Think about your personal experience with the issue at hand. Put yourself in the shoes of the people who are affected by the issue. Work hard to create a metaphor that will make the issue real for your audience. This is the hardest part of creating a good answer, so take some time to work at it. Have your anecdote or metaphor worked out before you are interviewed. Don't expect divine intervention to save you when the cameras are rolling!