

# But seriously...

To make the most of your next telephone interview, consider Colin Rowan's top ten tips:



**Prepare.** Your organization should have an agreed-upon theme or position that all your quotes and press coverage can echo. Without a plan, you'll probably end up with a stack of random quotes.

**Get help.** Before conducting an interview, bounce your soundbites off a colleague (or internal communications guru) to make sure you're putting your best words forward.

**Seize control.** If you simply answer the questions, you're not truly advocating for your cause. Interviews are also an opportunity to express your organization's position or opinion.

**Pivot.** Be respectful of a reporter's question, but don't feel obligated to answer the exact question asked, especially if you're not an expert on that issue. For example: "I don't handle our litigation strategy, so I'll have to find you the appropriate person. But I do want to stress that..."

**Use notes.** Well-crafted notes can serve as an informal script. Of course, you shouldn't read them like a lifeless robot, but don't be embarrassed to use them.

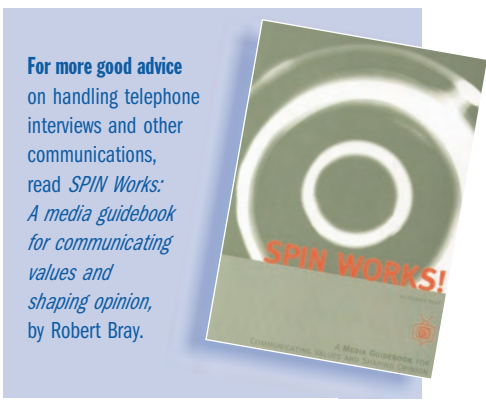
**Be brief.** Keeping your answers short not only increases your odds of getting quoted, it also reduces the possibility of having smaller pieces of your quotes used out of context.

**Soundbite first. Explanation second.** Save the reporter time by giving her a short, memorable quote first and then offering an explanation, if necessary.

**Talk like a normal person.** If you have to deliver several facts to a reporter, do so in a document or email. The best quotes are often opinions or assessments, not facts.

**Knock softballs out of the park.** Most interviews end with, "Is there anything else I need to know?" That's a perfect invitation for you to re-state your most quotable soundbites. Don't pass it up.

**Confirm clarity.** If you sense that a reporter is confused by your answer, he or she probably is. Always confirm that they understand what you said and what you meant. ■



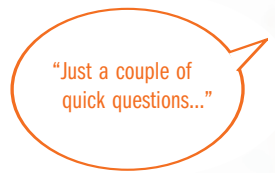
For more good advice on handling telephone interviews and other communications, read *SPIN WORKS: A media guidebook for communicating values and shaping opinion*, by Robert Bray.

## Terrible Telephone Interviews Made Easy

When a reporter calls, a golden opportunity to spread your organization's message can be easily lost. How? Just follow these seven simple steps!

So there you are: squinting at a computer with one eye, reading a memo with the other, stirring your coffee with your left hand, reaching for your BlackBerry with the right. Just another typical morning at the office, except now the phone is ringing and a reporter from the local paper is requesting a couple of minutes of your time. As busy as you are, this is an opportunity you don't want to miss. What's your next move?

Since talking on the telephone is such a familiar and comfortable activity, he says, making the most of a phone interview can seem deceptively easy. In fact, it requires preparation and practice. What remains easy, however, is screwing it up. So easy, that Rowan offers seven simple steps that are guaranteed to ruin just about any interview.



Colin Rowan has a few thoughts on the subject. As a communications director for a Texas congressman, a public relations advisor to companies including IBM and Samsung, and most recently a regional communications director for a national environmental group, Rowan has been prepping clients and colleagues for telephone interviews for more than ten years.



► **Take the reporter's call no matter what you're doing.**

Even if your mind is racing with other tasks or you're still fuming about that maniac who cut you off on the way to work, remember: it's now or never. Corporate consolidation has led to widespread layoffs across all media, so that reporter on hold could be just another stiff on a bread line if you wait too long. Never ask if you can call back in ten minutes, even if that would provide enough time to gather your thoughts and maybe even prepare some notes. Just sit back and fire away! Spontaneous answers are fresh, exhilarating and rarely get people in trouble.

**Respond exactly to the questions asked.**

This shows the reporter that you're a good listener, and people naturally respect good listeners. Of course, reporters may ask you to address sensitive subjects, and some may even put words in your mouth that you would never say, but remember: *they placed the call*. If they're willing to go through all the effort of picking up a phone, holding the receiver to their ear, and pressing all ten digits of your phone number, the least you can do is faithfully and honestly answer each and every question they ask. (And special tip for crisis managers: if reporters use potentially explosive language in their questions, be sure to repeat those words back to them to ensure you heard them correctly, as in, "Steal money from the poor? Did you say I stole from the poor?")



"Off the record? Well, in that case..."

**"Bridges" and "pivots" are for wusses.**

Some so-called experts will recommend using a reporter's question to "bridge" to a different question you would rather answer or to "pivot" to a point you would prefer to make. Sounds good in theory, but this assumes most reporters will readily forego their original line of questioning if interviewees are uncooperative or have their own agenda. Do you really think today's scions of Murrow and Cronkite are that easily fooled? Just watch some of the very best at work the next time they fire questions at President Bush or spokespeople from his administration!

**When they say "off the record," speak freely.**

Given that most reporters would readily sacrifice a good story to protect the reputation of a complete stranger, you have little to fear here. Sharing your organization's secrets or personal feelings builds trust and shows you are an open and caring person—the kind reporters seek out! So speak your heart and let them see the real you. If they use your comments even after promising they're off the record, you will still have the



"I stole money from the poor? Me?"

satisfaction of knowing that you were honest while they were not.

**Keep the information coming!**

Reporters can be kind of dense sometimes. (Maybe that's why they're always asking questions.) So if you sense that your interviewer is just not getting it, keep

piling on the information until they do! A telephone interview is just like those lecture courses you attended in college: the longer the professor talked, the more you learned, right? And try to avoid the temptation to reduce complex concepts to "sound bites." Leave the sloganeering to corporate types who think short phrases like "Just do it" or "Got milk?" will somehow resonate with a discerning public.

**Let your answers show how smart you truly are.**

Only people deeply immersed in your field know all the acronyms, jargon, and technical language that you do—so use it! "Protecting dolphins and whales" is for amateurs. "Preserving critical habitat for charismatic marine megafauna"—now there's a professional environmentalist at work! Reporters may not understand what you're saying, but you'll feel their respect growing with every impenetrable, arcane, and impossibly convoluted sentence you utter.

**Fill those silences!**

In radio, silence is referred to as "dead air," and everyone knows that dead things are a turn-off. When reporters do not immediately respond after you have completed your comment, they are giving you an opportunity to explain even further. So take advantage of those opportunities, even if you find yourself filling those pregnant pauses with things you never imagined admitting to anyone (even your spouse!) Remember: whoever said, "Silence is golden" never gave a telephone interview!



"Did I say 30 parts per billion? I meant million. No, wait..."

You don't have to follow all seven steps to ruin your next telephone interview. Just about any one will do. But if you ignore them (or take the serious advice on the back cover) you can probably expect more calls from reporters down the road. And who wants that? ■