



How to Approach a Journalist

Calling a journalist, whether national or local, press or broadcast, can be a daunting thought. It is vital for a public relations practitioner to have a respectful mutual relationship with a journalist. In reality, both PR people and journalists need each other for stories and publicity.

Preparation

- Before picking up the phone, you must prepare what you are going to ask and try to get as much information as possible about your subject.
- Be prepared to answer questions on more than just the immediate story. Journalists are likely to want more information about your lodge and freemasonry in general.
- Make sure you know the key messages you want to communicate and continue to go back to them throughout the conversation.
- The point of interest should be one of the messages in the press release.
- If you are targeting broadcasting media, think about whether the story will provide a great sound bite or moving pictures.
- Make sure your point is actually newsworthy, otherwise there is no point in ringing a journalist as they will not be interested.
- Check deadlines, as if you have missed them then you may have missed your opportunity.
- Make a list of who to contact and keep it updated. i.e what the outcome of the call was and if the journalist was interested or not as you don't want to be ringing up the same journalists.

Know the Story

Before calling the journalist ask yourself the following questions:

- Is your story newsworthy and how?
- Why is it relevant to the journalist?
- Why is it relevant to readers/audience?
- What media angles are there for your story?
- What else might the journalist ask for?

It can help to prepare what you are going to say before calling. You can try a role play with a colleague and writing prompt notes, but try not to sound as though you are reading from a script!



Know your Media

Think about whom the journalist is writing for - ask yourself who the 'end user' is.

- Who are you approaching and why? Is your story a feature, or news?
- How are you going to approach them? e.g telephone, fax, email.
- When and how will you follow up?
- What will the journalist want - do you have logos / visuals etc prepared?
- Will you need a spokesperson to be available for interview?
- What time are you calling them? Will they be on deadline or about to go to press? The best time to ring a journalist is mid-week between 10am-noon and 2pm-4pm.

Making the Call

- There is no right or wrong way to approach a journalist - although you should avoid asking if the journalist 'has a few minutes' as this gives them the opportunity to say 'no' and hang up!
- Find a style/opening that you are comfortable with and stick to it.
- Introduce yourself and your organisation.
- Avoid giving the journalist too much information as they may switch off. Keep it to the important and essential information.
- Remember your key points and go back to them! Don't let the journalist forget what the main reason for the conversation is.
- If the journalist asks you a question that you don't know the answer to, don't make it up just ask politely if you can get back to them.
- Don't be too casual; keep it simple and precise to enhance your chance of being quoted.
- Be careful about what you say, if you don't want to be quoted on something, don't say it!
- Do use analogies; they can make complex subjects easy to understand and make the story sound more interesting.

Taking Rejection

If the journalist has said no, but you really believe you have a story and that they will be missing out, try again using these techniques:

- Consider alternative media angles
- Ask the journalist why the story is not relevant
- How can you make it relevant?
- Ask the journalist what else it may be relevant to?
- How do they see it being relevant to their readers?
- It is your job to make the story relevant, but be sensible. If it really isn't relevant, don't try to convince a journalist otherwise.



Follow Up

Some journalists do not like follow up calls as it is difficult to be put on the spot and to remember every press release they have been sent. However, if you feel a key media contact may not have seen your press release, make a quick call or send an email with a short note and the release pasted in to it. It doesn't hurt to ask a journalist how they prefer you to follow up a press release.

Remember the Basics

- Be realistic
- Is the story actually newsworthy?
- Keep on top of current affairs
- Finally, treat the journalist as another person, and remember they need our stories to make the news tomorrow