



## How to talk to a reporter

By Dana Woldow

Whether the change your efforts have accomplished is large, like getting rid of all junk food in your school district vending machines, or small, like getting fresh fruit into your own school's cafeteria once a week, you will want to publicize your success, and that means talking to the media. Here are some rules to keep in mind:

### **Keep it simple**

To appeal to the widest audience, figure out a way to describe what you have done in words of just one or two syllables which anyone could understand. As you have probably discovered by now, school food is a complex issue, mired in bureaucratic regulations which are mind numbingly boring, and which rely heavily on [jargon](#). If a reader has to slog through a long explanation about what constitutes a "reimbursable meal", or even know what the phrase "reimbursable meal" means, they are probably going to skip the story altogether. Don't even call it "reimbursement" – instead, say "the money the government gives to schools to pay for free meals." It's longer, but it ensures that everyone can understand what you are talking about.

### **Focus on the new**

Reporters don't like boring, they like exciting, unusual, unexpected. Frame your story so that the emphasis is on the novelty of your efforts. What is different about what you have accomplished – does it fly in the face of conventional wisdom? For example, does everyone think that kids' birthdays and cupcakes are synonymous, but your school has instituted a policy of only "healthy happy birthdays", and the kids love it? School cupcake bans, both real and proposed, are not novel, but a school where students embrace the concept, and parents willingly send colorful fruit salad, or visit class to do a craft project as a popular alternative to a cupcake celebration, is news.

### **Use sound bites**

While you may be tempted to speak in paragraphs, it works better with reporters, especially radio and TV, to talk in sound bites – short pithy sentences that get to the heart of the issue. For example, "Just because a food is less bad for you doesn't make it good for you" or "You can't put a price on children's health." Make sure that you come to a full stop at the end of each sentence, and pause for just a split second before beginning the next sentence; this makes it easier to edit the final tape. Don't let your inflection rise at the end of the sentence (as so many of us unconsciously do, as if we are asking for the listener's agreement), or you risk sounding like you are questioning your own comment. Deliver each sentence as if it is the only one which will be used in the report, because it may well be.

### **Make it easy**

No one wants to do more work than they have to, and reporters are no exception, especially as they may be on deadline for several stories at once, and their time is precious. If you can arrange

permission in advance for a reporter to conduct interviews or film on your school campus, and line up the Principal or a teacher to be interviewed, and get permission from the parents of a couple of students to talk to the reporter, then you have saved that reporter a ton of work, and built a reputation for yourself as a source who not only provides a good story, but who makes it really easy to cover the story. That's the kind of source who gets called again and again.

### **Be careful with numbers**

A surprising number of reporters are uncomfortable with math. When using numbers to tell your story, make sure you present the figures just as you want them to be reported; don't leave any calculations for the reporter to have to do on his own. For example, if your school district is only able to spend \$1.25 of the current (in 2010-11) \$2.72 free lunch reimbursement on food, because the rest goes for labor and overhead, don't count on the reporter to figure out that more is being spent on labor etc than on food. Do the math for him. Present your data in the most compelling fashion. If 40 students ate breakfast at your school before you made some positive change, and now 60 students are eating, which sounds better – an increase of 20 students, or an increase of 50%? Both are accurate, but don't count on the reporter to be able to figure out that in this case, 20 more students equals a 50% increase. Spell it out for him and for his audience. And reporters aren't the only Americans who are math challenged; most Americans' eyes glaze over the minute you use a term like "percentage point", so don't go overboard on numbers.

### **Don't expect the media to tell your whole story**

It is not at all uncommon to talk to a reporter for 45 minutes, only to find that just one or two sentences of yours have been quoted in the final piece. This is why it is so important to decide what the single most important statement is that you want the world to hear about your efforts, and frame it in the most media-friendly way. "Kids WILL eat healthy food if it looks good and tastes good" or "The grant we got means that every single day at school, our students will be having fresh fruit instead of canned fruit." You can give all the details after, but make sure you lead with your headline, because often that is the only quote you will get.

### **Respect their deadline**

Whether the story is for the Sunday paper or today's five o'clock news, there is usually a deadline in journalism and if you miss it, you lose your chance to get your story told. If you have sent out a press release, most of the response will come within the first 48 hours, so be ready with your quotable quotes. A radio reporter may call you up and expect to do an interview over the phone right then and there. If you have to call him back because you aren't ready with your sound bites, he may already have found someone else to talk to.

### **Make the story your own**

If the reporter is responding to your press release, or just describes the proposed article as being vaguely about "what's new in school food", take control and tell the reporter what her story should be about. You are the expert – that's why she called you – so rather than waiting for her questions, jump right in and tell her what the big news is. Often reporters don't exactly know what their story will be until they start to talk to the players. They are looking for an angle, and if you can provide a good one (see "Focus on the new", above) then that may become the focus of the story.

### **If you don't like the question, make up your own**

I have worked with high school students, helping them learn to be advocates, and one thing I always tell them before they are interviewed is that if they don't know the answer to a question, they don't have to answer it, but they can instead use the opportunity to talk about what they think is important. If a reporter asks you something you don't know about, just say, "I don't know, but I'll tell you what the REAL story is here, it's (make your pitch)." Often the questions reporters prepare are just a device to get you talking, and they don't really care if you answer that specific question or not, so long as you end up giving them a quote they can use in their story.

### **Give them what they need**

Once you have built a reputation as a local school food advocate, you may get called for a quote by a reporter doing a story which is only vaguely connected to school food. For example, your state may be considering a junk food tax. The reporter needs a quote from someone who has some level of expertise in the subject, not just a random person on the street. In this situation, you want to provide a quote which links the point of the story to your efforts; for example, "By driving up the price of the unhealthy options, a junk food tax would support our efforts at (name your school) to get students to make healthier snack choices." Understand that the story is not always going to be about you and your work, but being called by a reporter to give a quote for an unrelated story shows that you have arrived as an authority on kids and food.

### **Try for a twofer**

As the number of staff employed by newspapers, radio and TV stations shrinks, more and more reporters are being expected to generate their own story ideas, and to bring back two stories when they were only sent out to cover one. The major cost is sending the reporter out to interview you; once she is there, if you can deliver a second story, or even inspire another story idea which the reporter will write at a later time (again using you as a source for that story), then that makes the reporter look super productive and cost-effective to her boss. If she is there to talk about the proposed junk food tax, talk about it, but also let her know that your school did a project which showed that students are happy to have birthday parties without cupcakes so long as there is something special (like fruit salad or a craft project) to mark the occasion. Even if she doesn't use your second story idea, it shows you are a valuable resource not just for quotes but also for story ideas.

### **Follow up**

Be sure to get the reporter's e-mail contact, and after the interview, follow up with a brief note, officially to say "Thanks and feel free to call me if you have any additional questions", but which also reiterates your most important points. This serves two purposes – it makes sure that the reporter has an exact quote from you, and it encourages her to use that quote. If you used numbers at all in your interview, make sure the reporter has them clearly in writing from you, as well as any graphs or charts you may have created to help illustrate your numbers.

### **Be realistic about the outcome**

Although the reporter promised you the story would air on the five 'clock news, he really has no control over that. It may get bumped by a bad traffic accident right before rush hour, or any of dozens of other late breaking events. Most school food stories don't have an expiration date, so it

will likely air in another day or two. Newspaper headlines are rarely written by the reporter who covered the story, and most articles will be edited by someone other than the reporter, meaning that while you may have been featured prominently in the original version, someone other than the reporter may have cut some of the material. Even if you get dropped from the story entirely, or are presented in what you feel is a less than flattering light, don't call up the reporter and yell at him. All that does is make it unlikely he will ever use you as a source in the future. Keep in mind that no matter how badly you think you came off, 24 hours after the piece runs, no one will remember a single word you said. All they will remember is that they saw you on TV, or heard you on the radio, or saw you quoted in the newspaper, so you must really know what you are talking about!

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