



NATIONAL CENTER FOR APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

MEDIA TIPS for FARMERS

Prepared by New Farm Media, New Farm Institute
512-484-2746, www.newfarminstitute.org

Making the Most of Your Interview

Learning how to work with reporters is one of the best investments you can make in your farm. When you become a trusted media source, the reward is often free media coverage, something that costs thousands if you had to buy similar attention. As your expertise increases, you will become an ambassador, not only for your farm, but for sustainable farming in your region. Making an effort to strengthen your media skills supports good, clean, fair food and makes farming easier for all.

Fortunately, developing media relations skills is relatively easy. This simple guide takes you through the essential steps.

Understanding Media

The first step is to think like a reporter. Reporters, regardless of whether they work for an online publication, radio program or weekly newspaper, seek the same things, which include:

- News
- Honesty
- A good story with a beginning, middle, and end
- A local angle , e.g., “Eat Local Week”
- Sound bites
- Compelling images
- Column items – more than a one day article, called a “story with legs”

As a farmer, it's likely that your business has all of these elements. You should be confident that:

- YOU are the expert, not the reporters
- YOU can drive the interview
- YOU can be as prepared as you choose to be
- YOU are in control
- YOU will have many other media opportunities
- YOU can generate income from positive media coverage!

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Prepare Your Key Messages

Why are you doing the interview? What do you want your audience to know about your farm or product? Setting a goal will help you shape your key messages or sound bites. To arrive at your key messages – typically three short phrases – begin by crafting an “elevator speech.” Imagine you are on an elevator with a stranger who has asked about your farm. What do you want them to know before the doors open?

Writing a rough draft of a conversational paragraph will get you started:

Our farm makes more value-added products in the area than any other farm. We've been doing this for 20 years and are always thinking about making new ones. We also like teaching classes and showing people around the farm. Thinking about putting in a commercial kitchen, too.

Now, take that raw material and sculpt it into a finer form. Use specific, action words to paint a picture:

At Smith Farm, we love to grow fruit and make award-winning jams and jellies. At smithfarm.com you can buy more than 25 of our products, including our best selling peach preserves, and sign up for our holiday cooking classes, too.

Remember: the average quote in print media is 16 words; and in broadcast media, it's just nine words. Keep it short and sweet to ensure it's memorable.

Basic Rules of an Interview

Before answering questions, you should understand the reporters' expertise and goals. A reporter on deadline who needs a quick quote to wrap up a story is very different from someone doing an in-depth investigative piece. Therefore, begin by asking:

- What is the reporter's usual beat
- What is the reporter's knowledge of farming
- When will the story appear
- Who else is being interviewed
- How long is the piece, how much will feature you

Likewise, there are questions you should not ask and assumptions you should not make:

- Do not ask to preview or edit the story before it appears
- Do not offer product in exchange for favorable coverage
- Do not confuse advertising (paid space) with editorial/reporting
- Do not confuse an interview for a conversation

To prepare yourself:

- Brainstorm all possible questions -- especially the negative ones. Consider national news as reporters often need local sources to comment on these issues.
- Allow enough uninterrupted time to prepare
- Wear clothes appropriate to your role (no stripes, logo t-shirts)
- Do whatever makes you feel relaxed, confident

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Interview Techniques

A good reporter makes you feel like you're talking with a friend. As you become more at ease, you tend to reveal more. But is that conversation strategic? Are you getting your point across? While interviews can be conversational, they are not a conversation. A reporter is a conduit to the audience you want to reach. You want to be certain that your message gets through.

Directing a reporter to the information you feel is most important can be accomplished using techniques, including:

- Bridging – redirect the interview to your talking points
- Flagging – “The most important thing is...”
- Rephrasing – turn a negative into a positive (but do not to repeat a negative)

Bridging must be done skillfully after answering a question directly. You do not want to stonewall, but you do want a smooth transition that allows you to stay in control of an interview and stick to your message.

Imagine you want to increase sales for a value-added product, and a local reporter calls seeking comment on a national story: “What steps are you taking to ensure that your salsa doesn't poison people like it did in California?” Rather than repeat a negative or begin discussing the nitty gritty of HACCP regulations, you want to bring the interview back to what you know. Do so by meeting this question with a bridging response: “For the past ten years, our certified organic farm has had regular in-depth inspections to ensure we deliver the highest quality food possible. I think that's why our customers love our salsas. They trust us.”

Flagging is a technique that lets the reporter know you are about to provide crucial information. You draw attention to those points simply by saying, “Let me tell you the most important aspect of this issue...” or “Your question gets right to the heart of the matter ...” or “There are three facts your readers need to know...” Your goal is to gently take control of an interview, steering a reporter to the meat of your story.

Universal Fundamentals

All interviews require preparation. At the very least, you should do a background search on the reporter to better understand their media outlet and reporting style. Below are factors to keep in mind for a variety of different media.

The Three Nevers

- Never lie
- Never say “no comment”
- Never argue with a reporter - you'll lose

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Ten Golden Rules

1. Prepare, prepare, prepare – talking points are key
2. Begin with your most important message
3. Don't answer hypothetical questions. Insist on talking about what you know, not "what ifs"
4. Use "first", "best", "only" descriptions
5. Say "at (name your farm)" often
6. If you don't know the answer, say so, don't guess
7. Keep it Simple. Do not use acronyms or assume reporter understands basic farming concepts.
8. Don't be defensive or angry, they'll use it
9. An interview is not a conversation
10. Nothing is off the record. Ever.

Different Formats, Different Preparation

Live Radio Interviews

- Prepare – OUT LOUD
- Disable call waiting
- Use a landline whenever possible to ensure good reception
- It's live – good news, bad news
- Smile with your voice – speak in front of a mirror
- Speak lower and slower
- Repeat key messages
- Stay energized -- sit up, stand, or walk
- Remember the reporter/DJ is an entertainer

Telephone Interviews with Print Reporters

- Prepare – OUT LOUD
- Use landline whenever possible
- Disable call waiting
- Use a cheat sheet of key messages to drive the interview
- Smile with your voice
- Take your time, repeat important information

On-Farm Interviews

- Good news – more time
- Bad news – no direct audience connection
- You're "on" for longer, even as reporter leaves
- Be sure to display your products, stand in front of your signage
- Print reporters love word play, catchy phrases
- Broadcast reporters will take b-roll footage of farm; be sure entrance/setting is tidy and restrict access to dangerous/unattractive areas as needed

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TV In-Studio Interviews

- Prepare – OUT LOUD
- Arrive 30 minutes early
- It's live – good news, bad news
- Ask reporter where you should look when answering questions
- Sit up straight, lean forward, use your hands, beware of body image
- Smile, be passionate
- If it is a taped program, stop tape if you need to redo your answer. This is **not** possible with a live program.

Post-Interview Evaluation

- What could you do differently next time?
- Did you get to every talking point?
- How nervous were you?
- Any unexpected questions?

Next Steps

- Mark your calendar for when the story breaks so you get a copy
- Post media coverage to social media/website, distribute at farmers' markets, mail to customers, etc.
- Write simple thank you to reporter
- Add reporter contact to your telephone/ mailing list
- Within 6 months, pitch the reporter another story

Be Yourself

Your expertise is valuable and you should not hesitate to share it. As you grow more comfortable speaking with the media, look for opportunities to promote your farm. Reporters are always on the hunt for a good story. You've got one. Help them find it and your farm will reap the reward.