

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: INDUSTRY TIPS “TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK A REPORTER”

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THE FIVE WS - WHO, WHAT, WHY, WHERE AND WHEN - ARE THE STAPLES OF JOURNALISM. THEY ARE THE ROOT OF ANY QUESTIONS THAT REPORTERS ASK US AND OUR CLIENTS.



IF THE FIVE WS ARE THE REPORTER'S STARTING POINT, HOW MANY OF US HAVE A STANDARD SET OF QUESTIONS THAT WE ASK A REPORTER?

WE RECOMMEND THAT PR PRACTITIONERS AND THEIR CLIENTS ASK REPORTERS AT LEAST AS MANY QUESTIONS AS THEY ASK YOU. QUESTIONS ELICIT INFORMATION AND LEAD TO GREATER CONTROL AND IMPACT ON THE JOURNALISTIC PROCESS. THESE QUESTIONS AREN'T HARD AND FAST GUIDELINES FOR EVERY CONVERSATION WITH A REPORTER. NOT ALL QUESTIONS APPLY TO ALL REPORTERS, ESPECIALLY REPORTERS WITH WHOM YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP.

THE BOTTOM LINE: IT'S IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE IN A DIALOGUE WITH THE REPORTER.

THE QUESTIONS TO ASK:

WHO ARE YOU? THIS QUESTION IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR NEW REPORTERS ON THE BEAT, FOR FREELANCERS AND UNKNOWN PUBLICATIONS, INCLUDING WEB ZINES. WE'VE EVEN SEEN COMPETITORS HIRE "RESEARCHERS" TO POSE AS REPORTERS TO GAIN INFORMATION.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM? THIS QUESTION CAN ELICIT INFORMATION ABOUT A PUBLICATION'S BIAS. THERE ARE SOME PUBLICATIONS AND PROGRAMS THAT WE POLITELY TURN DOWN. WHILE YOU CAN'T KEEP A FREELANCER (OR ANY REPORTER) FROM REUSING INFORMATION IN SUBSEQUENT STORIES, IT HELPS TO KNOW WHERE HE/SHE EXPECTS THE FIRST USE.

WHAT HAVE YOU WRITTEN ABOUT THIS SUBJECT BEFORE? IF YOU'RE DEALING WITH AN EXPERT, WE PREPARE DIFFERENTLY THAN WITH SOMEONE JUST STARTING A BEAT. AND SINCE WORKING WITH REPORTERS IS ALSO ABOUT BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, IT'S GREAT TO BEGIN A CONVERSATION WITH, "I JUST SAW YOUR ARTICLE."

WHAT'S YOUR DEADLINE? THIS IS AN EASY ONE. THE ANSWER, HOWEVER, WHEN COUPLED WITH QUESTION NO. 5, CAN LEAD TO MORE OPPORTUNITY. WE HAVE A 40 PERCENT RULE. ASSUME YOU'RE IN A ROUND-UP STORY AND THE REPORTER IS PUTTING OUT 5 CALLS TO SOURCES. DO THE MATH AND YOU FIGURE THAT EACH CONTACT IS 20% OF THE STORY. WRONG. WE BELIEVE THAT THE FIRST SOURCE BACK TO THE REPORTER IS 40-60% OF THE STORY. THE FIRST KEY CONTACT HELPS SHAPE THE STORY, PROVIDES THE REPORTER WITH AN ANGLE AND PERSPECTIVE. ANOTHER SOURCE COULD EMERGE AS THE LEAD, BUT IT'S THE INITIAL RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW THAT SETS THE TENOR AND FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE.

WHAT OTHER SOURCES HAVE YOU CONTACTED SO FAR? SINCE MOST SOURCES SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH THEIR SUBJECT MATTER, YOU SHOULD KNOW THE OTHER PLAYERS IN YOUR SPACE - COMPETITORS, REGULATORS, THOUGHT LEADERS. IF YOU'RE FIRST (SEE RULE NO. 4 ABOVE) YOU CAN FRAME THE STORY, DIFFERENTIATING FROM WHAT THE REPORTER HAS ALREADY LEARNED. THE BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REPORTER, THE MORE LIKELY HE/SHE WILL TELL YOU WHO ELSE IS ON THE REPORTING LIST.

CAN I EMAIL YOU SOMETHING? CAN I FAX YOU SOMETHING? CAN YOU GET ON THE WEB WHILE WE'RE TALKING? THIS IS DIFFERENT FROM ASKING IF THE REPORTER HAS A PRESS KIT, WHICH IS ALL TOO OFTEN BURIED ON THE DESK. IF THE REPORTER RESPONDS, YOU'VE NOW SWITCHED THE "INTERVIEW" INTO A PRESENTATION. THESE QUESTIONS MAKE THE INTERVIEW MORE LIKE A REAL-TIME EVENT AND IMMERSE THE REPORTER MORE AS A PARTICIPANT IN THE SUBJECT.

WHAT'S YOUR ANGLE? NOT ALL REPORTERS WILL ANSWER THIS, BUT IT'S WORTH ASKING. THE BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REPORTER, AND ABSENT AN INVESTIGATIVE ANGLE, THE BETTER YOUR CHANCE OF FINDING OUT. AGAIN, IF YOU FIGURE OUT WHERE THE REPORTER IS GOING, IT HELPS YOU TO LISTEN AND AVOID TRAPS SUCH AS REPEATING NEGATIVES, AGREEING WITH REPORTER CONCLUSIONS OR GETTING WORN DOWN BY REPEATED QUESTIONS LOOKING FOR A SPECIFIC ANSWER.

WHERE DID YOU GET THAT FACT? REPORTERS DON'T DELIBERATELY MISREAD FACTS OR MAKE UP INFORMATION. UNDER DEADLINE PRESSURE THEY READ FAST AND CAN'T ALWAYS CHECK ALL THE INFORMATION. SOMETIMES REPORTERS ARE CALLING TO CONFIRM A RUMOR.

WILL YOU CALL ME AS YOU CONTINUE THE STORY? THIS LETS THE REPORTER KNOW YOU WANT TO KEEP WORKING WITH HIM/HER ON THIS AND FUTURE STORIES. THIS QUESTION MAY ALSO PROMPT A REPORTER TO CALL YOU FOR FACT CHECKING OR FOR YOUR VIEWS AS HE/SHE LEARNS MORE.

CAN I CALL YOU WITH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION? THIS QUESTION ASKS PERMISSION TO SEND FOLLOW-UP INFORMATION AS THE REPORTER FINISHES THE STORY.

THERE ARE NO SILVER BULLETS TO GET REPORTERS TO ANSWER QUESTIONS. THE BEST REPORTER TO ASK THESE QUESTIONS TO IS ONE WITH WHOM YOU HAVE A RELATIONSHIP. BUT, IF IT'S A NEW REPORTER, ASK AWAY IN A POLITE, RESPECTFUL TONE. YOU CAN ALSO ASK IN A WAY THAT SAYS, "SO I CAN MAXIMIZE YOUR TIME WITH THE SPOKESPERSON, LET ME FIND OUT A FEW THINGS."

KEYS TO GETTING THE ANSWERS YOU NEED:

- DEVELOP ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS
- KNOW WHAT THE REPORTER COVERS, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY, WHAT HE/SHE LIKES TO FOCUS ON
- MAKE SURE YOU HAVE EXCELLENT FACTS AND FIGURES THAT SUPPORT A STORY IN ADDITION TO OPINIONS AND PERSPECTIVE, SO THE REPORTER VIEWS YOU AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION, NOT JUST AS A SOURCE REQUIRED FOR AN ARTICLE.

