



Annette Estes
Columnist

Professional Development

Handling the media

“Mike Wallace is here!”

Someone once said these are the four most dreaded words in the English language. I met Mike Wallace when I worked for WSPA-TV and he’s not such a gad guy. However, he can be a formidable adversary for those who are targets of his investigations.

It’s highly unlikely you’ll ever be interviewed by the “60 Minutes” host. However, being questioned by your local media can be just as frightening if you’re not prepared for it.

Most of the time we welcome media coverage for events or achievements we want publicized. When something’s wrong at your company you’d rather hide and hope they’ll go away. They won’t. My best advice during those circumstances is not to avoid them and to be honest. I quit buying Exxon gas after the Valdez oil spill not because of the spill, but because of the way the company handled reporters’ questions.

Here are ten tips on dealing with the media when you *want* to talk with them.

- Plan and Practice – Plan what you want to say and practice with a media coach or someone with a critical eye who will tell you what you need to change.
- Dress professionally – Don’t wear white or small prints that will “jump around” on camera. Dark colors are best. Most of all, wear something you feel you look great in. It will make you more confident.
- Control the interview – Know what you’re going to say. Decide on the most important point you want to make, what you would regret not saying after the interview is over. If you get asked something you think is off the subject or not relevant, say, “That’s a good question. However...and say what you came to say.
- Talk in sound bites – Make your most important points clearly and concisely and state them in 10 to 15 seconds.
- Look at the interviewer – Pretend the camera isn’t there. If you’re giving a performance or talking to the viewers, then it’s okay to look into the camera. But if someone is interviewing you, always look at that person.

- Don't touch the microphone – It always begged me as a reporter when I'd be interviewing someone and they'd grab the mike. It indicates you're an amateur and you want to be seen as a professional
- Watch what you say – While we're on the subject, don't say anything around a microphone that you wouldn't want the world to hear. You never know when the mike is hot or the camera is rolling. Don't learn the hard way, as I once did. Just take my work for it.
- Establish rapport – Media relations is about human relations. Be friendly, call both the reporter and cameraperson by name and ask about them. The cameraperson is probably the one who'll be editing the story, and can make you look your best or worst. Be helpful and pleasant.
- Be a resource – The best way to get good publicity is to establish a relationship with the media. If you know a good article on a subject a reporter often covers, send it to him or her. Don't contact the media just when you want to be interviewed. Help them out in other areas and they'll remember you when they want an expert on your area of expertise.
- Fear not. It's hard not to be nervous if you're inexperienced at being interviewed by a television, radio, or newspaper reporter. But if you've done your homework and know what you're talking about, you'll be less apprehensive when the interview begins.

Here's wishing you success and a great time when you get your 15 minutes of fame!

Annette Estes is a Certified Professional Behavioral and Values Analyst, Coach, and Consultant. and author of the book, *Why Can't You See it MY Way? Resolving Values Conflicts at Work and Home*. She was a news anchor for WSPA-TV and WYFF-TV for 15 years. She coaches people who want to improve their presentation or media skills. Annette won a 2004 Matrix Award from Women in Communications for her columns in *The Easley Progress*. Contact her at Annette@CoachAnnette.com or call The Estes Group at 864-244-1156.

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