

If the Media Calls, Are You Ready?

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You're about to break for lunch when you get a call from your organization's public relations office asking if you would be willing to do a last minute TV interview later that afternoon. Will you say "yes" and seize the opportunity to positively portray yourself, and your profession, to the public?

Although we have little to no formal training on media relations, who else should discuss nutrition related topics in the media? For many of us, doing interviews is out of our comfort zone, so we may shy away from them. There is an increased awareness about the increased incidence of chronic kidney disease linked to diabetes and hypertension in many of our communities. Thus, nephrology nutrition professionals and RPG members can – and should – speak up as the experts, instead of allowing unqualified spokespersons to take the lead.

Working with the media

The "media" include newspapers and magazines, radio and TV, and Internet-based material. There's often overlap, such as when newspaper articles are also posted on the Internet, or when radio interviews become podcasts.

Take a simple approach and start local. Read your community newspaper and watch local television. Offer your congratulations and eventually your own expertise in the future when you read a well-done article on a nutrition topic. Send a note or an email to the health reporter at your local TV/radio station with timely story suggestions. Or call the radio or TV station, ask for the show's producer and pitch your segment idea.

Here's a recent example. I heard a nutrition interview on WGN-AM, Chicago's top radio station. Although the professor did a great job, I noticed the host had to ask her to define what she referred to as "CLA." Although I knew she was referring to conjugated linoleic acid, a naturally occurring fatty acid that may increase the oxidation of fat while slowing fat buildup, the host did not (and neither did the listeners). Sensing an opportunity, I emailed a pleasant note to the host, said how much I enjoyed the interview, and to keep me in mind if he ever wanted a fresh voice. Three weeks later, his executive producer called and booked me for the next day! And guess who is a regular nutrition expert on The Noon Show?

Preparation

When preparing for a broadcast interview, think about what will be your key messages and "take home" points. Once you've identified them, write them up in the form of questions and send them to the producer. Busy producers will love you because you've made their job easier – and you'll be more comfortable knowing what questions will be asked. Don't forget to also send background information on the subject matter.

Some questions to ask the producer ahead of time include: How long is the interview? Who will conduct it? Will it be live or taped? Will you be sitting or standing?

If possible, get acquainted with the station by watching or listening to the reporter or host. What's her style? If it's a print interview, read the publication and get to know the writer by reading his/her articles.

Remember that the more you prepare the more confident and at ease you will feel – and that will be evident in the interview. Have a colleague or your spouse ask you questions so you can rehearse the responses prior to the interview.

Learn and practice how to use effective communication techniques such as hooking, bridging and flagging by viewing the video referenced in the American Dietetic Association Resources. They really work!

Hooking sets up a question you hope the interviewer will pose. You: "For some people, buying organic is a priority, but during these challenging economic conditions, certain organic foods simply aren't worth the extra expense." (Stop talking.) Interviewer: "Could you give us some examples of what foods you mean?"

Bridging helps you smoothly guide the interview back to your subject. Interviewer (during a segment on practical ways of reducing dietary sodium): "Isn't the medical community conflicted about the role of salt in preventing hypertension?" You: Answer the initial question briefly, and then convey your message. "Although there isn't complete agreement, most physicians recommend lowering the amount of sodium in the diet. One way is to cook more meals at home, rather than eating out."

Flagging highlights your key messages, which alerts the audience to your most important points. Flag by starting out your sentences with, "What renal patients really need to remember when going out to eat is" or "The most important steps to prevent renal disease are...."

What to wear? Do you have an outfit that brings you compliments every time you wear it? Wear that. Take notice and pay attention to what the national and local TV anchors wear as a guide to appropriate style. The best part of a radio or print interview is that it is done from the comfort of your office, and you can wear anything!

Advances in Practice....

During the interview

Present your key messages at the beginning. For each point, give examples, specific details, or surprising statistics. Tell a dramatic story about how Medical Nutrition Therapy saved significant money – or someone's life. Give your audience an “ah-ha” moment.

Keep your sentences short. Practice snappy “sound bites.” Try to limit your responses to 10 to 20 seconds. In a print interview, assume anything you say can be used. There is no such thing as “off the record.”

When it's short notice

What if you get a last minute request for an interview? If it's a print interview and they're “on deadline,” tell them you'll get back to them in 15 or 20 minutes. Then clear your desk and prepare. If you are asked to do a last minute broadcast interview, try to accept the opportunity. If you turn it down, they may ask a pseudo-nutrition expert instead!

Afterwards

You've just conducted an effective interview. Are you done? No, you have one more task to complete. Sit down and compose a handwritten thank you note to the producer and the host. Good manners never go unnoticed or out of style and you will become memorable.

The rest of the world is finally catching up to what we have always known: Food is medicine, and proper nutrition is vital for the prevention and treatment of chronic kidney disease. To be involved with the media you need passion, energy, knowledge and a desire to accept new challenges. You have it all, so why not try it?

Additional Tips

1. Send press releases about the chronic kidney disease epidemic and what it means to the community to local TV and radio stations and newspapers. Quote yourself. Don't forget to include your contact information.
2. TV is a visual medium, so props and cooking demos make the biggest impact.
3. Watch how the pros conduct interviews on national shows such as Good Morning America, Today and The Early Show.
4. Magazine and newspaper editors and writers change positions or affiliations frequently. Once a great relationship is made, they'll remember you in their next position. ♦

Resources from the American Dietetic Association

- ♦ Working with the Media: A Handbook for Members of the American Dietetic Association. Free to members at: www.eatright.org/media
- ♦ Brown D. Becoming a Media-Savvy Registered Dietitian. J Am Diet Assoc. 2006; 106:1163-1164.
- ♦ Updates from the ADA Media Spokespersons in the ADA Times
- ♦ Video on hooking, bridging and flagging: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=1wRa3n8Y0B0>

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