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6 media interview tips for lawyers

By Laura Ernde March 15, 2018

Have a gameplan

As someone who has worked with lawyers as both a journalist and an adviser, I know that they often make some of the best media interview subjects. As a rule, they are smart, knowledgeable and know how to argue a point. You wouldn't guess media interview tips for lawyers could be so valuable. I've also seen some very talented lawyers stumble when talking to a reporter or fail to make the most of a media interview.

6 media interview tips for lawyers

In the spirit of helping lawyers improve their skills — as well as helping journalists meet their deadlines — I'll offer six media interview tips for lawyers that will smooth the way for them to showcase their expertise.

1. **Confidence is key.**
2. **Cut the legal-ese.**
3. **Know your audience.**
4. **Be clear about the ground rules.**

6. Be cognizant of deadlines.

Want groundbreaking interviews that capture people's attention? Then keep reading.

1. Confidence is key

Failing to adequately prepare for a media interview is one of the most common — and easily corrected — mistakes anyone can make. Because many lawyers are well practiced in thinking on their feet in the courtroom, they might be tempted to wing it during a media interview.

I'd advise them to listen to the sage advice of Warren Buffett, who said, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it."

Start by writing down the key points you want to make. Practice talking them through. Next, spend some time thinking about the questions you're likely to be asked and be ready to answer them. If you're not sure, you might want to bring in a media relations consultant.

If the interview will be televised, there are additional considerations such as what to wear. Check out these helpful media interview tips for lawyers who are going on camera.

2. Cut the legal-ese

Every profession has jargon. Just because yours is enshrined in the Constitution doesn't give you a pass. But seriously, unexplained references to procedural terms such as "summary judgment," "demurrer" and "writ" should not pass your lips without an explanation. (Non-lawyers: here's a good glossary of legal terms.)

Before going into a media interview, one of the best media interview tips for lawyers is to review any legal arguments you want to make.

Winning an argument in court is not the same as winning in the court of public opinion.

Your argument can be eminently logical and sound, but if it doesn't sound authentic it won't connect with your audience. Remember that lawyers play a crucial role in translating legal jargon for the public. How many people had heard of the "emoluments clause" before the lawsuit brought against the Trump administration for failing to divest himself of his business empire?

Pro tip: Make sure the reporter understands the legal arguments, but don't go too far into the weeds, and remember to give the reporter something quotable as well.

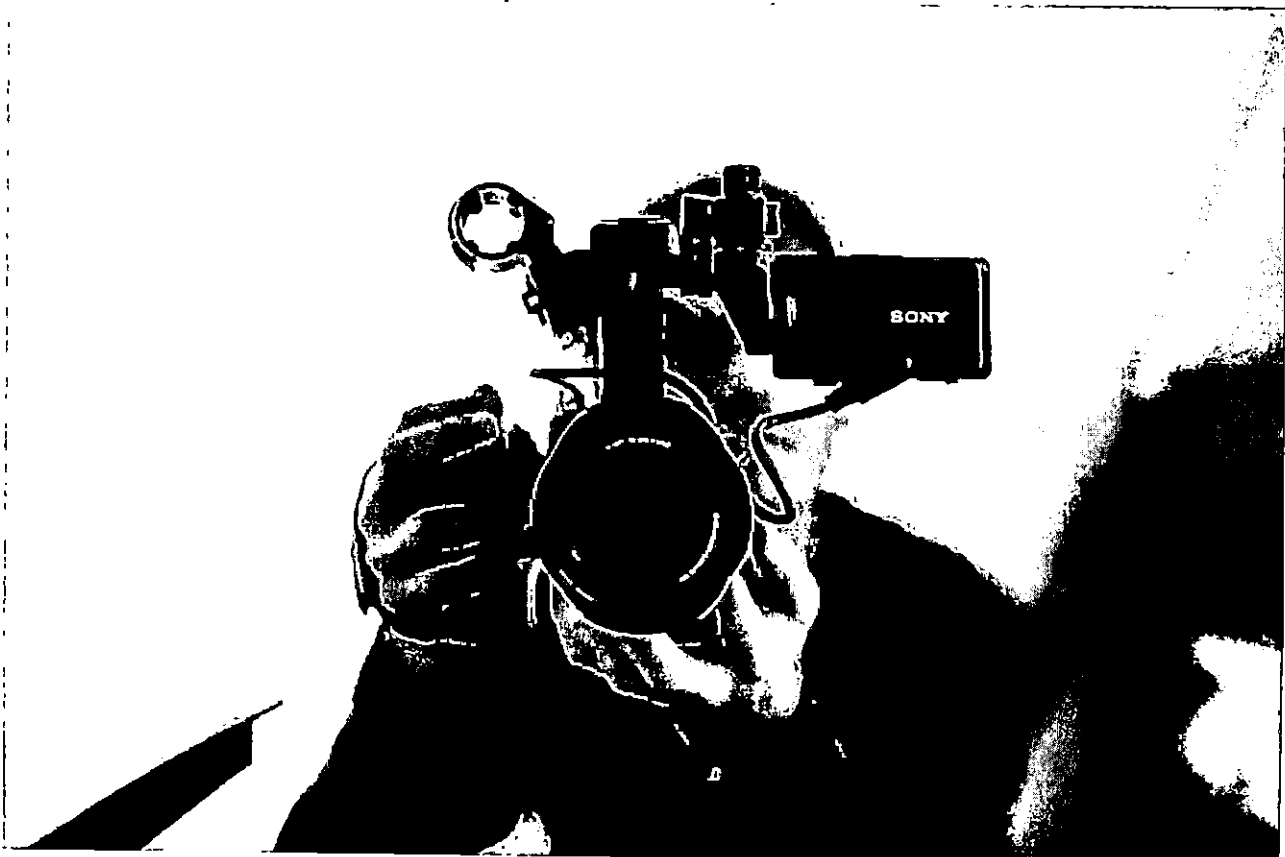


Photo by Seth Doyle on Unsplash

Getting your message across isn't the only consideration for a good media interview. Another key principle of good communication is telling people something they're interested in hearing. Knowing how to do this can be more art than a science, but with a bit of preparation you can make sure you don't miss the mark.

First off, know your audience.

Or rather, the audience that the media interview will reach. Is the interview with a business-to-business publication? A general audience? You'll want to tailor your remarks accordingly. For example, if you're discussing a lawsuit the legal press might want to know if it's a ground-breaking case while a mainstream publication might be more interested in covering the details of the dispute.

Again, you can always turn to a media relations consultant for more media interview tips for lawyers if you're unsure.

4. Be clear about the ground rules

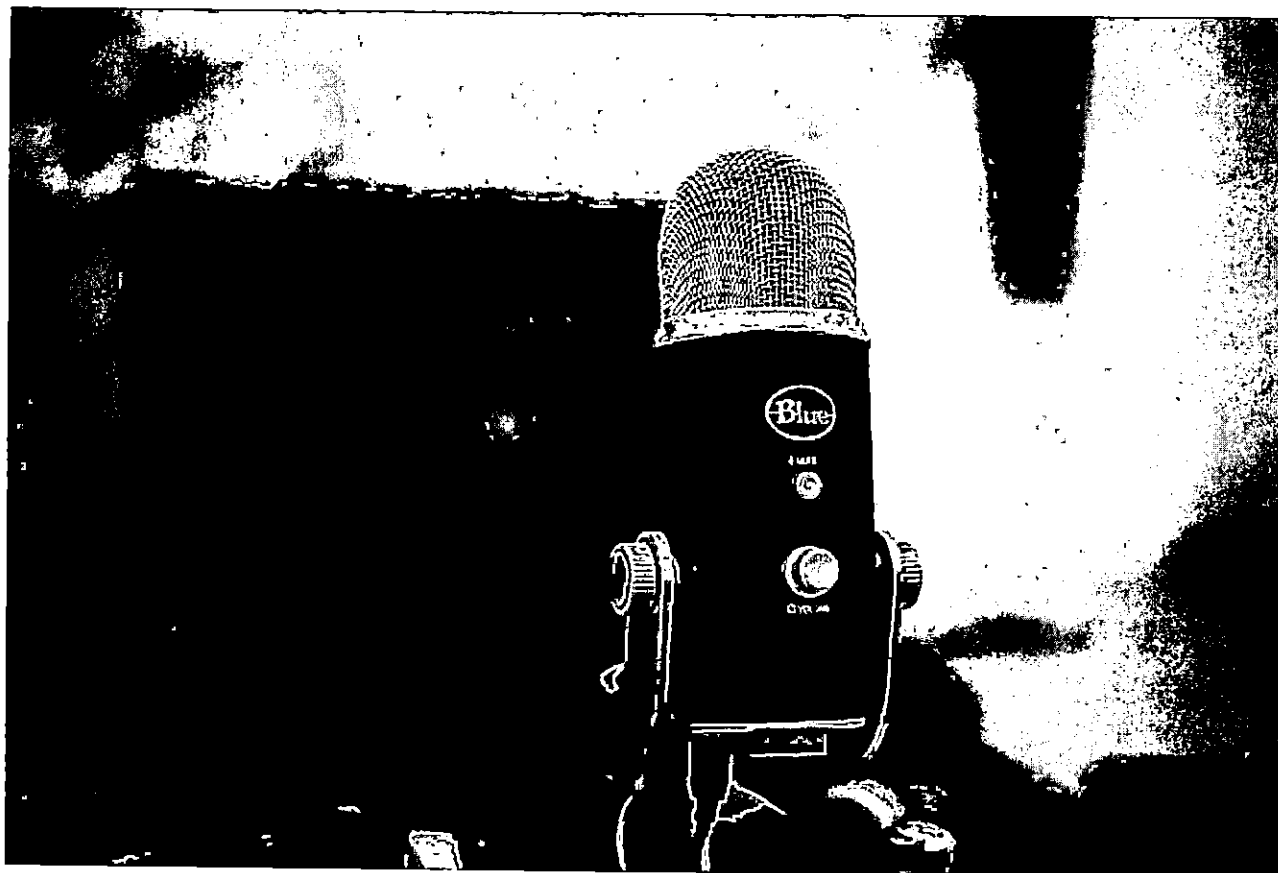
Think about the Miranda Warning: Anything you say can and will be held against you. The same goes if you're talking to a reporter. You should assume that everything you say might wind up in print.

Going 'off the record'

Granted, many reporters are willing to let their sources speak "off the record," but I would not recommend going this route unless you have already established a good relationship with the reporter. If you do want to share information with a reporter without being quoted, I have some additional media interview tips for lawyers:

- It's essential to discuss these ground rules in advance. Don't wait until after you have revealed the information to ask the reporter not to quote you. Most reporters will not retroactively grant this kind of request.
- Make sure you and the reporter both have same understanding of what "off the record" means. Does it mean that the reporter cannot use any of the information you give? Or can

Just remember, there's always a chance something could end up in print, so pick your words wisely.



5. Establish a media strategy

Many lawyers and journalists rightly detest the thought of “spin” in the litigation context. But there's nothing unethical about making sure the public knows your side of the story. Ignore this reality and you and your client might soon find yourselves in need of a crisis communications expert. I've seen slam-dunk legal cases lose in the court of public opinion because lawyers or their clients underestimated the importance of getting out in front of a story.

When a media interview touches on litigation, make sure your message aligns with a coordinated communications and litigation strategy.

A related mistake I've seen is a legal team trying to apply a one-size-fits-all process to their communications strategy. They might instinctively believe a press release is the answer. Perhaps this is because they're used to following court procedures which are strictly outlined. But a media strategy often requires a more nuanced approach.

6. Be cognizant of deadlines

The final piece of advice is to treat a reporter's deadline as you would a court deadline. If you don't get back to a reporter quickly, you might miss your chance to get your message across. In these times of 24/7 publishing, that window of opportunity can be very short. A same-day response is often essential.

But don't be tempted to give a media interview on the fly, either. Find out the reporter's deadline and build in time to prepare before you return the call or email.

In conclusion

If you follow these six media interview tips for lawyers, I can almost guarantee you'll be happy with the result. Just be sure to prepare ahead of time and think about the overall strategy before you open up on a mic.

#marketing #legal



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