

Talking to the media

As school leaders, it is sometimes desirable or necessary to speak to the media. Perhaps you want to let your community know about an environmental award or the opening of a new learning centre, or maybe the media has called about community upset over a proposed school zone. Whether an interview is proactive or reactive, a good news story or potentially problematic, being prepared and knowing what you want to say will make a huge difference.

It's a really good idea before you even get a media request to have a chat with your board chair about protocols for responding to the media (and for proactively approaching them). Is the board comfortable with you speaking to the media on behalf of the school in some or all situations, or do you need to run requests past the board chair for discussion? It can be useful to have a written board policy on the agreed protocols for media enquiries.

When and how should I contact the media

If you have an event or news, you should give media as much notice as possible. Particularly for suburban and regional newspapers, the deadline for news content could be as much as five days before it arrives in letterboxes. Most newspapers have a news tips email address, and a short, clear email with all the details and the best time and way to contact you is a good approach.

If the school or a student or staff member wins a significant award, let the media know as soon as possible – it's rare that it would still be considered news weeks after the event.

The changing nature of news and the impact on news media means that newsrooms (where they still operate) are extremely stretched and the turnover of journalists is high. If you can provide a well-written and interesting media release, particularly with quality photos, the chance of a local newspaper running it almost word-for-word is very high!

[Here's a useful *Stuff* article about how journalists decide what's newsworthy.](#)

Know your story angle and key messages

Before you contact a journalist, know what it is you want to say, likewise if a journalist approaches you, don't talk off the top of your head – know what message you are trying to convey.

Preparation is essential to ensure you can present your message/story idea in simple, compelling language. It can be useful to distill what you want to get across into three key sentences. Think about the ideas that you hope the journalist will focus on in the story – you can say them a number of times in different ways throughout the interview!

As much as possible, talk from a personal perspective – tell real stories about real people (not forgetting privacy implications), and anecdotes that illustrate your point.

What to do when the Media Calls

Sometimes the media will come to you – perhaps they spotted something quirky in your school newsletter, or maybe a parent has contacted them with a complaint or allegation. What should you do next? You can politely ask some questions, before you answer any.

1. Find out first who they are and who they work for. This gives you an idea of what kind of story they're interested in and how they may approach it.
2. What is their story about and what angle are they taking? Try to ascertain their interest, how did they hear about this?
3. If a journalist is calling for a local response to a nationwide issue or NZEI Te Riu Roa campaign and you'd like a sounding board or help with messaging, please call the NZEI communications team on 04 382 2755 and they'll be happy to assist.
4. If the story is potentially going to be contentious (or even if it isn't), you'll probably want a few minutes to gather your thoughts and further information, or possibly talk to your board chair as well.
5. Let them know you can't talk right now, but can call back soon (if you need to check some details or talk to your board chair, you can explain that). Find out their deadline – it might be several days, or they could be planning to put the story online in 30 minutes, with or without your side of the story.
6. Ask them for the questions they want answers to. Journalists will usually be happy to do this, even in broad terms. You could give the option of emailing the questions to you if there are quite a few and they may even be happy to receive your answers by email. Journalists are often time-poor and happy to receive written answers, which lets you choose your words carefully if it's a delicate situation.
7. Take some time to prepare (even if you only have ten minutes). Do you need to talk to anyone else? Then prepare your key messages. What do you want to say? Are there any risks to mitigate?
8. Call back at the agreed time. Make sure you say your prepared messages – even if you don't get asked the right questions. If necessary, bridge back to those messages, and don't be afraid to repeat yourself during the interview.
9. Be as friendly and as open as possible without compromising yourself. More than likely it will be a positive opportunity, but if you are concerned about it, call your Principal Support Officer for advice.

What if the media calls and I don't want to be interviewed?

Sometimes, a journalist may call about a story that is likely to put the school or a staff member in a particularly bad light and the circumstances mean that you can't see how anything you say will improve that, or legal issues mean that you really can't say anything. Unfortunately, declining to be interviewed won't make the story go away. If the story is strong enough, it will run anyway and note that you declined (or worse, "refused") an interview.

If you get a call like this, let the journalist know that the sensitive nature of the story means you need to take advice on what you can say. Quickly contact your board chair and also seek advice from your Principal Support Officer. It may be that a short written statement is prudent, for example, “As the case is before the Teaching Council, we aren’t able to comment at this stage, but are supporting the child and family involved.” A statement briefly outlining the actual situation or explaining why you can’t comment is far better than saying, “no comment.” As always, get back to the journalist in the agreed timeframe.

What NOT to do during a media interview

- Don't use jargon or acronyms.
- There is no such thing as “off the record”. If you don’t want it repeated, don’t say it.
- You don’t have to fill a gap in the conversation. Say what you want to say, then stop talking.
- “No comment” is a comment and will often be interpreted negatively by the public. If you can’t comment, explain why.
- Don't get too casual - flippant, jokey and sarcastic comments will usually not come across well in a quote.
- Don't repeat the charge or negative framing, eg. “This school is not failing its students.”
- Don't answer hypothetical questions.
- Don’t show your irritation or frustration at a line of questioning, especially for TV or radio.

More hot interview tips

DO think about potential questions. It can be useful to brainstorm possible questions beforehand – especially tricky ones – and plan how you will respond and bring the conversation back to your key messages.

If you’re interviewing by phone. You can keep your messaging notes handy for reference – just don’t let it sound like you’re reading!

DO keep answers short. You may do a television interview for 20 minutes, but the average soundbite is rarely more than 10 seconds long, so be clear and concise. Particularly for TV and radio, speak in short but complete sentences and don’t use the reporter’s name in a reply or say phrases like, “As I was saying earlier...”

DO communicate your messages. Answer questions, but don’t be distracted from communicating your messages.

DO use first hand examples and descriptive language. Communicating personal experiences can be dramatic and powerful. Use them as often as possible.

DO pause before answering. Take a brief moment to consider your response. Even for radio and television, this pause will seem thoughtful and natural.

DO use your language and framing. Reporters often will frame the topic in a particular way that creates conflict. They frequently ask a negative question or plant a buzzword in a question to get you to repeat it, if only in denial. Reframe and stick to your own language.

DON'T fudge or be vague. If you don't know an answer, say so. If you offer to research the answer, be sure to follow up promptly.

DON'T ask to see/approve the article before publication. The vast majority of journalists will be offended and irritated by such a request. If you are concerned that they may make a factual error, be as clear as possible during the interview and let them know that if they have any follow-up questions you'd be happy to talk again or respond to emailed questions. After a story is published or aired, you can request correction of a factual error, but not ask for changes just because you didn't like the tone or angle of the story.