

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

Appearing in print: understand the ripple effect

By Allan Bonner

Appearing in print

"We would never speak with the press," says the lawyer on behalf of his client. I respond, "But what if...," and am greeted with the nullifying hand gesture in my face before I can finish the sentence. "We would just never speak with reporters" comes the follow up perspective that adds nothing to the discussion.

I've had this conversation quarterly for 20 years.

On the courtroom steps you have a choice: put your hand up in front of the camera lens with your coat over your head like you're guilty, pretend you're deaf or competently decline to speak (emphasis on competence).

If you're called on the phone, you can have your secretary lie and say you're not in or competently take or decline the interview.

If a client asks you to speak to the press, you can withdraw services, admit you're scared and don't want to or competently speak if it will further the client's cause.

But keep in mind that influencing influential people can be good advocacy. If you get a favourable report or editorial in the newspaper, you can photocopy it 1,000 times and mail it around to significant people.

Many newspapers are online and even have video clips of newsmakers they interview. Cross ownership means newspaper columnists are also radio and TV reporters and commentators, so cooperating with them may mean multiple exposures.

For those who must or want to deal with print reporters, here are a few of the newspaper venues and types of people you may encounter as you serve prominent clients.

Editorial board

I once asked a good reporter at a successful tabloid who was on his editorial board. He replied, "Whoever's wearing a tie on the day somebody wants to meet with us." Some boards are formal and set policy for the paper. Others are informal and just want to get something topical written that day. You'll encounter all kinds in an editorial board.

Reporters

It takes all kinds, but straight print reporters usually have a little more time and are more interested in the facts than a performance from you. A clever turn of a phrase is good, but substance is better. Unlike radio and TV reporters, a print journalist isn't part of a show or putting on a show. You may not get feedback such as nodding or tone of voice to let you know how you're doing. You need to summon up enthusiasm from within yourself, not from the energy of the interviewer.

Beat reporters

New beat reporters may not know much about their beat. They have to learn somewhere. Some major newspapers like to change assignments drastically to obtain a fresh approach. I know one reporter who did stints in China and on the arts beat.



New beat reporters may not know much about their beat. They have to learn somewhere. (Nikolai Sorokin / Dreamstime.com)

However, for the most part a beat reporter has been covering the area (politics, business, the legislature, etc.) for a long time. This reporter may be jaded, bored and thinks he or she knows more about the issues than your client — which may be true. The other reaction to being on a beat for a long time is to be quietly intrigued by the issues and extremely well informed. Both kinds of reporters can give you a good workout.

Columnists

The more of a character and the better known the columnist is, the more spin he or she puts on the story. Don't be surprised if you get no quotes, but your personality is reviewed in detail. Act accordingly. Be guarded, but be authentic.

Section reporters

A public policy issue can be covered by half a dozen different sections of the newspaper. The sports section might want to know about the memories the CEO has of going to football games as a kid. The lifestyle section might want to know about the client's fitness routine, hobbies or diet. The city section might want views on urban sprawl, architecture or parking problems. The business section will be interested in interest rates, capital cost allowance or your business experience. The general news section will take your message of the day or your reaction to the day's news. Political editors will want to know the tax implications or legislation needed to implement your plans.

Page makeup

How a page of a newspaper looks used to be a result of someone fiddling with a pot of glue and bits of paper and pictures. Today, even the smallest of weeklies do their layout by computer. It's still called page makeup and the person doing this picks pictures, writes cutlines underneath them and may write headlines. In big newspapers, there may be a separate photo editor, headline writer and cutline writer. You don't usually get to interact with these people unless you're on a tour of the newspaper. If so, go shake some hands.

Editor

Editor is a general term that can apply to someone who edits copy or edits a section of the newspaper. A section editor might handle the weekend, features, sports, business, politics, lifestyle or other matters. Sub-editors assist or edit copy. Managing editors run the paper day to day. You normally won't encounter these people unless you're pitching a big story or complaining. Be careful on both counts.

Publishers

There are professional publishers who sit at the top of the pyramid in a newspaper because the owners have hired them. Then there are owner-publishers such as Lord Conrad Black, Rupert Murdoch and the late Robert Maxwell. They're part of a grand tradition going back to William Randolph Hearst in America and Canadian Maxwell Beaverbrook in the UK. Most get into the game for money, then influence, then fame.

Cartoonists

They'll skewer you, but I've never heard of anybody who knows lots of them or has a strategy to influence them. If you do, share.

And finally...

Radio and TV reporters don't want to admit it, but most read the major papers partly to decide what might make a good story for their media outlet. Whether you're good or bad in the paper, you will probably get a second bounce from the electronic media.

Allan Bonner is a regular commentator on cable political shows and has recently been on PBS, NBC Nightly News, New York 1, NPR, BBC, Global, CBC, Radio New Zealand and CNBC Europe.