

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

Appearing on radio

How to handle radio interviews, radio panels and rude callers



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The argument against lawyers speaking to the press makes itself. It is also made to me when I conduct lunch and learn sessions at law firms, speak at Bar associations and law societies and socialize with practising lawyers. The argument does not need to be made here again.

I like to pick up the discussion at the point when a lawyer has to deal with the press directly, advise clients on press relations or work with a communications consultant. At this point, press relations might as well be informed, professional and effective.

Media skills are something lawyers can keep in their back pockets in case of need, not brandish every day on every file. Earlier in *The Lawyers Weekly*, I dealt with TV. On this occasion, radio is the focus.

Radio is everywhere. It's in our cars, homes and offices. It's on at the barbershop, convenience store and dentist's office.

In public policy, radio has played an increasingly important role through bombastic talk show hosts on all sides of the issues, especially the right. But radio is really several different types of media all at once. Here are the venues you might find yourself in:

Radio talk

Some radio talk shows have a seven second delay in case nuts call. Some encourage those calls. Hosts are left, right, thoughtful and thoughtless. Regardless, you don't need to run the show. But you do need to get your message out.

Most of the time the host will handle obnoxious callers. At least the host will step in and make some bridging comment between the caller and you. This gives you time to compose yourself and deliver the messages you rehearsed. Often you just acknowledge the caller's perspective and then offer your own. If the caller and host start shouting at you or each other, stop talking. It's very hard to interrupt a professional interrupter. Most stations also have an audio "limiter" or other technical gizmo that turns down all microphones except the host's. It may not be democratic, but otherwise there'd be chaos.

Multiple guests

Whether there's shouting of insightful comments

from the other guests, your job is to get your fair share of airtime. If you are in the studio, you can often signal to the host that you have something to say with your body language. Lift a hand, use eye contact, lean forward, sit up and look vigilant. Do the same while speaking to get an extra few seconds before the host jumps in. You can also jump in with "Look, what I want to say is..." So long as you're close to the topic, you'll get away with it.

If you're not in the studio you only have your vocal quality over the phone to carry the day. That's tough to do for someone not used to speaking professionally. You can use energetic gestures to enliven your voice.

All news

WINS 1010 in New York used to be the home of Disc Jockey Murray the K, sometimes known as "the fifth Beatle." But that was in the sixties and WINS has been all news for decades. One reason for the movement to talk and news formats is the deterioration of the AM radio band. Every time someone plugs in a shaver or other appliance, it interferes with AM transmission.

Most all news formats feature short cycles of news, weather, sport, business, traffic and lifestyle items. You may get interviewed for three minutes, but your clip will only be 10 seconds on the newscast. The good news is that if you're a good news source, you'll get asked back over and over again.

Hype rock news

There used to be a format I worked in called 20/20 news. There was also "contemporary" news. These staccato newscasts were designed to be shouted at 20 after and 20 before the hour and to fit in with the rock and roll songs on the station's playlist. There are still a lot of stations using the "KISS" call letters, and lots of oldies stations. News is more entertaining, shorter and superficial on these outlets.

Newscasts

There are hourly newscasts, headlines on the half-hour, ten minute major newscasts and even half-hour regional and network newscasts. Your clip will vary accordingly between eight seconds to 45 seconds. You may even be the feature interviewee or subject of a short, "pocket" documentary. The interview may take 30 seconds or 30 minutes. Take a look at the clock. If it's getting near the hour (or sometimes the half-hour) the reporter is nearing deadline and will be in a rush. Some news formats have continuous deadlines.

When called for a pre-interview or to see if you'd make a good guest, try putting the reporter on hold for 30 seconds to compose yourself, or

see if you can call back. Unless you're a veteran, you need a little time to collect your thoughts. But when they call you after you've agree to be interviewed, be sharp because "you're on".

Public radio

Slow down. Better yet, stop. You're really going to have a conversation. On some NPR programs in the U.S. they won't allow two microphones open at the same time, so there's no shouting match. I've been on for an hour with scientists and a Pulitzer prize winning author. Typical sound bites will make you sound like a light-weight. The same is true of the long-form PBS interviews. Do your homework.

Talk back

Many programs have a talk back line. They record, edit and play on air the random comments of listeners who call in. Very occasionally and selectively you can too. Call in off hours, say your piece, and listen for the results.

The telephone

Most people interact with reporters on the telephone more than in any other way. In fact, some radio programs only want phone-quality interviews — they won't take a guest in the studio. But, if they'll let you, go to the studio so your voice will sound better through a high-quality microphone. Moreover, the host might not be as bombastic if s/he's a foot away from you. But on the other hand, you might be intimidated by all the action in the studio.

Never use a speaker phone because you will sound pretentious. The exception is, if you assemble a few staffers to brief a reporter and the call is not for broadcast. Be careful of the handheld device. You can't conduct a good interview in a crowd or with background noise. Find a quiet spot. Experiment with good plug-in microphones to get better sound quality. Take some quite time to prepare.

Hold the phone or microphone about an inch from your mouth. Stand or sit straight up and don't hunch over notes — you'll constrict your voice. Gesture like an actor would (bigger, but slower) because you can "hear" gestures on the radio and in your voice.

And finally...

Radio is a great "sleeper" medium. Since it's everywhere, so will you be, and that is something to manage in bad times and great for getting out a positive message.

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.