

Media interviews and the resulting stories

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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Your client is really impressed – he's just had an hour-long interview with a reporter from one of the national dailies which you secured for him. You wait with bated breath for the newspaper to hit the streets so you can bask in the glory of the unpaid glowing editorial. After all your client told him EVERYTHING he thought the reporter should know – or did he?

After searching the paper a couple of times you eventually find the article – you were beginning to think you got the date wrong. There it is on page five, bottom left hand corner and it's all of two column inches! As you find it your client is on the phone and he's livid – have you seen the article and what happened to all the comments he made and the information he gave? And where did that headline come from – that wasn't the one on the press release you sent them?

Cut by sub-editor and editor

The comments and information went the way the majority of articles written by tired journalists go – cut by the sub-editor and again by the editor. You see, what you hadn't factored into the equation was that an insurance company placed an ad it insisted went in that day and a cellphone company said it'd give an order for six weeks of ads but it insisted on page five also.

This meant the sub had to find an article to take up what was left of the page – two column inches. The journalist did what he was trained to do – write the story in the inverted pyramid style, starting with the most important information and going down until he was left with the least important. Now depending on how your client gave his information this could be where the problem started.

If he'd chosen say three key messages to get across and made sure he got those in right at the beginning of his interview and then used the balance of the interview to back these messages up with facts, figures and even anecdotal information, then even if the article was cut at least one or possibly two of the messages would have made it through to the reader.

But then again would they?

Scary part

Research shows that the interviewee gives 100% of the message – the reporter's interpretation is around 60%. By the time it's subbed, 40% of the original message has survived (if that) and by the time the editor and anyone else has fiddled around with it there may be 20% left. The scary part is yet to come – the reader's understanding and interpretation of the article. Yes – this is where the problem really lies – this is 10%!

And what about quotes – how do these get twisted? Well, here's some advice. Do what Tokyo Sexwale did to me when I interviewed him – use a tape recorder so you also have a record of the conversation. Now this may pee off a few journos but it would get the message across loud and clear that you expect the quotes to be accurate.

The problem comes when journalists take the quotes out of direct speech and use them as 'so and so was quoted as saying he was unhappy with the situation in the industry right now.' The problem here is what he actually said was "I'm not that happy with the current situation but am excited and reassured with what our industry is about to do." This is a mild example of what can happen with quotes.

Best form of exposure

This means that the best form of exposure is the controlled one – live radio and TV – but I hear you say that's scary. Not if you are properly prepared and again decide on three or less key messages you need to get across and then make sure you get these across as quickly as possible. Sometimes you'll literally have a thirty second chance to answer a question to a talk show host – or five minutes on morning television. You need to take full advantage of that time to get your message across and remember if it's live no-one can tamper with your message.

ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher (www.media mentors.co.za) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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