

**The Five Ps for Media Interviews:
A Primer for Victims of Foodborne Illness**

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The Five Ps for Media Interviews: A Primer for Victims of Foodborne Illness

The phone rings, you answer it and find it's a reporter from a local television station. She's found out that you and two other members of your family have been affected by a foodborne disease that's been linked to a batch of contaminated shellfish, and the reporter wants to interview you. What should you do? What would you say? Would you know how to handle the interview? You have a mixture of feelings — anxiety about talking with the media, eagerness to tell your story, anger about the foodborne disease, and curiosity about whether you can make a difference.

The bad news is that now that you're a known victim, journalists may call you — and they may do it often then eventually stop. The good news is that now that you're a known victim, journalists may call you — and you can take advantage of your feelings and experience to tell your story *and make a difference*. And that's the key: your story can be a vital part of the fabric about stopping foodborne disease, and it can be a valuable contribution to you and your family plus to everyone working on the issue and public awareness.

A call from a journalist asking for your story represents an important opportunity for you to help improve food safety for everyone. Keep in mind that the reporter has the final say in what gets printed or airs, and you can only do your best to make sure you provide the reporter with your story and relevant information. Nevertheless, managing this opportunity is a relatively simple process, and it revolves around what I call the “five Ps”: preparation, perspective, presence, patience and persistence. But before we get into the “five Ps,” let's look briefly at your rights.

Your Rights and Working with the Media

Fundamentally, you have the right to choose whether or not to be interviewed at all. So if a news person calls you from a newspaper, television or radio, you can agree to be interviewed, or you can politely say, “No, I do not wish to be interviewed.” If the person presses you on your refusal, tell her or him, “No is my final answer. Thank you for your interest.” Politeness and civility are important; after all the journalist is only trying to do his or her job, and both of you should treat each other well.

You have other rights too, and it's important that you know what they are. The National Victims

Center (NVC) (2003) has a “bill of rights for victims,” and you can read it and a related article online at <http://www.nvc.org/gethelp/privacyinmedia/index.html>. It's important to realize, however, that the context for this “bill of rights” is on *crime* victims, and it is not specifically tailored for victims of foodborne disease. Fortunately, S.T.O.P. recently created its own “bill of rights” for victims of foodborne disease (Mitchell, 2003), and it's presented in full in Appendix A. It is based on the NVC's “bill of rights.” If you believe there's any possibility you may be called (or if you already have been called) by journalists, or if you are seeking media coverage for your story, you should read this document, “Victims' Rights in Dealing with the Media about Foodborne Disease,” in Appendix A.

As long as you are open to the possibility of news coverage for your story, the “bill of rights” in Appendix A and the “five Ps” will be important guides for you. If you are not open to the possibility of news coverage, that's okay, and the information here can still serve you well, if you change your mind. In the balance of this paper I assume that you're willing to be interviewed by the news media. You may wish to consult with an attorney to see if there are any special considerations or limitations on what you may say during an interview with a journalist. In this paper I talk about the news media generally, noting selected aspects of print and broadcast media along the way.

What I say about the “five Ps” does not address how to attract news media attention — that's a whole other subject worth separate explanation. (If you're interested in learning about this topic, you can start by looking at useful documents on the Internet, like the NVC's [2002] *Working with the Media* at <http://www.nvc.org/ncvrwguide/media.html>, and Internet PR Guide's *Getting Your News Noticed*, by Julianne Repman and Renée Menius [2000], at http://www.internetprguide.com/pr_tips/article/0,3029,10193_466511,00.html.) Nevertheless, whether you're seeking news coverage or the news media seek you out, knowing how to manage media opportunities will serve you well before, during and after your interviews. So let's begin looking at the “five Ps.”

Preparation

This first step is the single most important one, and it's the foundation of all the steps that follow. You know your story best, and you know what things about it are most important to you and your family.

The trick becomes how to make that story meaningful and compelling for others. When journalists call, you have an opportunity to share your story, first, with them and, next, with their audiences. Each journalist has an idea about the kind of story he/she wants to write, and they want to talk to you. That means you need to do some homework.

What kind of homework, and how do you do it? When a journalist calls, you should find out:

- who it is,
- whom they work for (TV, newspaper, radio and what programs or columns),
- what story are they working on,
- what angle do they plan to take,
- what topics do they want to cover,
- who else have they spoken to,
- how much do they know about foodborne disease (there might be a chance to educate the reporter),
- where and when the interview can take place,
- how long will the interview take, and
- what the deadline is.

This last item is vital to journalists who call, because they must have their stories done at a specific time, and you need to work with them on this. No matter what the deadline is, chances are good that they don't have to turn in their finished story immediately. So ask if you could call them back at a specific time, because you'd like to put some stuff together so you can be better prepared for the interview. Be reasonable with how much time you need, because you're starting a relationship with the reporter. Respectful cooperation will be very much appreciated and serve you well down the road.

How long should it take to complete your preparation for any interview? That depends on the kind of story a reporter wants to tell. You may be able to prepare a stock group of things that can apply to almost any situation, and you'll have to tailor other material for each opportunity because each story will be different yet a little the same. Plus you'll put your knowledge and experience to work as you do some "thinking on your feet." There are some basic things you should prepare that will complement your homework about a news person who calls and the story he/she is working on. The following elements are the basic things you'll need to prepare, and you may be able to use them for more than one news inquiry (with some tailoring):

- *Be honest* — Keeping to the facts and sharing your genuine feelings without exaggeration or hyperbole is important, because to do otherwise risks your personal credibility, your story's validity and your reputation. If you don't have an answer for a question, say so and offer to get the answer right away. If you don't want to answer a question, say so and explain why. (There will be more on this approach later.)
- *Focus your story* — Since you are the expert on your story, make sure you can tell it in a way that is concise, colorful, factual and compelling. Boil down your story to a short narrative that you can say in not more than 45 seconds. Beyond the basic story, you should also develop a few key messages that you'd like to see in the journalist's final report. And remember, the journalist will work hard on using your story for the one she/he wants to produce, so your focus on certain messages (even with a little strategic repetition) will help them stand out so they get included in the finished piece. When you write your key messages, think in terms of sound bites of important ideas that pique journalists' interest and are easy for journalists' audiences to grasp. Key messages also give you fodder for what to say in answer to the usual end-of-interview question, "Is there anything else you'd like to say?"
- *Have background information ready* — This part is very much a matter of making sure you have the relevant facts, examples, quotes, etc. that you may want to use during the interview. You should have many of these things memorized, but if you don't, don't fear. It's okay to refer to them during an interview, and doing so shows something about how prepared you are.
- *Draft a list of possible questions with answers* — Since you know who the journalist is, what she/he wants to cover and how, and what the organization is and its audience, you should anticipate what kinds of questions the reporter may ask you. Begin with the most basic question, like when did you first realize you were sick, and work up to harder questions in a semi-logical way. Once you have the list of questions, come up with concise and compelling answers to each question that are specific and to the point. Never plan to say "no comment" or something equivalent. That kind of answer may suggest you're hiding something even if you're not. You should restate the question in different terms or say that the issue is really something

else. For example, to a question that you may not want to answer about whether or not you plan to pursue legal action, you could say, “We’re working hard on getting our life together, and we’ll let you know how we’re doing at a later time.”

- *Remember the audience* — Make sure what you plan to say will be meaningful to the reporter and, ultimately, to his/her audience. There are a few handy questions that can help you refine your answers to your list of anticipated questions. After you finish writing your answers to those questions, take the role of the reporter’s audience and ask these questions about your answers: “So what?” “Who cares?” and “What’s in it for me (the audience member)?” The traditional six Ws (i.e., who, what, where, when, why and how) can also be a useful check on factual information you may use.

All the work you do in this preparation stage will payoff as you continue to work with journalists. Perhaps the most important benefit of this homework is that you build confidence in yourself and mastery of your story and related information for whatever news organization that wants to talk with you. With your preparation complete, you can begin thinking about other aspects of the actual interview.

Perspective

At this point you’re still at the beginning of a relationship with a journalist. From the moment you answered the phone through the remainder of the five Ps, you’ll be cultivating an image of yourself for a journalist. Remember the old adage about first impressions being the most influential? That idea is a function of your perspective and can be a great asset to you through each of the “five Ps.”

Although the situation you and your family faces as victims of foodborne disease is not a good one, genuine concern and a helpful attitude forms your perspective, which can shine through and (1) boost your credibility as a person affected by an important issue and (2) boost your appeal to journalists and their audiences for being an interesting person with a compelling story. Perspective does not mean being happy and smiling all the time; it’s a combination of enthusiasm and a realistic frame of mind that shows through to others — that you understand and are dealing with the many facets and feelings that the effects of

foodborne disease has brought upon your life. You can see and talk about the good, the bad and the ugly of your experience and the broad issue of foodborne disease, and you have the strength of character and forthrightness about yourself that inspires others to support you and help you move forward.

Think of it another way: Although the situation you face is clearly terrible and should not have happened, if you maintain a constant negative attitude and confrontational approach during a journalist’s interview, chances are good that your story won’t be told or at least told in much detail. Why? Even though the situation is a tragic one, and you have every right to be angry, the vast majority of people don’t like gross negativity. Channeling your feelings, thinking about how your experiences can be made meaningful for others, and focusing on the benefits of this opportunity to tell your story can help you maintain perspective on your experience and help the greater cause of stopping foodborne disease.

On another dimension, journalists may ask questions or pursue a line of reasoning about negative, vague or private aspects of your story. (You should anticipate these things as you draft your list of anticipated questions.) You may not want to deal with these things in the way the reporter does. Remember to lean on your preparation, especially your key messages and anticipated questions and answers. The trick here is to address the negative topic by bridging back to your key messages, important facts or other information or comments that can put the point in a better light that is more in line with your story — and truthfully so. You also do not have to answer any question that you feel is inappropriate or that you are uncomfortable in answering. If this is the case, say so and say why; saying “no comment” could only make things worse, because it sounds like you’re hiding something.

Perspective is key throughout the process, and it is an important dynamic of your relationship with news people and their audiences. Remember that it’s not a phony kind of positive mental attitude, but rather it is a genuine kind of concern and frame of mind that is borne out of your personality, your ability to handle the adversity you face because of the effects of foodborne disease, and your willingness to make things better for our nation’s food. Now we turn to your presence during an interview, which will benefit from your perspective.

Presence

When interview time comes, it may be on the phone or in front of a video camera. You may even meet in a conference room at a news organization, or you may be

on the scene of a news conference that you're part of. It's time for all your preparation to pay off. Where ever and whenever you have the interview, the journalist will perceive and make note of your physical, attitudinal and intellectual presence. What does this mean? It means that how you present yourself in terms of your appearance, confidence, preparedness, and cooperation during the interview will determine how well things go and what parts of your story are used. In a very real sense, your presence is part of your performance during the interview, and this can be especially important in on-camera interviews, where your genuine rapport with the host or reporter should, ideally, help develop the best story possible for the audience.

Because impressions are important, you must manage your presence in ways that also make both you and the journalist look good, in an audience-centered way. On a physical level, you'll look good because you dress professionally and in a manner that is suited for the dignity of the occasion, like a news conference, rally, or broadcast studio. For example, if you'll be on television, don't wear white, because it "washes out" on the TV screen. Avoid narrow pinstripes, because they can look "fuzzy." On an emotional level, you'll look good because you are confident, relaxed (or as relaxed as you can be) and friendly. The reporter and her/his audience should pick up on these things and see you as an honest, interesting, genuine and credible person with a strong story. And that story should inspire interest among those who see and hear it.

In turn, you'll help the reporter look good as you help him/her craft a strong story to which audiences respond and editors and producers like. The difference between doing a "good" job and doing a "great" job is that reporters, editors and producers are more likely to call you back when you've done a great job. Being dull and uninformative puts you on the fast track to failure in any interview, especially if it's on television or radio. As publicist Joan Stewart (2003) said of TV talk shows, "If you wowed the crew, peppered the interview with pithy sound bites, and made the host look like a star, chances are good the producer already has asked you to return." To have this kind of success during your interview, it's best to practice patience, which is the next "P."

Patience

Patience is a virtue, and being patient during an interview means you'll do the interview one

question at a time and "keep your wits about you." You'll make few or no mistakes and handle things well. There are a few useful things to keep in mind as you exercise patience during an interview.

Your answers to a reporter's questions should be brief yet complete. Reporters like interesting and positive interviewees who give them useful information that is understandable (i.e., in plain language) and accurate — make your point then stop. Listen to the questions carefully. Try to connect with the interviewer, convey your message and speak convincingly. Also try to state your key messages early, as they can help set the tone and direction of the interview. Be thoughtful in your responses, and keep your answers audience-centered. Don't be afraid to ask questions of the interviewer if you need clarification, restatement or recontextualization of a question.

Remember that on TV, as Joan Stewart (2003) cautions, from the time the microphone is pinned on you, you're "hot," and that means be careful about everything you say because it may hurt you later. And remember your rights in these interviews. If you're going on a talk show, for example, the National Victim Center (2003) has some guidelines for both the shows and their guests. You may view them online at <http://www.nvc.org/resources/reports/talkshowguidelines/index.html>.

During any interview, a pregnant pause by a reporter is okay, and there is no need for you to say something. Use the pause to help you relax and stay focused. When answering questions, avoid guessing or speculating about anything. If you don't know something, say so and offer to get an answer later on. You may also redirect the question to one that's related and relevant to the one that was asked and answer your redirected question instead. Alternatively, you don't have to answer any question you don't like — just remember to say so and say why, but don't say, "No comment." As you answer an interviewer's questions, also remember to be concise in your comments, and use pithy, meaningful and honest sound bites. If possible, try to record the entire interview for yourself, so you have a record of what was said and done. Let the interviewer know that you plan to do this, and get her/his consent.

Patience implies a kind of willingness to "go with the flow," but to do so with purpose and without passivity. Tempering patience is persistence, which implies a need to keep things moving in ways that can help you get results you're hoping for.

Persistence

Persistence is a matter of focus on your audience-centered agenda for getting your story told. You have specific things you want to say, do and take away from the experience. In terms of what you want to say, your key messages are your focal points. Much of what you say during your interview should reflect back on them, maybe not word for word, but certainly in meaning. Try to bridge the points or topics the interviewer brings up back to your key messages.

Once the interview is done, it may seem that it all happened so fast. Try to learn from the entire experience so you can apply the lessons to the next interview. The point of persistence is that “practice make permanent,” and you’ll get better over time through each interview. Think back on what happened and what was said during the interview, and consider the strengths and weakness of those things. You’ll probably feel energized by the experience and be eager to find out what people thought and when the story will be printed or aired. It’s important to not be bothersome. Follow up with the interviewer a day or so after the interview (deadline permitting) to see if there are any further questions, if the interview was successful or not, and if the quality of the final product was good. Remember to thank everyone who was there for their work on the interview, especially the interviewer plus crew members and the editor/producer, if they were there.

Once you see the final product, you’ll have your own opinions of it, for better or for worse. Remember to not hold a grudge, if something in the finished report doesn’t meet your expectations. It’s possible that the journalist or producer may want to

call you again, and you don’t want to jeopardize the relationship you just built by complaining needlessly. You should, however, let your interviewer know where there have been clear factual errors or errors of omission of factual data. If this is the case, seek prompt corrections for these errors and explain why they are necessary. (Your recording of the interview may prove helpful here.) It’s futile to argue about statements of opinion that the interviewer or producer/editor added. You can let them know that you disagree and say why. You may wish to offer a new and interesting follow-up story that advances your point of view, if they’re interested.

Conclusion

From numerous meat recalls, to Congressional testimony, to advocates and groups like S.T.O.P. working on improving the safety of our nation’s food, media coverage of foodborne disease has been frequent and widespread. Indeed, personal stories from victims and their survivors have made the issue of food safety one of the most personal issues with which Americans can identify. Remember that there’s no guarantee about what a reporter will print or broadcast over radio or television, but you can at least make sure that the story you tell is compelling, honest and a positive contribution to the cause of stopping foodborne disease.

If you’re interested in looking into news interviews in more depth, you may like to start with the sources listed in Appendix B, and you may find other sources along the way too. You can also learn from interviews you watch on TV or hear on the radio. Working through the “five Ps” of media interviews should be a helpful way to manage the opportunities you have when news people call you and ask you to share your story for print or broadcast media.

Appendix A:

Victims' Rights in Dealing With the Media about Foodborne Disease*

(From the National Victim Center, with additions)

Victims have the right to:

- **Say “no” to an interview.** Never feel that because you have unwillingly been involved in an incident of public interest that you must personally share the details and/or your feelings with the public. If you decide that you want the public to be aware of how traumatic and unfair your victimization was, you do not automatically have to give up your right to privacy. By knowing and requesting respect for your rights, you can be heard and yet not violated.
- **Select the spokesperson or advocate of your choice.** Selecting one spokesperson eliminates confusion and contradictory statements. You have the right to expect the media to respect your selection of a spokesperson or advocate.
- **Select the time and location for media interviews.** Remember, the media is governed by deadlines. However, nobody should be subjected to a reporter arriving unannounced at the home of a victim. When you are traumatized, your home becomes your refuge. If you wish to protect the privacy of your home, select another location such as a church, meeting hall, office setting, etc. It helps if you are familiar and comfortable with the surroundings.
- **Request a specific reporter.** Many people identify with or respect a reporter whom they have never met. We often form personal opinions about reporters whom we feel are thorough, sensitive, compassionate and objective. If a newspaper, radio station or television station contacts you for an interview, don't hesitate to request the reporter you feel will provide accurate and fair coverage of your story.
- **Refuse an interview with a specific reporter even though you have granted interviews to other reporters.** You may feel that certain reporters are insensitive, uncaring or judgmental. It is your right to avoid these journalists. However, recognize that the reporter may write the story regardless of your participation.
- **Release a written statement through a spokesperson instead of an interview.** There may be times when you are emotionally incapable of speaking with the media, but you still wish to express your point of view. Writing and distributing your statement through a spokesperson allows you to express your views without personally granting interviews.
- **Exclude children from interviews.** Children already suffering from the trauma of crimes are often retraumatized by exposure to the media. Children often lack the means to verbalize their emotions and may be misinterpreted by both the media and the public.
- **Refrain from answering any questions with which you are uncomfortable or feel are inappropriate.** You should never feel you have to answer a question just because it is asked.
- **Know in advance the direction a story is going to take.** You have the right to know what questions reporters will ask you, along with the right to veto any question. This places you in partnership with the person covering the story.
- **Avoid a press conference atmosphere and speak to only one reporter at a time.** At a time when you are in a state of shock, a press conference atmosphere with many reporters can be confusing and emotionally draining. If a press conference is absolutely unavoidable, you have the right to select one reporter to ask questions for the majority present.
- **Stop any interview at any time.** If an interview begins to feel hostile, slanted, or too emotionally demanding, you have the right to stop the interview or to walk out. You can also ask for a break if you just need time to clear your head.
- **Demand a correction when inaccurate information is reported.** All news media have methods of correcting inaccurate reporting or errors in stories. Use these means to correct any aspect of media coverage that you feel is inaccurate.
- **Ask that offensive photographs or visual be omitted from broadcast or publication.** If you feel that graphic photographs or visuals are not the best representation of you or your loved ones, you have the right to ask that they are not used.
- **Conduct an interview using a silhouette or a newspaper interview without having a photograph taken.** There are many ways for media professionals to project your physical image without using your photograph or film footage of you, therefore protecting your identity.
- **Completely give your side of the story related to your victimization.** If you feel that a reporter is not asking questions which need to be addressed, you have the right to give a personal statement. And if the alleged or convicted offender grants interviews that are inaccurate, you have the right to publicly express your point of view.
- **Refrain from answering reporters' questions during trial.** If there is any chance of jeopardizing your case by interacting with the media during judicial proceedings, you have the right to remain silent.
- **File a formal complaint against a journalist.** A reporter's superior would appreciate knowing when his or her employee's behavior is unethical, inappropriate or abusive.
- **Grieve in private.** Grief is a highly personal experience. If you do not wish to share it publicly, you have the right to ask reporters to remove themselves during times of grief.

* Source: Mitchell (2003)

Appendix B:

Additional Resources on Media Interviews

- *Working with the Media*. A brief guide on building and managing your relationships with news media and doing basic public relations. Available on the Internet at <http://www.nvc.org/ncvrwguide/media.html>.
- *The Publicity Hound*. E-mail and online newsletter. Available on the Internet at <http://www.publicityhound.com>.
- *The Successful Media Interview*. Available on the Internet at <http://www.online-pr.com/OnlinePRInterviewPreptips.html>.
- *Get to the Point: How to Say What You Mean and Get What You Want* by Andrew Gilman and Karen Berg. Published by Kendall/Hunt (1995).
- *Talking Back to the Media* by Peter Hannaford. Published by Facts on File (1986).
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About the Author

Bridging theory and practice has been a hallmark of Peter M. Smudde's career. He has 17 years of experience in public relations, marketing communications and technical communication for numerous companies, ranging from General Motors to successful family-owned companies. Pete's played a full range of roles in the communications field, including director of public relations and consultant of strategic communications, the latter of which he's done since 1998 and continues to do today.

Along the way, Pete earned a Ph.D. in communication in 2000 from Wayne State University in Detroit, focusing on the interplay of rhetorical theory and the organizing activity of public relations practitioners. He's now assistant professor of public relations at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, and he helps students, peers and clients understand and apply the lessons of the theory and practice behind public relations.

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