

THE MEDIA ENCOUNTER:
CONTROL MEASURES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL

BY: Dr. Frank Dumphy
Education and Communication Arts Unit
FBI Academy

Dr. Charles Steinmetz
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C.

The forensic scientist who appears as an expert witness in the courtroom has traditionally coped with the defense and its experts, the jury, the prosecution, the judge, the questioned document or latent fingerprint and even the expert's own department or agency. Now, a new dimension has been added to the complexities of courtroom testimony - the television camera. This is projected even further beyond the courtroom as we are now in a position to see our colleagues confronted with media interviews and news release meetings. This is particularly true in those cases wherein regional or even national attention has been directed. The media is not a dimension to avoid, in that all of us in public service have an obligation to the public's awareness, but because of our misconceptions we may be reluctant to deal with the specific medium in an appropriate manner. For purposes of this article, we will concentrate on the medium of television as opposed to the spoken word of radio or the printed media. This is significant because the courts in many states have allowed the electronic dimension of television into the courtroom setting.

MEDIA ENCOUNTER

In every public encounter it is essential that identification experts attempt to favorably portray themselves as professionals thereby setting forth a similar image of their departments and the profession at large. A working knowledge of how to conduct oneself before television is an important tool which enables the professional to ensure that such an image is established. Public sentiment is of extreme importance to law enforcement agencies. The media is a powerful medium, which reaches more than 95% of the American public through television.

The identification expert can use any preparation for appearance on a television program as training for expert testimony in court as the same basic rules regarding demeanor and dress apply. Let us proceed with the assumption that you, as an expert witness (i.e. forensic scientist), are designated by your department to represent it regarding an investigative matter in which you have forensic responsibility.

With respect to television one should do research concerning the program on which one has been asked to appear. One should attempt to determine the type of show and whether or not the host has previously interviewed law enforcement officials. The outcome of such shows would be of interest in an effort to assess the potential encounter and prepare for it. Also, it would be wise to gain some insight into the personality of the interviewer. A strategy should be developed which will guide the

actions of the agency representative during the public appearance. Every effort should be made to meet with the host for the show and pin down exactly what it is that is to be discussed. The paramount view is that this should be a time to enhance the image of the agency. The objectives that you have established as a strategy should be kept strictly in mind when appearing on the show. One can rehearse the performance as with any other presentation by asking co-workers to listen to your remarks and constructively criticize the content. It is extremely important that the topic under discussion be thoroughly researched. One must know all of the salient points surrounding the topic and be abreast of any potential ramifications. Being prepared to respond to questions and attempt to anticipate questions that would normally arise from such matters is critical.

THE TELEVISION INTERVIEW

When the day arrives to appear at the studio one should bring an assistant to help with any last minute matters. One must meet with the host on the day of the show and reference previous conversations wherein one stipulates what points would be addressed during the interview. One should establish the boundaries for the interview. Probably the chief concern with respect to controlling the interview is to have a complete grasp of the ongoing discussion. This requires total concentration and strict attention to the particulars of the discussion. Do not become distracted with other matters. At the outset of the interview one should make a statement that alludes to the theme

of the message intended. A genuine concern must be manifested initially to gain the support of the viewers. If possible attempt to tie the matter to events that effect the community and create a need on the part of the listener. A sincere attention getter in the form of an illustration may pave the road and enable one to create audience interest by relating the topic directly to them by showing how it impacts on the day-to-day lives of citizens. Language customarily used on the job or jargon should be avoided to prevent misunderstanding.

The television encounter is not unlike general conversation wherein certain courtesies are adhered to by the participants. In the event common avenues of conversation such as participants interruptions should occur, take corrective action and request that such activity be avoided. If the conversation seems to be drifting toward an area not desirable one should seek an avenue through word usage to change the conversation.

GUIDELINES

The expert witness should emphasize any transitional words or phrases such as moreover, however, but or nevertheless, which signal the movement of the message from one point to another. If one addresses main points in verbiage that is vivid and concise retention is heightened. The use of transitional words is a good means by which to steer the topic of discussion. It is advisable to have the interviewer interpret or rephrase any question that is unclear so that you can formulate a proper response.

Don't render information that could subject you to scrutiny you do not wish to undergo or that is prejudicial to an ongoing court matter.

Don't use negativism as a means of communicating.

Don't allow personal concerns to become apparent with respect to controversial issues.

Don't ever refuse to comment on a matter without qualification - such as "this is a matter of pending investigation, and as such cannot be discussed."

Certain situations can occur during the course of the interview that can make the law enforcement representative seem less than professional and these should be guarded against. Initially the interviewer may advertently or inadvertently misrepresent the intent of the interview by furnishing erroneous information. In the event this occurs, the guest should immediately establish the proper focus of the interview. Failure to do so can cause a problem in that pre-set objectives may not be met.

Conversations can tend to drift from intended topics to issues unrelated and thereby not allow the guest to meet his objectives. When this happens immediately and tactfully resume the original topic. Remember you have expected outcomes for the program.

In some instances when the conversation concludes, the interviewer will incorrectly summarize the information covered. The guest should take careful note of inconsistencies or misconstrued statements and should rebut these. The ending of the commentary as with any speech is the most important phase of address.

The expert witness representative appearing on a television show should be aware that although conversation concerning intended topics has ended and it appears that one is no longer on the air, there may well be an ongoing audio feed. If there is a microphone in the vicinity realize that it can be a transmitter. Any unintended conversation should be curtailed until one is absolutely sure there exists an "off air" status. Remember the key to your success is control and your actions dictate this control.

Television is a primary visual medium, therefore, visual. It is of extreme importance that the law enforcement officer make a lasting impression. The initial observation by the viewer becomes fixed in the mind and affects the balance of the message. This is where image building becomes a concern. The most important variable in communication is obviously the speaker. A similar comment given by two persons may produce different outcomes. This is called "ethos or source credibility." The components of source credibility are trustworthiness, expertise and dynamics, as stated by William D. Brooks. One should lend extensive thought to statements and achieve dynamism by reducing thoughts to positive written remarks prior to utilization.

PHYSICAL ATTIRE

Physical appearance including dress is a key concern in establishment of image. Viewers will immediately identify with and be receptive to speakers based on initial impressions,

which is not unlike the courtroom environment situation. Appearance is a measure of the influence one may have upon others. One may not be able to control body type, but one can assure that clothing is proper, clean and fresh for public appearance.

There are many schools of thought regarding the correct or proper attire for both men and women who are appearing in court or on television. These points have been argued on many occasions but suffice it to say that the authors suggest that men should always wear a business suit and never a sport jacket. Colors for are preferably grays of any shade and darker blues. Plaids or patterns should be avoided as well as browns or black which have been found to be unacceptable for men. The shirt should be pastel for television and white for court. The often recommended red (or "power") tie is rapidly becoming a nonstatement and is ridiculously over-employed. A stripe or paisley in a subdued color is much more professional in our opinion. Women are encouraged to resist any dresses, blouses or jewelry which over-emphasizes their femininity. The image that projects and influences viewers or jurors is one of neutrality which is businesslike. Therefore, for women, a suit (color dependent on the season) highlighted by a blouse and one simple, yet good, item of jewelry is most affective in establishing a professional image. Tailored dresses and blouses are equally effective.

While on television, as in the witness chair, both men and women should cross their legs away from the viewer (e.g. the camera on TV; the jury in the courtroom). Men should wear socks that cover the calf as no bare leg should be visible. Both men and women should wear polished footwear in good repair.

Makeup for men and women can be extremely advantageous for the television appearance and it is recommended that the expert witness comply with studio requests for such usage.

CONCLUSION

The agency that authorizes an employee to relate information to any of the public media has placed a great vote of confidence in that individual. Such action is parallel to courtroom testimony and can serve an agency well in the area of public relations. The feeling of success in presenting critical expert testimony or participating in a television interview is its own reward for the professional who has prepared and planned thoughtfully.

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