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10 tips: How lawyers can be better interviewees

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Law firm partners put enormous effort into winning clients. Crafting their business development skills, perfecting their pitches and writing digital content are integral to the effective communication strategy of every practice group. Although their potential and reach can be significant, media interviews are inevitably seen as less important.

Despite the obvious value of being quoted in the FT, the Wall Street Journal or the high-end trade press, surprisingly little effort and thought can be given to the process. Yet the legacy is permanent: the digital footprint of a lawyer's quote not only lasts much longer than the impression from a single meeting, or a bespoke pitch document, it is likely to be read by far more people who matter over time.

Having interviewed innumerable lawyers - from Toronto to Tokyo - I've compiled a checklist below of how they can add value to what they say and why it matters. Being a good interviewee is a skill: one that comes naturally to some, and is more often apparent when talking to those partners who manifestly understand its worth to themselves and to their firm. Most lawyers can become much better interviewees with a modicum of effort - and benefit accordingly.

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TEN TIPS FOR LAWYERS ON BEING A BETTER INTERVIEWEE

1. BE UNAFRAID

Media interviews can make lawyers fearful. The thought lingers in their mind of tabloid journalists seeking to entrap them or take a quote out of context. This is not what the quality media does in writing about serious issues. They seek proper analysis, not frivolous gossip. Google the journalist and find out what he/she has written. A good ice-breaker might be to reference something of theirs you have read: it will flatter the journalist, who may in turn flatter you online.

Tip: If you're anxious about an interview, agree in advance that quotes will be sent to you for approval prior to publication.

2. BE PREPARED

Lawyers sometimes start an interview with a confession: "I haven't really prepared for this." It shows. Ask about detail and they can't remember. Request examples and they are flummoxed. Enquire about numbers and they respond: "I'll have to get back to you." Much more impressive is the lawyer who has the details in front of them, or who has anticipated your questions prior to the interview.

Tip: Journalists speak to many lawyers - you're more likely to be quoted if you speak with the voice of authority and know your stuff.

3. BE AWARE

The best lawyers are good listeners. They ask questions at the outset about what you're writing: in scope and scale. They listen carefully to your answers and then tailor their response to your questions. They also ask who else you are talking to and sometimes make helpful suggestions about alternative interviewees. In the process, they can become a journalist's friend: someone whom the journalist will go back to.

Tip: Listen to each question carefully and answer it appropriately. Don't deviate, or play the politician's trick of answering a different question.

4. BE INTERESTED

A good interview is a conversation, not a monologue. Lawyers typically don't ask much, probably in the belief that the journalist interviewing them has no

information or opinions of any value, which may well be true! Those that do often probe to find out what other market participants are saying. Remember journalists are in a unique position: sometimes they can learn a lot from speaking to all the key players. Don't ask questions yourself and you may never find out something of real use.

Tip: Write down a couple of questions to ask, give your answer to a question, and then ask what others are saying.

5. BE QUOTABLE

A minority of lawyers have an infinite capacity to be dull, pulverising the important aspects of any case or deal into a paste, thick with numbers and technical terminology. Think about why your case or deal is interesting, and explain that clearly and simply in interview. Without hyperbole, don't be afraid to use adjectives, or even better a quirky story. They make for good copy.

Tip: If you want to be quoted, think of a short memorable phrase in advance. It might even make a headline.

6. BE ECONOMICAL

Lawyers are not usually short of words. A few give answers so long that they would fill a textbook chapter. Remember the journalist is probably writing a piece of between 800 and 2000 words, of which your input is only a small part. What you need to provide is an incisive sentence or two on each point, not answers that echo the complexity of Proust or the epic sweep of War and Peace.

Tip: Think beforehand what you might say to key questions and write up answers. Not easy, but keep each one to 100 words or less.

7. BE FUNNY

This sounds hard. But it's not as hard as you think. Describing the most technical collateralised loan obligation or an intricate UNCITRAL Arbitration Rule might not be the stuff of stand up comedy, but some amusing anecdote normally surrounds any piece of legal work, no matter how abstruse. Telling a funny story proves that you are human too.

Tip: It's obvious. If you engage a journalist with humour, you might end up getting better coverage.

8. BE COLLEGIATE

Reading through a wealth of interview transcriptions, it is remarkable how egocentric some partners can be. They use the word ‘I’ a hundred times or more without one mention of ‘We’. Don’t be myopic. Law firms are partnerships: talk about your firm, not just yourself. Remember that new office/client/deal – it matters to your firm. It should matter to you too.

Tip: Identify three things that have happened recently in your firm, and make sure that you weave them into the conversation.

9. BE OPINIONATED

Lawyers can be terrified of giving public opinions, unless they are couched in the most careful language, fully underpinned by a written risk assessment. This has no place in a news or feature article. Do have an opinion on the future of what you do and don’t be afraid to give it. Stand back, think about where your practice and your firm are going. Write it down and revise it: 90% of what you say in interview will never be used, but your strategic wisdom might be.

Tip: To form a well-rounded opinion, talk to others in your group about what they think.

10. BE YOURSELF

Relax, don’t be uptight. A good interviewer will try and draw out something of the person underneath the corporate blue suit. So talk about your partner, your children, your holiday, a sports game or a film you've watched - anything that reveals a little of your life beyond the office. A passing reference will do, but to the person at the other end of the phone, it humanises you. Instead of being just another lawyer, you become a person too, exactly like the journalist interviewing you. The art of being a good interviewee ultimately rests in being yourself.

Tip: No forward planning needed. Just remember: it’s a conversation, not a cross-examination.

If you would like to know more about what I can do for your firm, please do get in touch: www.dominiccarman.com

