

Projecting the Right Image

Grenville Janner QC MP

As a young, practising barrister, I made occasional appearances on local and national TV and radio, explaining either the law or the effects of some current, topical case. So I was billed as “a barrister” and only those very few people who recognised my face or voice could blame me personally for my errors.

Today, the scene is different. Counsel may appear, unrobed but otherwise naked in their identity, before microphone or camera. They are seldom trained in even the bare and essential techniques of handling those tricky media. And their errors and omissions are too often too obvious, too embarrassing and too harmful.

So here is your quick review of some of the essentials, vital to successful TV or radio appearances.

As a start, you must decide whether or not you wish to appear at all. Ask:

- What do they want to talk to me about, and why? Is it a subject with which I feel comfortable or am I likely to be shown up for my ignorance?
- Will the interview be live or recorded? Live is more dangerous – there’s no retreat, but at least you’ll know what will be seen or heard. Recorded means the chance to redo or restate, but you never know how or what they will cut.
- Will you be on your own? If not, who will confront you, and is the contest acceptable? Will the interviewer be out for your blood or can you expect a friendly session?
- Where and when will the session take place? Can you guarantee to turn up? “No shows” get no second chances.

If you decide to appear, start preparing. Work out your main points; jot them down on a card; and make them.

Best mnemonic for a brief “sound bite” – do your PREP. State your Position; give your Reason; and an Example; then restate your Position. All in 15 to 30 seconds, which is all you may have at the start or all you may be left out if you pre-recorded.

Ask your interviewer: What is your first question? Take a deep

breath and let it out slowly. Then keep control of yourself, as you would in court, under pressure from a determined Judge.

As with a Court, so with a studio. Arrive early; acclimatise; never rush; never take alcohol before you perform. Instead, make sure that you are comfortable.

On TV, sit or stand upright and with authority. Do not lean forward on the table or slouch against a wall. On radio, spread out your papers carefully; never rustle or rattle your documents.

For television, either look at your interviewer or, if you are working in one studio and the interviewer is talking to you “down the line”, then ask for “an eyeline”. Make them tell you where to look so that it appears on the screen as if you have eye contact with your interviewer, otherwise you will look shifty. Then settle in. Above all: concentrate.

Forget about the audience outside. Talk to and think about your interviewer or, if you are in a discussion, the presenter and your fellow victims.

Remember: every speck of dandruff will show on your dark suit; if your jacket is not pulled down or your shirt is rumpled, you will look like a hippopotamus. Conversely: if your mind and body are both prepared for battle, you have every prospect of winning.

Next: *delivery*. Many of the rules are the same as in all other presentations. For instance:

- Take your time. Pause. Chat and do not gabble.
- Do not umm or err. Instead, wait a moment; think; and choose your words.
- Use short, brisk words; and brief, fighting sentences. Waffle, jargon and pomposity are bad at any time, but they pronounce death in the media.
- Barristers must take special care to keep away from verbal shorthand which they understand but which the listeners or viewers will not.
- Keep eye contact. Use anecdotes; give illustrations – everyone likes a story. Above all, be yourself. Smile when you are introduced. Animate as you would in ordinary conversation.

Do not let a microphone or a camera turn you into a zombie.

Now for some special techniques.

First: *reading*.

On radio, you chat your script. Leave plenty of space in the margins and between lines. Use underlining and accents for stress, oblique strokes for pauses. Imagine that the microphone is a person and talk to it. Lift each page gently off the pile. And relax.

The radio phone-in: you may be asked into the studio to talk about legal problems. You give your set piece or answer the presenter’s questions. Then they take calls from listeners.

Once again, talk to them. If Joe from Clapham asks a legal query that you can easily answer, do so. If he needs specialist advice which can only be given on the basis of full information, tell him.

If Mary from Manchester invites you to comment on some current legal scandal, take care. Do not let your enthusiasm for truth or the opportunity to sound off lead you towards a libel action.

Finally: *confrontation*. As always, keep cool. Lose your self control and at the same time you lose the battle.

That distinguished BBC teacher of TV skills to diplomats, John Goss, says this: when people switch on their television and listen to your discussion, they have invited you into their living room. You are their guest and they expect the presenter to be courteous towards you. They object if you are treated rudely, so if you respond with courtesy, you win.

As with radio and TV style generally, so especially with confrontation, actual and potential – there are techniques to be learned. The best way to learn is to be taught and then to criticise yourself in action. I often record my TV efforts and send them to John Goss, who tells me how and where I should do better.

So treat radio and TV with respect. Handle them properly and they can provide new opportunities for you to display your talents and your wares. But do not take excellence for granted. To achieve it, you need skill, training – and good luck.

Reproduced with kind permission of Counsel – Bar Journal of England and Wales (May 1990) ■