

HOW TO APPROACH 'ON' OR 'OFF-THE-RECORD'

Electric Airwaves is the UK's largest communications training company and the most frequent question we are asked by participants on our courses is whether they should ever go 'off-the-record'. Implicitly linked to this is the question 'do journalists honour such conversations?'

So is there such a thing as 'off-the-record'? The answer is – 'yes' with a 'but'.

What does 'off-the-record' mean?

You need to be sure that both you and the journalist understand the context for your comments. The most usual understanding is that whatever the journalist is told can be reported so long as it is not attributed to the

person who said it. This is why a person speaking off-the-record is often described as 'an insider', 'a party official' or 'a colleague.'

But a second form of 'off-the-record' is where neither the identity of the source nor the information they've passed on can be revealed. Press officers will often do this kind of background briefing when they need the journalist to understand the context of a story but do not want to have either their identity or the actual information revealed because it would prejudice them.

Why does 'off-the-record' exist?

Journalists are expected to develop and cultivate sources. 'Off-the-record'

information is often valuable and can only be secured by keeping its source secret (some journalists have gone to prison rather than reveal their sources). And no staff-contracted 'beat' journalist – those who cover a specialist area such as politics, business, education etc - would reveal sources if they ever wanted to have another source trust them.

So what should you do?

Looked at from the perspective of the occasional spokesperson, they do not often specifically cultivate on-going relationships with journalists. Therefore, they cannot be certain that a confidence will be kept or misunderstandings not arise, especially with a 'non-beat' or freelance journalist.

Whilst a journalist may be guided by their code of ethics, this is not legally enforceable and 'the public interest' is often considered more important than the requirement to protect an individual's anonymity.

So our advice is that unless you are a Press Officer or have an established trusted journalist relationship, do not go 'off-the-record'. Do not say anything to a journalist that you would not want to see quoted with your name attached. And if you are still not sure, do not say anything that if you were revealed to have said it, would get you fired!

If you want to speak to one of our journalists in order to find out more about the media or want to enquire about booking a training session, please call us on +44 (0)20 7323 2770 or email team@electricairwaves.com.



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