

“No Comment”

The Battle to Get Quotes

by Bill Glose

The assignment sounded easy enough: a feature story profiling a super-heavyweight lawyer who won multiple jury verdicts or settlements worth over \$100 million each; who wore a diamond-studded Rolex and a purple suit to trial; who alternated days driving to his office in either a Ferrari or a Rolls Royce. Best of all, Max (not his real name) spoke his mind and spouted memorable quotes, especially on the topic of his favorite subject—himself. Max didn’t disappoint. During our interview, he shared courtroom antics and behind-the-scenes tricks, bashing opponents and judges alike. The article, I figured, would just about write itself.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. With such a brash person, I figured getting outside sources to share their opinions of him would be an easy task. However, substantiating his claims was a labyrinthine nightmare. No one wanted to talk.

Normally, the losing side of a contest has plenty to say about the victor, often insulting, sometimes expletive-ridden, but usually colorful. A little research turned up an opposing counsel who once commented that he had beaten Max “in every aspect of their case except in the minds of the jury.” A perfect quote! Now I just had to get him to say something similar for me. It took a while to track him down, but I finally found him. Or at least I found his obituary.

On to the next source: a giant corporation that had battled Max and lost. Even better was the fact that shortly after they had settled with Max to the tune of almost \$200 million, they hired him to represent them in another nine-figure case. I called the firm’s vice chairman multiple times, but the only response was, “No comment.”

A little more digging uncovered a lawyer who had faced off with Max in a major case. And won. After a number of persistent inquiries I was rewarded with a one-sentence email that stated Max was a good lawyer. Not quite the edge-of-your-seat quote I was hoping for.

I started to suspect that Max’s peers might be intimidated by his penchant to sue for vast sums of money, and that comments they provided might be construed, under cross examination, as slanderous.

A nothing-but-good-things-to-say possibility was the dean of Max’s alma mater, to which he had donated

truckloads of money. The dean turned out to be on sabbatical, but I finagled a phone interview at his home. However, when I called at the designated time he was gone due to an emergency. *Harumph!*

When I told my editor about the lack of callbacks and the string of “No comments” I’d received, he provided two more leads. The first lead never returned my calls, but the second called back the very next day. Unfortunately, he only knew Max by reputation. *Double harumph!*

But persistence pays off. I finally got a callback from the dean, who spoke glowingly of Max at length. I also heard from a forewoman I didn’t expect to hear back from, who had plenty to say about his memorable courtroom manner. Then I got a return call from a judge who had publicly commented about Max in the past. Fate, it seemed, was not set against me. Or was it?

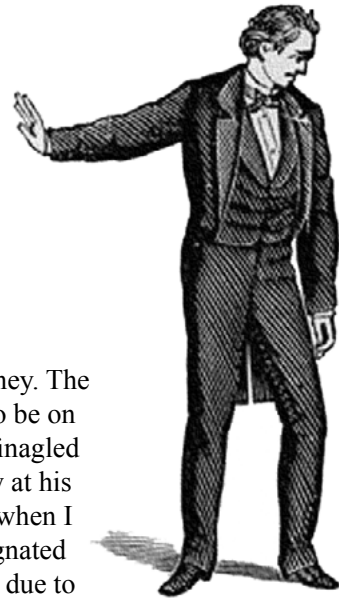
“I was only calling,” said the judge, “to tell you I’d rather not say anything.”

At least it wasn’t “No comment.”

When you need information on your subject you can save needless running around by informing your subject you will need to speak with people he or she knows. Most interviewees will gladly provide names and contact information of friends and peers if you ask.

Sometimes, however, a subject will be reluctant or unable to provide names; other times, the contacts provided by a subject might be too biased for the thrust of your article; you may wish to speak with those who hold an opposing view as well. In any case, you will need to do a little digging to turn up those all-important supporting quotes. Here are a few ideas on where to look:

- 1. Family members:** great for background and anecdotes that foreshadow the person the subject became.
- 2. Co-workers:** bosses are great due to the supervisory relationship and subordinates are great because of the potential “mentoring” aspect, but any coworker that knows the subject well will do.



3. Previous quotes: other articles about the subject are a great place to find people who have commented on him before. If they commented once, they're likely to do it again.

4. Professional organizations: awards and commendations that have been presented to your interview subject were given to him for a reason; ask key members of those organizations why they chose him for the award.

5. Community groups: any group or organization to which your interview subject belongs should be able to comment about his involvement. Ask which committees he works on and speak to the chairs of those committees.

6. Expert opinions: trade directories or Internet searches can turn up experts in the interviewee's area of expertise. Experts who live and practice in the same area as your subject have the greatest likelihood of familiarity.

7. Customers/clients: people who pay your subject for his services have reasons for choosing him over his competition.

8. Audience members/students: events where the subject interacts with the public in any way (lectures, performances, etc.) are filled with people who either know or know of your subject.

9. Opponents: people whose job/vocation is contrary to your interview subject's are great sources of opinion. Even if they don't know your subject personally, they might give you key information that sends you in a helpful direction.

10. Neighbors: people who live or work next to your subject have special insight on his habits. ■

Bill Glose is an award-winning freelance writer as well as the author of *Half a Man* and *The Human Touch*. His honors include the F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Award and the Virginia Press Association First Place Award for Sports News Writing. A featured speaker on literary craft, Bill is a regular columnist for *Virginia Living*. Visit his website at www.billglose.com

