

Interview Techniques

In today's environment, professionals must take advantage of every opportunity to reach their target audience with positive messages about their issues and causes. When you are brought into the news media spotlight, your actions and words can have a positive or negative impact. The trick is to do more than "hold your own" with the media. You must seize the moment to communicate your message instead of simply answering questions. If you panic and engage in self-doubt, you can easily lose control of the situation. But if you stop, take a deep breath and remember one fact, you can immediately begin to turn any encounter with the news media to your advantage.

The one fact to remember:

You have more power and control than you think.

Even in a situation that seems uncontrollable, you have control of your actions and words. Information is power and you have the ability to use that power in a positive way as a persuasive communicator. The key to successful communication with the news media lies in understanding how the news media works and using your knowledge to manage interviews wisely.

When you are in the spotlight, keep in mind:

- You are not at the news media's mercy.
- You are a source of information.
- You may not be able to control events entirely, but you can control your responses to them.
- You can also control the way you communicate those responses to the news media and the public.
- You can't control the media, but you can help shape media coverage and, thereby, help shape public perceptions of you, your organization, the program or the issue.

When your organization, or an issue that you are involved with, is the subject of a breaking news story, you must do more than react. You must be in front of events, not dragged along by them. The best way to stay in front is to have a communications plan that is based on a firm understanding of the news media's needs, motivations and methods.

Understanding the Media — News is a Business

A mystique seems to surround the media, but close examination reveals a rather typical management structure behind the smiling anchor team and the hustling reporters. This management team is simply trying to create and maintain a market for a product, sharing the same bottom-line concerns as other businesses. In fact, productivity and profitability are just as fundamental in the news media as in other businesses.

The Reporter

Your interface with the news business is most likely to be a reporter. It is important to understand that a reporter is neither a saint nor a sinner.

A reporter has a job to do and that job is complicated by pressures from management and editors, serious time constraints and a limited knowledge of who you are and what you do. Most reporters are

trying to get information in a straightforward manner. They rarely have sinister motives and are usually not out to destroy you in an interview. They may be aggressive, but that's because you are one of their few sources — maybe their only source — of information.

However, reporters can occasionally be careless and ill-informed. Even a “beat” reporter, who covers a specific topic on a regular basis (such as transportation), may have limited knowledge of your issue. To be a good communicator, you need to look beyond the reporter's limitations in order to establish a rapport. Frustration or resentment on your part could lead to a communication breakdown and perhaps a negative story. By remaining open and cooperative, you may be able to educate the reporter in a non-threatening way.

It's also important to understand the ways in which broadcast journalists differ from print journalists in their news-gathering techniques and philosophies.

Television and Radio

In general, you can expect television and radio reporters to approach a news story with less perspective than their print counterparts. They will also be less willing to get below the surface of the story.

Because the broadcast media must fit into a time-constrained capsule, the context and nuances of a story — often critical to understanding — are sacrificed. It is a good idea, prior to a radio or television interview, to tune into the specific program to get a feel for the style and tone of the show. You might also visit the station's Web site where you can find useful information about the radio show host(s) and their format.

As a rule, radio news is the least probing and most superficial information medium. But it is also one of the most immediate. Radio has the ability to get news to the public rapidly. Radio news interviews should, therefore, be conducted carefully and thoughtfully since radio may well carry your first communication to the outside world. Try to consider the various questions that reporters might ask and prepare a clear and succinct answer to each. Make the most of this opportunity to reemphasize your key messages.

Television news is perhaps the most persuasive and influential information medium in the world today. In the U.S., television news has changed the way we think, the way we vote and the way we're governed. As its impact continues to grow, television news continues to change. Television technology brings ever-greater access to events around the world and sometimes becomes part of the event itself. And yet, despite its power, television news is limited in many ways. A good communicator, however, will tailor information to make effective use of this medium.

Because television is a visual medium, news assignment editors may ask, “Who's got the pictures?” more often than “What's the story?” Unfortunately, the pictures are the story to some television news people even if those pictures don't really explain what is going on, and more importantly, WHY it's going on.

Another concept that guides much television news coverage is the “sound bite” — a few seconds of an answer or comment pulled from an interview. This “sound bite” is often presented as the essential

kernel of information around which the story revolves. It may or may not accurately reflect the substance or context of the situation being covered.

On a continuing story, one that is covered for more than a day or two, television news managers often try to find a new angle or “spin” for each day’s coverage. Sometimes the angle is more an invention for the sake of diversity or drama than it is a facet of the story that is useful or enlightening.

Finally, television news operations tend to feed off one another. The danger in this kind of imitative behavior, of course, is that a false premise or story may be repeated and perpetuated by others.

So does television news have any redeeming qualities? The answer is an emphatic “YES!” There are heroic reporters and news crews who have made important contributions in the coverage of breaking news and special events. They sometimes show us amazing depth in a medium defined by speed — whether covering a riot, assassination or an earthquake.

Broadcast Interview Techniques

Being well prepared before facing the camera or microphone will go a long way in helping to ensure a successful interview. How you handle yourself will have a remarkable effect on the impact of the story. Keep the following tips in mind before your next interview.

In any interview situation — but especially in a television interview — where you sit in relation to others can have an effect on how you come across to the audience.

- Never sit between two interviewers. Sitting in the middle puts you at a disadvantage, because you must constantly turn your head from one side to the other to answer questions. Sit to one side of two interviewers, especially if they are apt to be hostile.
- When you sit down, be sure your jacket is pulled straight and that you are sitting straight in the chair.
- Do not lean to one side or the other or slouch as if folded in the middle.
- Do not glance at the camera while you are responding to an interviewer’s question. The camera should be ignored unless you are told otherwise. Make eye contact with the reporter.
- Avoid sudden body movements (standing up, leaning back in the chair) that may take you out of the camera range.
- Remember to keep your answers short and succinct. Avoid technical language and too many statistics. Instead try using anecdotes to convey your message.
- Discuss the interview with the reporter before your interview begins. Find out what the reporter wants to learn. Ask about questions in advance.

Print Media

Newspapers and magazines can, and quite often do, bring us more ideas, perspective and history than broadcast media. Unfortunately, not all publications live up to their potential for deepening our understanding of events.

When you encounter a print reporter, you will generally find that he or she is more prepared for an interview than their broadcast counterparts. That means questioning will be more comprehensive and probing. Print media reporters are more likely to be specialists in a certain area (beat) and thus better informed about your subject. They tend to work longer on a story and produce fewer stories each day/week than broadcast reporters. Their stories usually go into greater depth. Many reporters will also use statistical data if provided.

You don't have to think in "sound bites" with print reporters, but you do have to keep an interview focused and directed at all times. Even though a newspaper or magazine writer may start out with a greater understanding of the situation being covered, watch out, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. With more time to develop background for a story, a reporter may also develop a questionable angle or premise. Watch for a reporter's hidden agenda, predilection or preconceived notions about your organization, program or issue.

Once you have some understanding of the needs, motivations and techniques of the news media, you will be better prepared for handling an interview.

Print Interview Techniques

The following are additional points to consider in preparing for a print interview:

- Know who is interviewing you and why. Find out the reporter's correct name, purpose of the story, the publication and when it is distributed, etc. Most reporters will give you the general line of questioning in advance, if requested.
- Anticipate questions and prepare for them.
- Work out responses. Crisp, punchy, straightforward answers are best. Do not memorize the answer, except for key phrases. Remember the two or three key points you want to make and make them.
- Practice responses with an associate before the interview.
- Avoid "no comment." If you can't answer a question, say so and why. If you don't know an answer, it is okay to say so. Simply offer to follow-up with the information requested. Find out when the reporter's deadline is and make every effort to accommodate it.
- Don't answer hypothetical questions (What if...). Do say: "I don't want to speculate..." but then bridge that comment with a remark such as "...but I can say that we're prepared to..."
- Do listen carefully to questions.
- Do not debate or spar with a reporter, but politely correct wrong facts or assumptions.
- Cite third-party experts or statistics that support your view.
- Do not repeat inaccuracies or deny allegations. Instead, state your position clearly and concisely. (You may be quoted out of context: "I'm not a crook.")
- Remember, "off-the-record" statements sometimes do get published.
- Don't lie to the media.

Handling the Interview — The Request

Try to determine what the reporter wants to accomplish in the interview. Why are they doing the interview? What is the story about? If it is not obvious to you, ask.

Why do you want to talk to me?

You may discover the reporter is after information that is really outside your area of expertise or that someone else is a more appropriate spokesperson.

What do you want to talk about?

Discovering the subject areas they want to explore will help you prepare for the actual interview.

Who is the reporter?

You may know the reporter is informed about your area of expertise or you may need to educate the reporter about your organization or issue.

What documents have you seen? What is your deadline?

Being responsive in helping a reporter meet his/her deadline will go a long way in developing a positive working relationship.

Attitude

Be polite, open, and above all, honest. But remember, do not let a reporter lead you or badger you. You can successfully counter a reporter's attempts at intimidation and maintain control of the interview. Just bridge to your talking points.

Talking Points

Organize your thoughts into concise messages. These talking points will anchor all your answers throughout the interview. Try to consider the various questions that reporters might ask you and prepare a clear, complete answer to each. Make the most of this opportunity to reemphasize your key messages. Think of three or four recurring themes that you would want the public to hear. These are your talking points and they answer the question: "What, at the very least, do I want the audience to remember?"

Keep messages simple. Take initiative, control the interview and don't wait for good questions.

Your Answers

If you've done your part, you'll have an idea of what the reporter wants to learn. A concise answer to a reporter's questions can keep you in control of the interview. Think in terms of three-part answers: statement, explanation and conclusion.

Intimidation Tactics

Learn to recognize the intimidation techniques a reporter might employ. They include:

<u>Question Type</u>	<u>Definitions/Objectives</u>
Loaded Preface	A long preamble to a question, usually containing false and/or loaded statements.
False Premise	An attempt to lure you into taking an extreme position.
Quotation	A "fishing trip" by the reporter who is trying to get a colorful statement out of you by referencing a third party.
Hypothetical Situation	The reporter tries to get you to react on an emotional level, perhaps to establish an inconsistency.
Divide & Conquer	The reporter tries to drive a wedge between you and someone with whom you should be carefully aligned.
Negative Entrapment	A line of questioning that tries to uncover something negative.
Paraphrasing	The reporter draws his own conclusion and tries to get you to agree with it.

Mental Preparation

An interview should be a positive experience, if you do your homework. You don't want to seem defensive. Reporters will pick up on defensiveness very quickly, as will the camera. Take the media interview for what it is — a rare opportunity to tell the reporter's audience about what you are doing and why it is important. Anticipate tough questions.

Bridging

Should a reporter use intimidating questioning techniques, you do not have to stop talking. You can "bridge" from the reporter's inappropriate question to your own talking point. It's okay to say:

"On the contrary..."

"Our position is..."

"My vision is..."

"That's one point of view, let me give you another"

"The other side of that issue is..."

"Our view is..."

"Yes, and..."

Interview Tips

- Never speak "off the record."
- Stick to the facts.
- Do not speculate or guess.
- Do not offer personal opinions.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, it's okay to say "I don't know" but promise to get the answer before the reporter's deadline.
- Speak from the perspective of the viewer/listener/reader.
- Tell the truth.

- Be a helpful resource.
- You don't have to talk about things you don't want to (or can't) talk about.
- Have your own message. Each interview presents an opportunity to say something positive. Bridge to your messages at every opportunity.
- Use simple and clear "sound bites," especially for broadcast media.
- Be prepared for the interview/reporter. Remember that you may not be given exact questions in advance.
- In television interviews, your gestures and facial expressions may say more than words.
- In radio interviews, speak clearly and distinctly, enunciate carefully.
- During a crisis, deliver the facts and your message early on. Clarify misinformation and inaccuracies immediately. Be accessible to the news media to avoid gossip, speculation or criticizing.
- Don't ask to read or preview a story before it is printed. Quotes will be checked, but you don't have the right to preview the story in its entirety.

Overcoming Nervousness

It's natural to be nervous before going before the camera. Every professional entertainer experiences some kind of "butterfly" feelings before a performance.

What can you do about it?

- Practice a few relaxing exercises before you go on — rolling your neck, swinging your arms, stretching.
- Take a deep breath, hold it for 3-5 seconds, let it out slowly.
- Stand naturally with your feet shoulder-width apart, your hands loose and relaxed. Then shake your hands and arms, letting the vibration work itself into the rest of your body.
- Think of nervousness as a way of ensuring you are "up" for the interview.
- The best way to combat nervousness before the camera is to come prepared for the situation by knowing your subject matter and the major points you need to make.
- Many times, the talk show host or reporter will spend a few moments before the program begins talking with you about the subjects to be covered. This also provides an opportunity to "calm down."
- Regarding relaxing, whether the camera is running or not, when you're in the television studio or near a camera, you are "on." Do not make comments in the green room (room used as a waiting area prior to an interview), during commercial breaks or after the program that you would not make on the air.
- One final thing to remember. Reporters would rather talk to someone like yourself, who knows the industry and the issue, than the most polished looking TV spokesperson.

Personal Appearance

What a speaker looks like should never overshadow what he or she has to say. A speaker's appearance, however, can help make the message more convincing. Keep these points in mind as you prepare for a public appearance:

- Dress conservatively. If you wear a uniform to work, wear one to the interview.
- Wear a dark suit with a solid color shirt or blouse. Avoid white, which tends to reflect light onto the face of the person who is wearing it. Solids show up better than patterns.

- Do not wear flashy jewelry.
- Keep jacket or dress free of lapel buttons or pins.
- There should be no bulky items in pockets.
- For major television appearances, use powder, professionally applied. A dusting of powder on your face will help avoid shine invariably caused by bright lights. It will also fix any tendency men have toward a "five o'clock shadow."
- Do not wear sunglasses.
- When seated, keep jacket buttoned, but pulled straight to avoid wrinkles.
- Make sure collar and tie are straight, shirt tucked in.
- Never wear a hat.

A few final tips:

- Reporters generally feel overworked, underpaid and on deadlines. Know this. Respect this.
- Become a resource to the media. Comment on trends and issues as they relate to your region. Localize stories. Provide attributable documentation to your claims.
- Know the media format you're pitching to. Become familiar with the reporter's style and history in covering your issues.
- Return reporter's calls. Respond in a timely manner. Accommodate deadlines.
- If you can't comment on an issue or event, refer to someone who can (or else give an explanation as to why you can't comment).
- Include ethnic media when you tell your story (see Section VII, "Working with Ethnic Media"):
 - Provide bilingual spokespersons.
 - Identify relevance of information to specific ethnic communities.