

Media Relations Handbook

CLARIFY THE INTERVIEW

An interview request should always be measured against the main question, “How will this interview advance my organization’s message and goals?” But there are several other questions you can ask before you agree to an interview so you can be prepared.

- What is the interview about?
- What is your organization’s role in the piece? Who else are they interviewing?
- What outlet is it for? Is it one that reaches one of your target audiences? If it is not one you are familiar with, find out if it’s print, broadcast or online.
- When is the report most likely to be published or broadcast?

If you are comfortable with the answers to all of these questions and you feel this interview gives you a good opportunity to get out your organization’s messages, go for it. If you don’t feel you are the right messenger, consider suggesting someone else from your list of spokespeople or partner groups who might be more appropriate or could make a stronger statement. If the story just isn’t on the right topic or won’t give you the forum to discuss what you want to discuss, consider turning it down. Spend your time on something that will let you get your message out clearly.

SPEAKING ON AND OFF THE RECORD

You should always assume that anything you say to a report could end up in the news — even if you say, “this is off the record,” especially when you are unfamiliar with a reporter. As you develop relationships with reporters you will learn to whom you can speak freely on background without being taken out of context.

BE PREPARED!

Know the three key points you want to make; have simple facts and figures ready to support those points. Try to identify stories and anecdotes that will help an uninformed viewer or reader understand your issue. To avoid mistakes, practice interviewing using your messages. All spokespeople for your organization should be familiar and proficient in delivering these key messages.

MESSAGE RULES FOR INTERVIEWS

1. Don’t have more than three messages. More than that is too confusing.
2. Messages are not necessarily soundbites; they are ideas you want to get across. They are reinforced by sound bites, phrases, statistics and anecdotes.
3. Messages can be tailored for specific audiences, while still remaining constant.

4. Messages must be simple. They are ideas that can be explained in a sentence or two.
 - a. If they require a paragraph, keep working.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

The media is a hard vehicle to control, but remember, reporters are conduits, not your ultimate audience. Address your points to your key audience that is among their readers. Use every opportunity to answer a question and bridge back to one of your main messages.

HOW TO STAY IN COMMAND

Make yourself quotable

Provide the reporter with positive, appealing words and images that will make them want to put your message in their story. Typically, your comments will be edited to about 5 to 15 seconds or a short sentence, so focus on getting your point across efficiently.

Never shoot from the hip

If a reporter calls your office for a “quick comment,” you don’t need to take the call right away. Ask what the subject is. Ask the reporter for his/her name, outlet, direct line, and if they are on deadline. The deadline question is key because if you take too long to get back to them, you will miss a chance to get your side into the story. Take a deep breath, consult your key messages and make quick notes about the points you want to make, and then call back. Also, never start a sentence that says, “I shouldn’t say this but...” If it starts that way, you probably shouldn’t. Also, only answer questions that you are asked. Elaborating could reveal sensitive information the reporter wasn’t aware of.

Take it from the top; make sure to correct misconceptions

Even though you will have sent advance materials, do not expect that the reporter has read them thoroughly or really knows what your organization/campaign is about.

Don’t make things up

If you don’t know, tell them that you don’t know.

Use analogies or descriptive terms rather than statistics

Create an image by saying that a new runway is 30 football fields long rather than citing the statistic that says the runway is several thousand feet long.

Never use jargon or acronyms

Remember, most people don’t have insider knowledge of your issue.

Know your opponents’ viewpoints and have counterpoints ready

It is rare for the media to only report one side of the story. Assume the other side will get called as well, and dismantle their arguments in your talking points.

“No comment” rarely works

Think about how you react when you hear someone on the news say “No comment.” Most often, they leave the impression of hiding information from the public. On the other hand, bluffing your way through a question will damage your credibility. Answer the question honestly and repeat your message.

CONTROL YOUR MESSAGE

You have one or more messages you want to get out, and regardless of the question, you want to answer with your key messages. Turn the questions to make sure what you want to get out is what is heard.

Be prepared for the negative bias of the media

The media’s primary bias is towards negativity. Reporters want to know what is the problem, the controversy, and who is to blame. Be prepared to work with this bias rather than get upset about it.

Know your topic

Just before the interview, check for all possible late breaking news. You may be able to use this as a bridge to your key points, or you may be asked to comment on it.

Repeat your message

Repeat the message many different ways. Support it with anecdotes, clichés, and statistics. Repeat, reiterate, and re-establish — if you don’t, no one will remember it.

OTHER EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES

- Don’t hop around in an interview just because the interviewer is jumpy. If they interrupt you or barrage you with rapid fire questions, remain calm; finish your sentences; wait until the interviewer takes a breath and then pick one question to answer.
- Don’t fall for the “Isn’t it true that” line of questioning which aims to put you on the defensive. Don’t start with “no” or act flustered. Merely correct the record and bridge to one of your main messages.
- If an interviewer misstates something or has a fact wrong, don’t be polite and keep quiet.

TRANSITION TO YOUR KEY POINTS

When you are in a sticky spot, always bring the focus back to your key points. Here are some friendly, subtle methods:

The Bridge—Answer the reporter’s question in a very brief and concise manner but then use the opportunity to bridge or segue to your key points. Some popular bridges include:

- “I don’t have all the facts to answer that question accurately, but I can tell you that...”
 - “That used to be important. What’s important now is...”
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- “I agree we have a problem and I’d like to go directly to our solution...”
- “Your question points out a common misconception we hear all the time. The real problem is...”

The Hook—Entice the reporter or producer to ask a desired follow-up question. Some easy hooks are studies or research. For example, “You’d be surprised what our research indicates...” or “A recent study by X revealed...”

The Flag—Help the reporter or producer remember what you want them to by pointing it out to them. For example, “The key point to remember is...” or “The most exciting thing about this program is...” or “Don’t forget...” You may also underscore a point with enthusiastic inflection in your voice. Other flag phrases to get the audience’s attention include:

- “If I could only say one thing about this, it would be...”
- “Finally...”
- “The most important thing to remember...”

CREATE A POSITIVE VISUAL IMAGE

By providing a stimulating visual environment for your story, you will be controlling the image portrayed and putting yourself in a positive light.

- Illustrate your key points with pictures, charts or props. Simple, interesting visuals may help deliver your message during an interview.
- Be aware of the surroundings for your interview. If the reporter or producer is coming to your location, show them a positive image. Make sure any areas the reporter might visit are clean and tidy and free of objectionable or confidential materials.

CONTROL YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Your physical presence can say as much as your words, so use it to your advantage. Sometimes body language conflicts with your message making what you say appear to be suspect. Remember these tips:

- Look your interviewer in the eye to convey genuine interest.
- Smile whenever appropriate.
- In television interviews, if you must look away from the interviewer, don’t just shift your eyes, move your entire head. Focus the conversation on the interviewer and let the camera find you.
- Avoid sudden body movements. Some gesturing is appropriate to convey your enthusiasm, but avoid extreme waving or pointing.
- Keep your feet planted firmly on the floor and your knees together. Don’t cross your legs.
- If you perspire, be prepared. Wipe your brow during the interview if necessary.
- Be aware of, and avoid, any unconscious mannerisms like scratching your ear, playing with your tie, tapping your pen or rocking in your chair.

HANDLING HOSTILE REPORTERS

If a reporter is unfriendly towards you or writes a story that you do not like, stay calm and decide how to respond in a reasonable and constructive manner. If you are dealing directly with a reporter, take a deep breath and use one of the techniques described above to avoid conflict and try to transition to one of your key messages. Answer the question and quickly get back to your main point and facts that back up your message. If you are responding to a negative story, consider using one of the following tactics:

- Pitch the story to another reporter or editor
- Write a letter to the editor
- Write an op-ed

IF THE STORY IS INACCURATE OR UNFAIR

If a story comes out with factual mistakes or misquotes, do not call up and yell at a reporter. Rather, point out the mistake calmly and ask for a correction. Consider contacting the editor or news director. However, going to a reporter's editor is a serious step and should only happen when a major mistake has been made and the reporter refuses to acknowledge his/her responsibility for the miscommunication. This is a sure-fire way to sour whatever relationship you have with that reporter, and it can hurt your chances of ever getting coverage from that reporter again. Remember that even if you have a friendly relationship with a reporter, his or her job is to report the news and it may not always turn out the way you like it.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

The best way to improve your interviewing skills is to review your performance and then make a list of what you'll do better or differently next time.

Ask yourself:

- Were you on message?
 - Did you get your main points across in a concise and easy to understand way?
 - Did your opponents have any compelling arguments to which you need to construct a good counterpoint in the future?
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