

The Tip Sheet for Media Interviews



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Why is the Media Important?

- **An opportunity to tell your story**
Inform, motivate and persuade a large audience by using the media tools available to you.
- **An opportunity to communicate broadly**
A media interview will allow you to reach a larger segment of the population and ensure that your side of the story gets told.

Truths About Media

- **It can be hard to control the story**
Unlike advertising, you cannot always control the message conveyed in a media interview and the reporter is likely to edit the piece however he or she wishes. More discipline may be required on your part to keep the story going in the direction you want it to go.
- **The cameras are always on**
If you don't want it printed or broadcast don't say it. Assume from the moment you pick up the phone or walk into an interview that everything you say can and WILL be recorded and/or quoted. Microphones may be "hot" and picking up what you say, even after the interview is technically finished.

Before the Interview

- **Know your message**
What do you want your audience to take away? Continue to emphasize and repeat this main idea throughout the interview.
- **Develop three or four key talking points that convey your message**
Weave these points into all of your answers. Anticipate what questions may be asked and be prepared with answers. If you are successful at staying on message you can help shape the news story.
- **Learn about the reporter and the outlet**
Visit the outlet's website to read or watch their previous stories and find out more about their typical audience. The type of outlet will have an impact on the sort of talking points that you prepare. You can also find out more about many reporters by visiting MediaBios at www.tjfr.com.

- **Learn about the story**

Find out the goal of the story and try to get a sense of the types of questions that you may be asked.

- **Rehearse anticipated questions**

After you get an idea of what the reporter might ask you, practice your answers to these questions a few times. Even better, do it in front of a mirror, a friend or a video camera.

- **Relax and focus**

Breathing exercises go a long way toward helping you relax and calm jittery vocal cords. Get to your location 10-15 minutes early and spend time practicing your core message points.

- **Chat with the interviewer**

Right before the interview begins, chat with the reporter to make sure you both have an understanding of the topics that will be discussed. This is especially important for broadcast interviews, so you do not get caught off-guard on camera. This is also the time to “request” a question that hits your key message.

During the Interview

- **Make your first words the most memorable**

Interest levels diminish quickly, so make sure that the first words out of your mouth are on message and hit some of your key talking points.

- **Keep your audience in mind**

The reporter you are speaking with is not your target audience. You are speaking to people as they watch the TV news in their living rooms, listen to the radio in their cars, or read newspapers on the subway. Communicate in a way that engages them – speak “real American,” don’t use arcane jargon, and always try to translate your “news” to their lives in a way that is relevant and compelling.

- **Be enthusiastic**

Show your audience how interested you are in the topic. Now, it is time to convey your compelling stories to readers, viewers and listeners.

- **Keep your answers succinct**

Don’t feel compelled to keep talking! Most responses to questions should be 18-30 seconds. You shouldn’t feel nervous when no one is talking. Wait for the reporter to ask you the next question.

- **Control the interview**

You can steer the content of your interview. Remember your core message points and gently shift back to them in all of your answers. If a reporter asks a question you cannot or won't answer, you might say, "I can't address that issue, but I can tell you..." (or) "That is interesting, but the issue here is..." If the reporter's question is vague, don't be afraid to ask for some clarification.

Sample Bridging Phrases

Ways to get from their question back to your message

- What we've found is that...
- As [title/position/organization/point of view], I care about...
- But I'm here to talk about...
- I don't know, but what I do know is...
- The most important point we can get across to people is...
- That's an interesting point. However, for [organization/point of view]...
- I can't speak for them (him/her), but I can say...
- I'm not really qualified to speak to that issue, but I can say...
- I'm [not up to speed on/haven't studied] that particular issue, but I can say...
- As the leading [organization], we believe the most important issues are...
- As [position/organization/point of view], many of us struggled with this issue. And our (conclusion, reaction, sense, etc.) is...
- *If appropriate:* As [organization], we're not in the business of determining (whatever issue the reporter is trying to steer to). Our job is to analyze trends to inform policymakers and the choices they have to make.
- *If appropriate:* The [organization] does not advocate for specific policies, rather we...

- **Localize and Personalize**

Try to make the topic personal to the audience. Including local facts or stories can make an interview more compelling to the listener as well as the reporter.

- **Never say "no comment"**

It makes you look guilty and untrustworthy. If you can't comment on a point, use a transitional phrase, such as "I'm not an expert on that subject, but..." and return to your message points.

- **Do not repeat negative words or inaccurate facts included in a reporter's question**

Simply correct the inaccuracies and shift to an appropriate message point.

- **Don't worry about repeated questions**

If the reporter's questions are the same, the content of your answers should remain the same. Reporters sometimes ask the same question more than once in order to get a simpler cleaner answer. However, they may also be trying to get you to go further in your response than you may wish to.

After the Interview

- **Review**

Take some time to think about your questions and answers to prepare for your next interview.

- **Send follow-up information**

This is a good opportunity to send the reporter any more information that you may have about the topics discussed in the interview. Keep good notes of any promise you made to follow-up – and keep them.

Special Tips: Television Interviews

- **Dress appropriately for the situation**

You'll almost never be overdressed wearing a business suit, unless this is a story with a unique focus.

Women should avoid wearing elaborate jewelry, or clothing with busy patterns. Avoid open-toe shoes.

Men should wear business shirts of muted color. Avoid striped shirts. Generally, dark colored suits and ties without intricate patterns "read" best.

If you wear a uniform or other work-related clothing, ask the producer or reporter if they would like you to appear as you dress for work. For example, if you are a physician, it would be appropriate to wear a white coat and stethoscope if you are discussing medical or health-related issues.

If you wear eyeglasses, make sure they are not giving off "light hits" on camera. If you do a lot of television interviews, consider getting non-reflective lenses.

- **Consider wearing make-up or powder**

The bright lights of television will make you look paler than normal, and the heat can cause perspiration. If you are offered powder, take advantage of it.

- **Ask for water before you begin**

If your mouth or throat gets dry, you will be glad it is there during the interview. However, do not use ice as cold can affect your voice.

- **Don't be afraid to start your response over again.**

If the interview is taped, your answer will be edited, so start over if you feel your answer was unclear. Of course, you can't do that easily during a live broadcast interview. If you must, use a transition phrase, such as "Look at it this way..." and rephrase your answer.

Facial Expressions

- **Smile**

Smile a little more than usual and overemphasize positive expressions. Negative characteristics are exaggerated on TV and a neutral appearance may look angry or frustrated.

Posture

- **Get comfortable**

The more relaxed you look, the more convincing you will be. Lean slightly forward. Try crossing your leg at the knees or ankles.

- **Maintain eye contact with the interviewer**

Don't worry about the camera. Never look straight into the camera unless you are doing a satellite interview, in which case you talk directly into the camera. Have a conversation with the interviewer and focus on him or her.

Physical Expression

- **Be natural**

Most gestures should be in the triangle from the bottom of your chin to your waist, and generally should not extend beyond the width of your shoulders.

- **Be careful about nodding your head**

It's great to be involved in the conversation when appropriate, but be careful of nodding during a negative question and looking like you agree.

Voice

- **Use a conversational, upbeat tone**

Try not to be monotone. Highlight points with variations in voice pitch and intensity, and use of dramatic pauses when appropriate. You can hear it in your voice when you smile. Stay focused and positive.

- **Relax**

You should strive to speak at a normal speed, with an informal tone.

Special Tips: Satellite TV Interviews

- **Ask for an equipment test before you go on-air**

Check with technicians to make sure all the equipment is working properly beforehand and ask to test the IFB – the earpiece through which you will hear the interviewer. Also ask whether you will be hearing yourself delayed through the earpiece.

- **Look straight into the camera**

Talk to the camera as if it were a person with whom you are having a conversation.

- **Place an index card with the interviewer's name and location under the lens of the camera**

Remember with whom you are speaking– use her/his name as you would in a natural conversation.

- **Be as friendly as you would be if you were face-to-face**

Special Tips: Conference Phone Interviews

A recent trend in taped television interviews is for the camera crew to set-up your interview in a remote location (for example, your office conference room), with the reporter phoning in to interview you. You will hear the questions over a speakerphone, and need to respond as if the reporter is sitting in front of you.

- **Ask someone – perhaps a staff colleague – to “sit in” as the reporter**

Look at him/her and direct your answers to him/her, not the camera or the speakerphone.

- **Speak in a natural voice**

Resist the temptation to shout your answers toward the speakerphone – even if the reporter can't hear you well.

Special Tips: Radio Interviews

- Keep answers short and lively.
- It's okay to refer to notes, but don't read directly from them.
- Remember – you need to convey sincerity and enthusiasm through your voice. SMILE – they will hear it in your voice!

Special Tips: Going “Off the Record”

- **Off The Record:** generally refers to a statement that cannot be directly quoted in a story or attributed to you. Often used to provide a reporter with a tip –

they would generally need to substantiate your statement before reporting it. However, some reporters believe they may use the quote to persuade other people to react [for example: “Someone in the organization feels X. Do you agree?”].

- **On Background:** Generally refers to information and context that can be used in helping the reporter develop the story but cannot be attributed to you.
- **Not For Attribution:** Quotes that can be used but not attributed directly to you. For example, a characterization to a defined group of people [“a high-ranking official said...”]

There are no hard and fast rules, and different reporters may have different standards for these types of interviews. *If you do use one of these tools, it is important that you clearly and explicitly establish the ground rules up front with the reporter to reduce the chance of misinterpretation.*

- If you are asked to go “off the record” or provide statements “on background” or “not for attribution” -- or ask for it yourself – explicitly discuss what that means with the reporter so that you both share a common understanding.
- If it comes up during an “on the record” interview, ask for all recording equipment to be turned off. Move away from the cameras or microphones.

You may also choose to tell a reporter that, if they would like to use one of your statements from an “off the record,” “on background,” or “not for attribution” conversation in a story as a direct quote attributed to you, they may call back and ask you if a specific statement may be used on the record.