



Media Interview Tips

A. Preparing for an Interview:

1) Gather as much information as possible from the reporter. Understand who is calling and why:

- Identify the reporter and his/her affiliation. If possible, determine the reporter's audience – size, geographic location, ages, occupations and interests.
- Establish the focus of the story.
- Find out the reporter's deadline.
- Find out who else will be interviewed for the story.
- Ask how the reporter learned about your university/organization or was referred to you.
- For television or radio interviews, find out if the interview will be live, taped or 'live to tape' (meaning it's a live interview that is aired at a later date.) For radio, ask if there will be listener call-in. This information will help you not get caught unaware by a caller you weren't expecting during the interview.

2) Collect and organize your thoughts:

You do not have to talk to the reporter immediately. The reporter has had time to prepare, so you should grant yourself the same opportunity. It is important, however, to respect a reporter's deadline. If you do not get back to the reporter in time, especially if responding to a potential negative story, you risk seeing or hearing a report that says "X could not be reached for comment."

3) Use your preparation time to do the following:

- Prepare for likely questions.
- Outline two or three key points you want to make.
- Think about your visual appearance (in the event of a television interview). (Clothes that are blue or red appear well on television -- avoid white – it can be too bright for television cameras.)
- If you are in a situation that does not allow you to fully prepare, then in a friendly manner ask the reporter for the following:
 - The nature of the story he/she is working on.
 - Specific questions she would like addressed.
 - The deadline, in case you would like to provide supporting information after the interview.
 - In a situation in which a hostile reporter is asking loaded questions, it is important to KEEP YOUR COOL and REMAIN CALM. Do not try to debate a reporter. Provide him/her with accurate, concise information. Offer to send the reporter information or call him/her back when you have some supporting documentation in hand.

B. During the Interview:

- Emphasize positive stories and provide solid information. Media like to tell a story through real-life case histories and examples. If you can illustrate your news through a personal story or case study, be prepared with an example. Statistical information and percentages that support your case(s) are also very helpful.
- Be Consistent. All responses to media inquiries should be consistent. To ensure consistency, share background information with other individuals who might be speaking with the media on your story/news.
- Technique – The key here is to be HONEST, SINCERE and CONFIDENT. If you do not know the answer to a reporter's questions, then say so. If you can find out, then do so.
- Avoid Speculation – Do not be speculative or answer hypothetical questions. If a reporter leads with, "Assume that..." or "What if...", respond with something such as, "I am unable to speculate on that, however..." and state your positive message.
- Remain Positive – Convey positive messages and responses. Positive remarks are the best. For example, if a negative question is posed, don't say, "No, our program is not about X." Instead say, what your program is about.
- "No Comment" – Do not say "No Comment." It sounds as if you have something to hide. If you do not have an answer, say so and let the reporter know that you, or the appropriate spokesperson, will get back to them with information. If you do not want to discuss something, rephrase the general message or refer to your key messages on the topic – you don't have to answer specifics. Be firm, but not abrasive.
- Keep It Simple – Technical terms may be foreign to a reporter. If a reporter fully understands you, he is more likely to incorporate your response in the story.
- Be Concise – State your answer and stop. Do not fill in silent pauses. Often a reporter will ask a question, wait for your response, and then be silent, waiting for you to elaborate. If a reporter seems to utilize this technique, provide your answer, stop, and ask the reporter if there are any other questions. A pause also provides you with the opportunity to add your two or three key points or collect your thoughts.
- Press Contacts – Keep a record of press contacts. This will help you remember which reporters are fair and balanced and should be called upon when you have something to say.
- Television Interviews – Often television coverage will only air your response, so it is best to restate the question at the beginning of your answer. (i.e. Q: "What is the goal of your project?" A: "The goal of the our project is ...")

C. Media Terminology:

Media terms have different meanings to organizations and members of the media. It is therefore important from the outset to lay down the ground rules surrounding a media interview. Below are some key terms you must know.

Off-the-Record – means no part of the interviewee's statement can be printed or broadcasted. Understand that NOTHING is off-the-record when speaking to a reporter. If

you do not wish to have a statement of fact appear in print or broadcast do not provide the information or quote to the reporter. Also, please note that any information provided via e-mail can be considered “on the record.”

Often people provide reporters information off-the-record because they know and trust them. However, you must be prepared to deal with the circumstances of your off-the-record remarks being made public. There is no law that states a reporter cannot use off-the-record remarks. It is an ethical decision every reporter must make, and in some cases they will break this unwritten rule to meet their perceived obligation of being a journalist.

On-Background – means that the interviewee’s name is not identified and she is instead referred to as a “spokesperson for your organization.” However, some organizations and reporters interpret on-background to mean not using your name or the company name. Therefore, it is important to clarify ahead of time with the reporter his definition of on-background.