

Preparing for and Succeeding in Various Interview Formats



Media Training Module

Introduction

Many people dislike the prospect of being interviewed. It comes down to a question of control—with the reporter perceived as having most of it. The reporter asks questions, which interviewees assume they can only answer.

In reality, you have much more control than you think. An interview is an opportunity for us to reach the target audience with a message that drives a hoped-for action or perception. You and the reporter both have the right to go in with agendas. Indeed, we believe you are not ready to meet a reporter until you/we have clearly identified what it is you/we want to accomplish and how.

This Media Training Workshop is designed to give you the confidence required to meet the firm's communication goals. Our purpose is to give you the tools to be the master of your overall communications, as well as the television, radio and print interviews that may play a part in it.

Making News ... or Not

Legendary columnist Walter Lippmann defined news as “that which protrudes from the ordinary.” Today, meeting the challenge of “breaking through the noise” is both more and less difficult than ever. The downside is that competition for the target audience’s attention has never been higher; happily, so are the number of media outlets that we have to work with.

To be successful, it is critical to accept that the privilege of determining what’s news and what isn’t belongs to the listener, not the speaker. The fact that you have an interview and are talking about something you think is important isn’t as important as whether your target audience cares to pay attention. It follows that the greater the impact of your story on the lives of your target audience, the more newsworthy it will appear to reporters and the more play it’s likely to get.

Is all this effort worthwhile? Is being interviewed and generating publicity worth the time and risk? Our answer is yes for these reasons:

- Coverage by the media carries with it the implied “third party endorsement” of the reporter and his or her news outlet—it is perceived by your target audience as more credible than advertisements.
- Failure to deal with the media leaves the playing field open to competitors and foes.
- Dealing with media even during a crisis or bad time is usually wiser than avoiding it. It gives you a chance to present your side of the story, answer unfair attacks and, at the very least, to present yourself and the organization as being human and concerned. Allowing an attack to stand unanswered can leave the impression that you or the firm have something to hide.
- Fear of media is unwarranted. Tough, even unfair reporters exist and this workshop will prepare you for them, but most interview situations are positive or at worst, neutral. Most reporters just want to know what’s going on. Most want to write a balanced story.
- And remember this wise, but grammatically challenging adage: “You never know when you’ll want to *have had* a positive relationship with a reporter.” The reporter you help today is more likely to treat you fairly when tough times come than the reporter you sent packing.

While all this is true, you certainly have the right to decline an interview and in some circumstances should consider doing so. If you don’t think the reporter’s topic is something you’re wise to address, you might decline but soften your refusal by referring the reporter to another source. On the other hand, if you think you can help the reporter provide a balanced story, even one that includes potentially negative information, you may decide to proceed. For the most part, the PR team will help you make these important decisions; however, there may be times that you will need to decide on your own if, for instance, you are at an industry conference and are personally approached by a journalist. In this situation, you might get as much information as you can from the reporter, taking notes and looking helpful, but asking if you can meet up later that day or via a phone call in the near future so that you have time to gather your thoughts and work with the communications team on creating a good set of talking points.

Use your judgment, and if you choose to decline an interview, ALWAYS state why. “No comment” is a comment, and can be viewed as an implication of guilt. Instead respond by saying, “I can’t talk about that, because it is in litigation, but I’d be happy to discuss our overall strategy record and how it leads the industry.”

Top Ten Media Mistakes Executives Make

1. Most execs don't understand the editorial process (and why should they?). A basic understanding—including the media do's and don'ts—can help.
2. They (and most people) think the reporter is the audience.
3. They think that just because they say something is so, the reporter will believe it. It's hard for them to put themselves in the reporter's shoes and realize that to a journalist, the exec is basically *selling* rather than objectively informing. They need to have supporting data, anecdotes and third-party facts at hand—and be fluent in interjecting them during the interview.
4. They have a tendency to be myopic (focused on their own sales agenda) rather than broad (and, therefore, more compelling). Therefore, they often think reporters are clueless (because they don't “pick up” on their myopic messages) and lose respect for them.
5. They are not armed with good quotable sound bites, which is all most reporters are really looking for, so this can be a large missing piece.
6. They throw the whole notebook of information at the poor reporter, providing way too much detail and straying from their key message track.
7. They don't realize that as interview source, the exec is a guide who must thoughtfully lead a reporter through the key aspects of the story. It's understandable that an executive assumes a reporter already “gets” the overall picture, but often that is not the case. Therefore, they fail to really emphasize the key points multiple times during an interview to help make the reporter's job easier.
8. They see reporters as seasoned experts who understand the nuances of their firm or offer, especially trade pub reporters. They speak in jargon and don't present concepts within a broad problem/solution context.
9. Executives can get way too schmoozy during an interview, not realizing that the reporter couldn't care less about their recent vacation to the Bahamas.
10. When suggesting potential spokespeople, execs will often select their best sales people for interviews. One would think that a successful sales person would be good at media interviews, but the tendency to sell can work against someone during an interview, so that shouldn't be the sole criteria.

Preparing for and Succeeding in an Interview

STEP ONE: IDENTIFY YOUR TARGET

A reporter is rarely, if ever, your primary target. Instead, the target is that reporter's audience. Usually, you will agree to an interview because you hope the story will prompt that audience to take some action or reach a desired conclusion. Knowledge is power, and it follows that you should know as much about the target as possible:

- Who are they? You have many audiences: customers, suppliers, regulatory agencies, local businesses, financial analysts, employees, investors, shareholders and, perhaps, the general public. Who are you/we trying to reach? Don't be greedy! For a given interview, select one or at the most, two targets. If you aim for too many, you will miss them all.
- How much can you learn about this audience? Demographics? Reading and viewing habits? Hopes, fears, concerns? The more you know, the better you'll be able to speak the audience's language.
- What do you want this audience to do or conclude? Buy your stock? Seek out your product or service? Support your cause or vote for a helpful piece of legislation? The better you crystallize your objective, the more likely you will be to achieve it.
- Why should that audience listen to you? What's in it for them? Profit? Convenience? Peace of mine? In an interview, the point is *not* to say what you want to say. The point is to say what the target audience cares about and needs to *hear* if it is to conclude or do what you hope.
- The PR Team will provide much of this intelligence for you in advance.

STEP TWO: GATHER INTELLIGENCE / INTERVIEW THE INTERVIEWER

Before you sit down for an interview, it is wise to know as much as possible about the situation you will be confronting. Through conversation with the reporter and other means, you might discover the following useful information:

- What kind of media? Consumer? Trade? (The answer will help you know what target audience you are dealing with.)
- What prompted the story?
- What is the reporter's level of knowledge?
- What is the reporter's deadline? Publication date?
- What topics will he or she cover?
- Who else was (or will be) interviewed for the story?
- Is the reporter going with any "givens"?
- If a TV interview, are there any other guests? With the segment be live or taped?

- How long is the segment versus your part of the interview?
- Will the format be one-on-one? Panel? Audience participation? Call-in?
- The PR Team will provide much of this intelligence for you.

STEP THREE: CRAFT YOUR MESSAGES

You have a lot to say, but in an interview there is rarely enough time. Even if there were, people wouldn't want to listen to or read it all. And even if they did, studies show people retain less than 10 percent of the information they receive. Messages are simply the three or four most powerful and succinctly stated points you must make if your audience is to conclude, or do, what you hope. Ultimately, these messages comprise the quotes you most want the reporters to use, so they must accomplish the following:

- Get the audience's attention. What problem, opportunity or important issue does the news you are sharing address? State it in terms that will get your target audience to nod, "That's relevant to me. I want to listen."
- Reveal your solution. Tell them what it is, how it works and why it accomplishes something in a new, different and better way. But avoid needless detail and insider jargon. Few people care about how a computer works. They only care what it does.
- Detail the benefits. How and how much will the audience gain from following your advice? What will they be able to do now that they weren't able to do before? How much time will they save? An anecdote might bring your point alive better than mere words or statistics. Can you provide a story-like example?
- Empower your audience to act. Always provide your toll-free number or website address where people can get more information. The reporter may not use it and the TV editor may cut it out, but unless you have been directly told not to do so, it is worth a try.
- If you have written a book (or write a column or produce podcasts or other helpful content for the audience), don't hesitate to mention it in a natural way once during the conversation. For instance, if you're talking about hiring and training the right staff members and you've written a book on that subject, you can say something like: "Yes, that's right. Advisors would be wise to consider doing a personal strengths test such as the Kolbe Profile before making their final decision. I talk about that in my book, *Hiring to Grow*. In fact, there's a helpful list of resources in chapter nine."
- The PR Team can help you craft your talking points and/or rehearse for the interview ahead of time.

Messages must be honed and honed again. Your goal is to be able to deliver them in sixty seconds or less. They must be tailored to the audience, articulated in language that the audience understands and, most important, provide the essential evidence required to capture their attention and prompt the hoped-for action or conclusion.

STEP FOUR: PREPARE FOR THE TOUGH AND OFF-SUBJECT QUESTIONS

Reporters aren't always friendly and friendly ones do not always ask the questions you want. Here's how to prepare for and deal with that:

- Write down the most negative questions a reporter might ask. Chances are you will be able to come up with meaner ones than the reporter will. Good. That way, there will be no surprises.
- Draft answers—BRIEF ONES. “Yes” and “No” are great answers, but don't always apply or may seem too curt. Perhaps your response will be, “That used to be true, but here's how we do it now ...” or “Yes, that happened—however, we now have this safeguard in place to make sure it never happens again ...” or “On the contrary, the facts are ...” The point is, your response to a negative question should be short and true. You must not deny or avoid the undeniable; nor should you repeat the charge, as in President Nixon's famous quote, “I am not a crook.”
- Think how you might regain control of the interview by transitioning back to a key message. If you simply answer a negative or off-subject question and stop talking, the next question is likely to be on the same subject. You use transitional phrases in daily life to change the subject, and you should do the same in an interview. There is no shortage of graceful phrases to use:
 - “The bottom line is ...”
 - “Yes, and in addition to that ...”
 - “The key thing to remember is ...”
 - “... But the point that is really important in all this is ...”
- Take comfort in the fact that while you must always *respond* to a question, there will be many questions that you can't actually *answer*. In these cases, there are many appropriate ways to respond:
 - “I can't speculate on that but what I will tell you is ...”
 - “I'm not the right person to answer that question, but I can refer you to the expert. What I can tell you is ...”
 - “I haven't seen the statistics you are referring to (or heard the comments you are quoting). What I know is ...”
- The PR Team will help you prepare for tough interviews.

STEP FIVE: SUCCEED IN THE INTERVIEW

The interview, whether in person, by phone, by satellite, or via email, is the primary tool journalists use to get the job done. Every reporter has a slightly different interview style, but there are common needs shared by all.

In general, the more controversial the subject and adversarial the reporter's approach, the more likely it becomes that the reporter will seek out other sources to respond to your comments.

Unless you are interviewed in a live broadcast, your comments will be edited—sometimes heavily. Expect it and know that the reporter will be searching for the quote that boils down your message to its essence. The vast majority of journalists strive to give a fair hearing to all sides, if for no other reason than the idea that conflicts of opinion make for stronger and more interesting stories.

Here are some guidelines:

- Go in with your own agenda—your three or four key messages and the determination to deliver them early and often.
- Set a positive tone:
 - Conversational
 - Cooperative
 - Confident
 - Assertive, but not aggressive
 - Unintimidating
 - Not arrogant or snide
- Take the initiative:
 - Lead discussion—be active and responsive.
 - Take responsibility for telling your story.
 - Deliver your three/four key messages—early and often.
 - Anticipate negative and off-subject questions and be prepared to deal with them.
- Be direct and helpful:
 - Most questions will be on subject and expected (this is a prime opportunity to deliver your point).
 - Remember, an interview should be conversation, not testimony; you are encouraged to expand—but always be brief.
 - Correct mistakes, yours and/or the reporter’s.
 - Be strong in countering incorrect points or negative questions (e.g., “Absolutely not ...”, not wishy-washy (“I don’t think you would find that the case”).
 - Keep it simple and refrain from using industry jargon and acronyms.
- Be quotable. Start with a strong headline and then give specifics.
- Support and bring your points to life with:
 - Personal experience/examples
 - Facts and statistics
 - Third-party endorsements
 - Analogy
 - Anecdotes
- Bring your whole self to an interview. Don’t leave the human being back at home. Your personality and personal experiences will greatly add to your credibility. It’s okay to be yourself—your best professional self, that is.
- Work in key phrases, as provided by the PR Team, but try not to sound too rehearsed. Internalize key messages. Say the words and phrases out loud several times so that they come to mind and roll off your tongue when appropriate.
- Don’t depend on the reporter:
 - If he/she fails to ask a question, raise the subject yourself.
 - If you think of something more to say about a question that was asked earlier, go ahead and say it.

- “Transition,” “Flag” and Summarize:
 - After briefly answering a tough or off-subject set of questions, always “transition” back to your agenda. (e.g., “While the past few months have not always been pleasant, we’ve weathered the storm and are positioned well for the future. In 2011, we’ll be rolling out ...”)
 - At the end of a long answer, or whenever appropriate, be sure to “flag”—or sum-up and emphasize the important point(s). (e.g., “But again, Ralph, the key point is ...”)
 - As the interview ends, give a summary statement that covers your points. (e.g., “Ralph, what I want to leave you with is this ...”)
- Feel free to take a few notes—or props such as a book or white paper—into the interview, if it makes you feel more comfortable or helps you create a better conversation.
- If you are accompanied by someone on the PR team, it’s okay to occasionally look to that person for support. (e.g., “Don’t we have a white paper on that subject, Natalie? Do you remember the statistic Ralph is asking about ...”)
- Take a leave-behind item such as a book or press kit (or send follow up materials and/or a call recap) as a tangible reminder of your conversation. If you are being supported by the PR team, tell the reporter to expect such-and-such from so-and-so.
- Offer your phone number, email and/or mobile contact information so that the reporter can contact you directly should he or she have additional questions. If you are with someone from the PR Team, he or she will provide contact information and offer to assist with any additional needs.
- While it’s okay to ask when the article might run, don’t ask or insist on seeing the content before it’s published. The only exception is if you have submitted an article with your byline—then it’s not only acceptable, but also wise, to cheerfully insist that the edited version be sent to you for final review. If the writer offers to send you the article (or a portion of it) in advance for review, don’t try to change the story or your quotes unless specifically invited to provide that type of input; do correct in accurate information.
- Do send a note of acknowledgement, and offer to be of assistance in the future, when the story runs. The PR Team may do this for you / the firm. If something is wrong or inaccurate in the article, don’t try to correct the mistake yourself—let the PR Team do that for you.

Staying Out of Trouble

- Answer tough questions truthfully and briefly. Never dodge. And always conclude by “transitioning” back to your agenda.
- Don’t ramble. Long answers yield confusion, and bad quotes. In effect, they delegate to the reporter the privilege of deciding what part of our answer is important.
- Don’t take a reporter’s nasty tone or aggressive question personally. Reporters adopt this style in hopes you will rise to the bait. Stay in control and never lose your cool.
- Don’t let yourself be interrupted. You wouldn’t allow it at home, so why here? Simply say something like, “I will get to that in a moment, but first I need to finish my point ...”
- Feel free to rephrase negative questions in your own terms. (“I think what you’re asking me is ...”)
- If it is the right thing to say the first time, it is the right thing to say the second, third and fourth time. Reporters sometimes ask the same questions several times, but in different ways. They may be trying to make you angry or to say something inappropriate. Politely and patiently repeating the same answer puts an end to this gambit.
- Don’t repeat a charge or negative. (For example, instead of saying “No, I am not a crook” say “That’s not true, Ralph. On the contrary the facts are ...”)
- Don’t allow a cheap shot or incorrect statement by a reporter to pass. Correct it immediately. For example say, “Ralph, that is not correct. The truth is ...”
- Don’t nod while the reporter is talking unless you do, in fact, agree. Shake your head from side to side (or hold it still) if you disagree. Then it’s your turn to talk, reframe and correct the conversation.
- If a question stumps you for the moment, buy time by:
 - Asking the reporter to repeat or clarify the question.
 - Repeat the questions yourself. This provides you with an opportunity to rephrase, broaden, or narrow the original question.
 - Being honest. (“That’s an important question, and I want to think about it a moment.”)
- Feel free to decline to answer a question, but always share the reason and bridge on to something you *can* say. Questions that need not be answered include ones that ask for:
 - Personal opinion
 - Competitive information
 - Your response to a hypothetical situation (it’s tough enough to live in the real world, much less guess about things that might not happen)
 - Response to statistics or comments by others that you have never heard before
 - Status of issues under negotiations or legal review
 - Information you don’t know (never fake it or speculate—answer directly: “I don’t know, but I’ll find out, and in the meantime, what I do know is...”)
- **NEVER SAY “NO COMMENT”**
- Exercise caution. You are always “on the record.” If you don’t want to see it in print, don’t say it.

Tips for Television

Television stations usually work on very tight deadlines, with stories being turned around within a few hours. If you're contacted for an interview, be prepared for that interview to take place quickly. The exception would be a filmed segment for future playback or placement on the web (e.g., AdvisorTV, Reuters Insider).

Here are some guidelines:

- Embrace live interviews when given the chance. These are often less confrontational and will be edited for replayed later. If you know your subject and your messages, these sessions offer the best unfiltered access to your target audience.
- The camera exaggerates everything. Dress conservatively and appropriately in solid colors. Wear simple accessories. Don't dress up in "corporate clothes" when your message is "down home." Always accept an offer of make-up or apply your own to remove "shine." Aim for delivery of a powerful message without distractions from your appearance.
- Stay engaged with the host at all times. Lean forward a bit. Remember, you are there with important news to share with the audience.
- Assume the camera and microphone are always on. Don't think that if they are off, it means you are off the record.
- Make sure that your body language is consistent with your message. For example, don't smile or nod when the reporter is asking about an unpleasant topic.
- It's okay to use your hands to gesture—much like you would in a public speaking appearance. Do watch, however, for cues from the host. If she is keeping her hands on the table, you do the same. If she is bouncing her hands and moving her head and shoulders in a bit more animated way, you can do the same. Match the host's energy.
- Unless told otherwise, look at the reporter, not at the camera.
- Remember that television is a visual medium. If you can help the reporter find interesting video to help him or her tell your story, or if you can bring a "show and tell" prop to help get your message across, do it.
- The PR Team will help you craft segment questions and talking points in advance.

Tips for Radio

Do not discount the power of radio. Adults spend an average of 3 hours and 17 minutes each weekday listening to radio, meaning it is an excellent vehicle for delivering your message. Online audio—sometimes referred to as a podcast—is a popular medium that allows the website visitor the opportunity to hear your voice, including passion / emphasis and inflection points.

When delivering your message on this non-visual medium, remember that your delivery is as important as what you have to say. In other words, the way you sound—the tone and emotion in your voice—speaks volumes to your audience.

We recommend these general guidelines:

- Even if you're preparing for a live interview, remember to always interview the interviewer first. Get a clean handle on the story or segment you're participating in and why you've been chosen.
- Deadlines are sometimes very tight. Interviews can be very short. Expect to be asked for a quick decision on whether you'll grant the interview and expect to be given only a few questions. Deliver your three messages right from the start.
- If you are interviewed over the phone, make sure you are in a quiet place and won't be interrupted. Remember to turn off Instant Messenger and calendar reminder bells, cell phone, office phone, radio, etc. Consider leaning forward on the edge of your seat, or standing to help energize your voice.
- Use conversational language, but avoid jargon, acronyms and excessive detail that the listener is unlikely to care about.
- Slow down and speak clearly. Over enunciate, but just a bit.
- Match the energy and style of the host.
- Offer examples and stories to paint a picture—but keep them brief.
- If taped, ask when and where the interview will broadcast. Also ask whether the station has a website that will re-broadcast the interview. If you're in a studio, ask the anchor or producer for a taped version of the finished interview. Most stations will prepare this as a courtesy for studio guests.
- Don't date yourself as in, "As I was saying earlier." That will have to be edited out to keep the sound byte fresh.

Tips for Print and Internet Media

Print media, including websites, offer great opportunities for delivering your message, because it is the news medium most able to offer context.

Here are some points to remember:

- Know the publication. Unlike broadcast journalists, medium and large market print reporters often work single beats and have time to become more knowledgeable about their subject. Be prepared to offer context for your message.
- Before the interview starts, set a time limit. This will help focus the reporter and prevent “fishing expeditions” into other areas.
- If possible, prior to the interview, send background information on your organization to the reporter and ask if there is anything specific that he/she would like to see. This will save you having to waste time going over basics with the reporter.
- Get your numbers ready. Editors and reporters want numbers or some kind of supporting data that strengthens your message and backs up your claim. If you don’t want to provide certain numbers, like sales figures, think of a substitute that will satisfy the reporter. For example, he or she might be content with figures on the growth rate of the overall market. If you can offer examples that will bring those numbers to life, all the better.
- Many print interviews take place over the phone. Never do a phone interview on the spot unless you know your message and the reporter well. Ask the reporter for general guidelines on the information he or she is seeking, get the reporter’s deadline and then set a time to call back.
- Print reporters need time to take notes, even if they also ask to record the interview. Speak at a conversational, but slower pace than usual to make sure you’re being understood correctly. Listen for cues from the reporter; if he says “uh-huh, uh-huh” you can assume he is tracking along with you just fine. Pause at the end of a phrase or sentence and listen for a second; don’t talk over the reporter who may be trying to ask you a question or redirect the conversation. If the reporter takes you off topic, bridge back to your point.
- Most reporters will give you time at the end of the interview to make any additional points the reporter didn’t think to ask. Use the time to reiterate your three key messages. If the reporter doesn’t offer the time, lay claim to it yourself.
- Suggest any follow-up or additional stories the reporter might be interested in. Reporters often have latitude in generating their own stories and will welcome an additional source.

Summary

To be successful in an interview, you must:

- Identify your target audience.
- Establish an objective for each audience (i.e., the action you want that audience to take or the conclusion you want to them to reach).
- Develop three or four key messages that stand the best chance of prompting those actions and conclusions.
- Think in advance about tough questions and how you will address them as well as transition back to your messages.
- Find out as much as possible about the interviewer and what he or she wants to accomplish.
- Be conversational in tone. Human. Use examples and anecdotes to bring your story to life.
- Deliver your messages early and often.
- **NOTHING IS OFF THE RECORD.**
- Relax and have fun!
- Keep the PR Team informed. Ask for help preparing for and succeeding in various interview settings.