

Tips for Interacting with the Media

Courtesy of the Sherwood Group

First Contact

Keep several things in mind when speaking to the media:

- A. Do not allow yourself to be pressured into an immediate decision.** You may be familiar with the topic of the interview, but always give yourself time to prepare what you will say.
- B. Remember that you are not obligated to answer any reporter's questions.** Some reporters will try to pressure you by saying they are trying to meet a deadline. Make sure that if you do decide to answer their questions immediately that it is again beneficial to you and your company to do so.
- C. Check the reporter's credentials.** Never do an interview over the phone until you have established that the reporter's credentials are legitimate. After the initial phone call, contact the reporter's organization to confirm that they are indeed employed there.

Set Your Agenda

Your key messages should be positive, memorable statements on the issues that you want to address whether or not the reporter asks you about them. Remember to:

- keep your messages short
- keep them relevant
- keep them clear and concise

Your message will always be filtered and altered by the media.

Support Your Key Messages

Illustrate your three messages with details or examples to make them memorable. Use...

- facts -- simple and easy to understand
- statistics -- in human terms i.e. one in five people, not 20 percent of the population
- analogies/comparisons
- examples

Develop Questions and Answers

Although you wish to stick to your key messages, there are questions you must be prepared to answer. Prepare a list of difficult questions and figure out the response in advance. The answers are not key messages, they respond to the question and provide a bridge to move to your agenda -- a key message.

Difficult Questions

1. Confrontational or Loaded

This type of question can be designed to surprise you or repeat the negative -- in each case bridge back to your key messages. Example:

Q. Is your program a complete failure??

A. We are pleased with our results to date. We are receiving much better recognition and growing awareness, resulting in _____. ALWAYS SPEAK POSITIVELY!

2. Hypothetical or Speculative

This approach gets you to comment on something that may or may not happen. Or it asks you to comment on your own future. Beware when you hear the word "if" in the question.

3. Repeat Questions

A reporter may repeat a question several times to get you to say something you don't want. Repeat your original answer over again to stay out of trouble. If you keep repeating the answer, the reporter will stop asking.

4. Off the record

Unless you know and trust the journalist very well, don't go off the record.

5. Off topic

If the reporter asks you about a topic outside the interview that you don't want to discuss, just say you would prefer to discuss your topic.

6. Personal opinion question

These are loaded questions that ask your personal opinion, so as to make you say something more interesting.

Clarifying or Correcting an Answer

Be careful if this is worth the risk. It may draw attention to something and make it more likely to be used. The best time to do this is to clarify a factual statement. If you are trying to retract something, you can't expect a reporter to cooperate. Use your judgment.

Interview Do's and Don'ts

DO:

Develop key messages before each interview with your key points up front
Take control by giving answers that bridge to your messages
Be aware of the reporter's audience
Talk in terms the audience will understand
Support your messages with facts
Quote third party experts to support your case
Be a good listener
Maintain eye contact with your interviewer
Be pleasant and cooperative
Rehearse by practicing two to three sentence replies that last twenty seconds or less

DON'T :

Get stuck on the question and forget to bridge to your message
Be monotone
Mumble or speak too quickly
Say "uh"
Play with your hands
Gesture inappropriately
Slump or slouch
Answer hypothetical questions
Say "No comment"
Talk about topics outside your expertise
Repeat negative words
Look at the camera (do look at the interviewer)