

Tips for Talking to the Media

1. Advance Preparation

Create Key Message Points

Before being interviewed, you must know what you want to say. Key message points are the main ideas you want to convey when addressing an audience or participating in an interview. They are clear, concise statements that sum up the key facts you want your listeners to take away with them.

Keep your key messages to three, if at all possible. More than that are difficult to communicate effectively. You should meld the key message points into the context of your discussions with the public or media as much as possible or appropriate.

Make sure that you get these points across, regardless of the reporter's objectives. You'll have to be graceful to get these points into the record, because you must make your message forceful without seeming to "bulldoze," or "bully," the interviewer. Your goal in granting an interview is to lead the interview as much as possible to assure you get your key objectives across. Many reporters will also offer opportunities for you to provide more detailed information of the points you want to make.

Try to speak in a conversational tone. Avoid using jargon and acronyms that people outside of our field may not understand. For instance, instead of saying "TANF," say "welfare" or "the federal welfare program."

Anticipate Questions

You probably can anticipate many of the questions the reporter will ask. Prepare in advance how to answer these so your message is presented. Make your preparation loose enough to leave room for the unexpected, however, and be aware that "what goes wrong makes news."

Develop Appropriate Transitions

In preparing your responses to questions, try to broaden your response by determining verbal transitions and bridges between key points. Once you have answered the question, quickly make a smooth transition that gracefully leads the conversation from the issue under discussion into a positive subject, or an area you want to pursue.

Rehearse

Do some role-playing and rehearsal on your own with coworkers and in front of someone who is not involved with the subject matter. Keep your thoughts simple and clear, and speak clearly and deliberately. Another expert can point out questions you had not anticipated and evaluate your answers technically; an objective listener can comment on the clarity and understandability of your point of view.

2. Your Appearance (For Visual Media)

What to wear

Avoid wearing checks, plaids, polka dots or busy patterns. Do not wear shiny jewelry because it will distract the camera. If you are seated and wearing pants, you should not have exposed skin between your

socks and the bottom of your pants. Before going on camera, stop in the restroom and check your hair, make-up and clothing. You may want to powder your face or at least wipe it with a damp paper towel to remove oil and shine.

Posture

If seated, keep your back firmly against the back of the chair. Relax your shoulders, but do not slouch. Keep both feet on the floor. Or, men may cross their legs at the knee and women may cross their legs at the ankle – but do not bounce your feet. If you're tempted to do that, keep your feet flat on the floor, keeping your knees and ankles together.

If you are behind a desk, place your hands on the desk, with your forearms on the edge of the desk top. If there is no desk, place your hands on your lap midway between your waist and your knees.

Where to look

If you are in an interview situation, look at the interviewer, not the camera. If you are making a direct plea or a statement, look straight into the camera lens.

3. Tips for the Interview

Do Not Talk "Off the Record"

With print journalists, *never, ever* say anything you don't want to see in print. Even if a reporter says, "This is just between you and me," chances are it could still be tomorrow's news. With television and radio journalists, *never, ever* say anything near a microphone that you would not want broadcast. Even when the microphone is off, do not say anything to a reporter that you do not want aired.

Get Your Message In

Try to get your message in early – you may be sidetracked later. Broaden the area of discussion by using transitions to get from one of your message points to another.

Be Honest

A lie to the press can be very damaging. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to follow up. It's also a good idea to give the reporter an indication of when you can respond, or where s/he can get the information.

If you are on television or radio, and you do not know the answer to a question, it's okay to say so. Never say "no comment." You can say something else like, "It's too early to comment on that at this point," or "I don't have that information, but we do know that...."

Be Concise

- Whatever you say, make it concise.
- Remember that a 20-minute interview may wind up being 20 seconds on the air or three lines in the newspaper. It is essential to crystallize your key message points in a few hard-hitting sentences.
- State important facts.
- Keep language non-inflammatory, simple, and candid.
- Avoid answering speculative "what-if" questions. Talk about what you know.

Turn Negatives into Positives

Be prepared to lead the interview from problems and negatives about a situation to positive aspects about what your organization is doing to solve the problem.

Correct Misstatements

If a reporter is wrong about a fact or position, you must correct his/her error as soon as possible. You should do so, however, in a courteous, non-threatening manner.

Be Proactive, Not Reactive

Take control of an interview by using opportunities (pauses, quick responses, etc.) to bridge to important points you want to cover. For example, try a transition like: "I'm not an expert in that area, but I am very familiar with the services in this county."

Final Thoughts

Be lively and engaging, yet speak slowly and clearly. Relax and speak with confidence.

4. Getting Support from the Media

In general, here are rules to remember when seeking to motivate support:

1. Do not be melodramatic. Your message and reasoned approach should be strong enough to let the facts speak for themselves.
2. Use current, relevant data and statistics.
3. Avoid being corny or trite.
4. Do not blame or reproach - these rarely are effective motivators.
5. Use positive, strengths-based messages. (e.g., "Illinois has long enjoyed a reputation for developing innovative programs to treat addiction. We have an opportunity now to build on that foundation," etc.)
6. If possible, avoid the term "substance abuse." Do not say "substance abuse providers." They may be service providers, treatment providers, etc., but they are not substance abuse providers.
7. Know your audience and make your points with an understanding of their perspectives. Your message should engage them.

(Source: "Practical PR: Interviews," The Futures Group International, U.S. Agency for International Development, contract # CCP-3051-C-00-2016-00, 1995)

If you have further questions about talking to the media please contact the Communications Department.