

Media Training

“When planes land safely, that’s nice but it’s not news.”

John Stossel
ABC’s “20/20”

What is News?

- Timely and new
- Compelling
- Controversy
- Perceived wrong
- Dangerous or catastrophic event
- Human struggle and accomplishment
- Public/Community impact

Paid vs. Earned Media

- Advertising = controlled content and placement
- Editorial = unpaid, but less control

Getting the Word Out

- News release
- Statement
- News conference
- One-on-one
- Live vs. recorded

Messaging

- Prior to your interview, decide on the single message you wish to convey. Then develop three supporting points to your message. Stick to these during your interview so that you are able to stay on topic.

DOs and DON'Ts

- **Practice the golden rule.** Treat reporters, as you’d want to be treated. Be helpful and courteous. Return phone calls – even if you can’t comment or don’t want to be included in the story. Think of the reporter as a valued customer.
- **Don’t lie.** It takes a long time to establish credibility with the media. You throw it all away if you get caught in a deliberate lie. If you make an honest mistake, call the reporter right away with accurate information and explain how it was miscommunicated.
- **Don’t get cute or split hairs.** Almost as bad as lying is telling the truth *technically* but in a way that misleads or provides inaccurate information. Remember the sentence: “It depends on what the definition of ‘is’ is”?

- **Don't expect a reporter to show you a story before publication.** It conflicts with journalistic ethics and professionalism. If you are concerned that the journalist hasn't understood your point, ask him/her to repeat your words back to you.

Meet the Press

- **Be accessible** – When a reporter calls, ask about the subject matter and their deadline. If you need time to gather your thoughts, tell the reporter you will call them right back.
- **Be prepared** – Use that time to decide on your key message points. Then return the call promptly. Have a specific message and always think before you speak. Prepare a few message points and practice different ways of reiterating those points. During interviews, people tend to ramble and end up saying something they wish they hadn't. Having your message points handy will ensure that you get your point across.
- **The microphone is always on** – Enough said.
- **Get comfortable** – Be yourself.
- **The reporter is not your friend – but be friendly** – Avoid a combative relationship with the media. At the same time, don't play favorites.
- **It's okay to say you don't know** – Remember, there is nothing wrong with saying you do not know the answer to a reporter's question. Unless you are positive that the information is correct, do not offer it. Reporters have no problem with a source saying that he or she is unsure of something. They do, however, have a problem with a source saying something that is later determined incorrect. Tell the reporter you will check on the information and get right back to them – then do it.
- **Forget "off the record"** – Always assume the reporter is working on a story and that everything you say is on the record. If you don't want a statement quoted, don't make it.
- **Skip "no comment"** – Avoid using "no comment." If you think it would not be an appropriate time to answer a reporter's questions, explain why you are not able to give an answer and ask if there is any other way in which you could be helpful. "No comment" often comes across as an admission of guilt in the public arena.

Dealing with Difficult Questions

Journalists ask tough questions. That's their job. They ask the questions that the public would ask if the public could speak to you directly. Here are some tips for responding to difficult questions:

- Anticipate the question. What's the question you hope you won't get? Be prepared to answer.
- Answer in a sincere and honest tone. Keep your composure. Don't be sarcastic.
- Answer only what is asked. Listen carefully to the question and answer it in a succinct, straightforward manner. Don't ramble.
- Don't be afraid to apologize. If you or your organization has made a mistake, don't be afraid to say so, so long as legal liability is not an issue. A good response is to apologize, explain what went wrong and say what you're doing to put things right.
- Don't repeat loaded questions – If the reporter frames questions in a negative way, be sure to state your position in positive terms. If the questions are ones you'd prefer not to respond to, address them briefly and then move on to what you do want to say.
- Be clear about what you cannot say. If you're not the right person to comment or express a view, don't do it. Tell them who the best person to answer the question is. Don't comment on things you know nothing about. Park the question and move on; for example: "I can't speak to that issue, but what I can tell you is..."
- More about "parking the question." You don't have to answer every question thrown at you. If the reporter is trying to get you to comment on something someone else has said or asks you about something you don't want to explore, say, "I'm sure that's an important point, but if I could get back to what I was saying earlier..." or "Let's be clear about the real issue here."
- Don't get defensive. See the difficult question as an opportunity to help the reporter better understand the issue.
- Don't understand the questions? – If so, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify the question.
- Respect confidentiality. If you're asked to comment on a situation involving an individual, be cautious about what you say. Keep your response general and say something like "We can't comment on individual cases, but our general policy on this matter is..."

Print Tips

Select your main points in advance and stick to them. But remember, the reporter has an agenda of his/her own to complete during the interview. Aggressively trying to steer the reporter away from his/her main line of questioning can dampen the overall outcome of your interview. Whenever you can, supply new facts, insightful information and a fresh perspective.

- Have your notes and key messages handy. This is particularly helpful when reciting statistics.
- Avoid subtle humor or sarcasm. Subtleties and sarcasm can be misunderstood when they're in the form of the written word.
- Get to the point. It is important to make your key points first. There is nothing worse than getting sidetracked during an interview and realizing after it's over that you forgot to make your major argument.
- Remember the reader. Refrain from using technical language the audience is unlikely to understand. Chances are the reporter won't understand, either. You'll either be asked to explain your answer in layman's terms, or your answer will be edited out altogether.
- Be concise. Although brevity is more important during broadcast interviews, it is best if you keep your answers short. You could be one of dozens of interviews for a story. Because your comments will be heavily edited, it is best to be brief and to the point.

Television Tips

- Define your objectives *before* the interview. List the three most important messages you want to deliver.
- State the most important facts first. Put key points at the beginning so they're clear and isolated, then elaborate as time permits.
- Always assume the microphone is on.
- In taped interviews, don't be afraid to stop mid-sentence if you need to rephrase or start over.
- Keep sentences short and simple and skip the jargon. Try to explain technical material in terms that viewers will understand.
- Think about what's behind you for video interviews. If you're being interviewed in your office, clear your workspace of any knickknacks. Make sure your computer monitor is not showing a distracting screen-saver or confidential information. It's best to turn your monitor off. If you're delivering "bad news," try not to have your organization's logo as the backdrop.

Dress

- Avoid anything distracting. We want the focus on what you're saying, now what you're wearing.
- Avoid dangling earrings, loud ties.
- Button up.
- Don't wear white; it glows on TV.

- Don't wear black; it's too harsh and absorbs the light.
- Avoid herringbone patterns which tend to "move" on TV.

Body language

- Speak to and look at the interviewer, not the camera.
- Watch your posture; look up and sit upright, and don't slouch.
- Gestures; be natural, use your hands, but don't overdo it.
- No distracting movements; avoid fidgeting and fiddling with glasses, notes, pens, money in pockets.
- Don't scan; avoid darting your eyes and focus on the person asking the question to avoid looking "shifty."
- Sit, lean forward.
- Smile (when appropriate).

Voice

- Speak with authority.
- Watch speed and pacing – Don't rush: speak slowly, in short, concise sentences.
- Avoid non-words – State your position in simple, easy-to-understand language.
- Use everyday examples and analogies when appropriate.
- Vary your volume, tone and speed.
- Count to three – Don't be afraid to pause and gather your thoughts.
- Don't mumble.
- Be animated but speak with your normal voice; don't put on an "act".

Radio Tips

Before the interview

A radio reporter or producer will often call and want to conduct the interview right then and there. However, there will be a few minutes of preliminary talk between you and the reporter before he/she actually begins to record your comments. These preliminary few minutes are your opportunity to find out what the questions will be and for you to think about your answers. If you still feel you need time to prepare, take it. Set up a mutually convenient time for the reporter to call back and record the interview.

- **Before the interview, find out how long you will be on the air.** Is it live or recorded? Are you being interviewed for a news story? For a talk show? This will tell you if you need to make your answers 10 seconds or 30 seconds.
- **Generally, radio news stories are shorter than television stories.** It's essential, therefore, that answers be brief and that you make your key points as quickly as possible. Practice your sound bites.
- **Write background notes.** If you're being interviewed by phone, it helps to have background materials, key messages, etc. in front of you for reference during the interview. Try not to sound like you're reading your responses.

- **If you're being interviewed by phone, arrange a quiet place.** Turn off cell-waiting and your cell phone and arrange for no interruptions. Turn off your radio. Don't try to listen to the show while you're talking. It can create annoying feedback, and it will distract you.
- **If you're being interviewed at length in a radio studio, bring your notes along.** Again, there is nothing wrong with using them for reference. Make sure you unclip your notes before the show starts and lay them out so you won't have to shuffle through them while on the air.
- **Ignore studio distractions.** At times, the host might cue up a commercial, or someone might walk into the studio. Concentrate only on the questions and your answers.
- **Keep your cool during a call-in show.** Many anonymous callers love to upset guests on these programs. If you get angry, that will be the portion of the show that people remember.
- **And again, always assume the microphone is on.** Don't make offhand comments or disparaging remarks.