

Media Interview Strategies

Establishing ground rules for interviews

When you agree to speak with a reporter, it's important to know if they want quotes for attribution or if they're just looking for background information to be more educated about an issue. In some cases, you can offer background during your conversation to get the reporter up to speed; and then summarize your main points on the record at the end. Remember, you are the expert. Guide your interviewer.

Types of comments/answers during an interview*

“On the record” - reporter can quote you and use your name in the story

“On background” - reporter can refer to your conversation and incorporate your intel in the story, but will not directly quote you

“Off the record” - reporter agrees not to use your conversation in the story

* Please note that you can preface any part of what you say during an interview with “on the record,” “on background” and/or “off the record.” For example, as we mentioned above, you can speak “on background” or “off the record” for the majority of the interview, and then end with your main points, “on the record,” at the end.

Questions to answer before your interview

- Goal - What is the message that you want to get out there?
- Strategy - What is the best angle or approach you can take to get your message out there?
- Tactic - How do you want to speak (“on the record,” “off the record,” “on background”, or a combination)

As you consider your main message/s, please note that media professionals are only interested in focusing on a limited number of messages. Ensure your message has a new angle; otherwise, you are less likely to get quoted. . Be sure that you can explain why your message needs to be heard and how it will affect people's lives and the wider community. Because media caters to the greatest audience possible, avoid using jargon, insider language, and acronyms. Be sure your messaging is in plain English, and easily understood by those outside of the industry.

Create your core message

A core message should communicate the single most important idea about your campaign, policy, or report in one or two sentences and should be told in accessible, values-based language.

Breaking News

When responding to breaking news, be careful to get all the facts before making public statements. Consider reaching out to peers, partners, and subject matter experts if you have questions. Think carefully about how this news fits into larger histories and politics.

Get your key points across

Make your main point simple and concise, and speak in simple language. Try using a metaphor to illustrate your point. Repeat yourself.

Preparing for your interview - Know the following:

- Who: Reporter & outlet - What is their usual focus and style of reporting? What is the outlet's audience?
- When: Deadline - Hours? Days? Long-lead piece? This will influence the way they interview you and your ability to prepare.
- What: Topic & angle - Always be sure to read the latest news about the subject matter (even though you are an expert) to get a sense of the overall narrative. This will help you anticipate questions.
- How: Format - Print? Online? Radio or TV segment? Is it live or taped? How long is the interview, and who else will be in the discussion?
- Tone - Is the interviewer someone who stokes debate and controversy, or are they likely to write a considered article?

Manage the interview by setting a time limit and directing whether you are “on the record,” “off the record,” “on background,” or a combination. Keeping interviews short will help you focus on your key points. Set the time frame before you get on the phone and remind the interviewer at the start of the conversation.

Preparation

Anticipate tough questions and how to phrase answers. Tough questions don't mean antagonistic questions. A tough question can be one with a complicated or nuanced answer. Practice how to phrase complicated answers simply and concisely. Write out your key point(s) and say it out loud. Sometimes, it helps to write down what you want to say and actually say it out loud before your interview. The more you practice saying something, the more natural it will feel in your interview. If you mess up, just keep going. It's OK. Also, think about personal anecdotes that can help humanize the issue. If the issue doesn't affect your life directly, think about how it affects the lives of others.

Rapid preparation

- Drink water and clear your throat
- Shake out your arms, shoulders, and legs to loosen up
- Take a few deep breaths to focus

- Going on TV? Do a quick vanity check - Is there anything in your teeth? Are you wearing loud/distracting jewelry? If your face is shiny, wipe it with a tissue to decrease shine.

TIPS:

Emphasize your main point.

- It is important to make sure the journalist leaves knowing your main point. Repeat yourself to get it across - more so than you would in regular conversation. Don't spend time on low-priority context.

Speak in complete, short sentences.

- This will enable reporters to quote you easily and make it more difficult for editors or producers to curtail your quote.

Once you've answered, stop talking.

- Rambling is unhelpful. Some journalists leave pauses after a question to see if they can get you to keep talking and fill the space. Be ok with a moment of silence. In interviews, less is often more.

It's OK not to know the answer

- Don't speculate. If the interview is for print, just say "I don't know but I can find out and get back to you by email." If it's a live interview, just say I don't know and pivot back to your key points.

Be friendly and cordial

- You're both "on the job." The journalists are there to get the story, and you are there to communicate your perspective. Remember that this is a professional transaction, not a conversation.
- Your priority is to make sure the journalist walks away knowing your key point. Get it out early, especially on TV or radio, where you may only have one chance.

Be present and mindful.

- Answer thoughtfully. If you can't give the interview your full attention, it's best not to do it at all.