

# Meeting the Media -- Tips for Effective Interviews

Media interviews provide an effective way to promote products, services, organizations, personalities and causes. However, effective interviews require careful planning and preparation. Interviewees also should adhere to commonly accepted (best) practices.

## Four Fundamental Ideas to Always Remember

Interviewees:

- can *choose* whether or not to be interviewed.
- determine what information is disclosed and are *sources* upon whom interviews depend for content.
- develop skills and confidence through *practice*.
- maintain their position of power in an interview by providing *accurate and truthful information* and by maintaining a *cool, calm and controlled* demeanor.

## Selecting/Agreeing to Interviews

- Have a clear purpose for seeking publicity. Some experts refer to this as a *single overriding communication objective (SOCO)*.
- Be selective. Seek outlets that are relevant and reach audiences important to your cause.
- Start small. Gain experience first with local, familiar, and easily accessible outlets. Then seek exposure in more competitive, national media
- Treat all media with respect. Don't assume that ostensibly friendly interviewers are push-overs.
- Set aside any fears or stereotypes about the media. Plan on having a friendly, positive experience.

## Pitching Interviews

Seek out interviews proactively by sending an e-mail query (or "pitch") to reporters, editors, bloggers, TV news assignment editors, or talent coordinators for TV and radio shows.

The 3-4 paragraph pitch letter should include:

- A catchy introduction that telegraphs the story angle
- Why the story is relevant/important to the audience
- A succinct outline of key points to be addressed.
- Details about available information and visuals
- An invitation to contact you or a statement that you will follow up by e-mail or phone.
- Essential attachments. (Suggested: a *one-page* crib sheet with a short bio of the interviewee and a list of possible questions or interview ideas).

## Responding to Requests

Even if a reporter is on deadline, critically evaluate requests from unknown media. It is appropriate to *decline* an interview in certain situations. For example:

- The reporter's legitimacy is questioned.
- Previous problems with the reporter suggest that the resulting coverage will not be balanced or fair.
- You lack the necessary subject-matter expertise.
- Scheduling conflicts preclude finding a suitable time.
- Circumstances suggest that limiting media access is appropriate (such as maintaining the privacy of an executive or personality following a personal tragedy).

## Venues for Interviews

Interviews can take place in a variety of locations:

- Over the phone (including radio news *phoners* and *call-ins* to radio and TV programs)
- Media offices (newspaper or website offices, etc.)
- In-studio (TV, radio; live or pre-recorded)
- Event venues (conferences, sporting events, etc.)
- Organization office or facilities
- Offsite locations (hotels, restaurants, etc.)
- News conferences
- Satellite media tours
- Web conferences
- Via e-mail (written responses to questions)

## Confirm Arrangements

Always send a confirming e-mail when scheduling an interview for a future date. Include:

- Location, arrival time, actual time of interview.
- Driving, parking and check-in instructions.
- Scope of topics to be covered (and ground rules on topics not to be covered, if agreed upon in advance)
- Special arrangements – demos to be conducted, special materials or props to be provided, photographs to be taken, etc.

## Planning/Preparing for Interviews

Interviewees meeting the press for the first time should *carefully* prepare for their first interviews. Even

experienced interviewees should take sufficient time to prepare when tackling new or difficult topics.

- Obtain help from a media relations expert who can explain how the media operate and basic protocols.
- Work with the outside expert to develop no more than 3-4 key talking points to be the foci of your remarks. Concentrate on how the topic of the interview *benefits the audience* and/or *transforms their lives*.
- Identify ways you can make your story more understandable and memorable to audiences. Research *examples, statistics, stories* or other *evidence* to illustrate your talking points.
- Think in terms of short sound bites – one or two quips or sentences that contain *culturally resonating catchphrases, metaphors* or *analogies*, or other *mental images* will get quoted or replayed.
- Anticipate all questions – *probable* questions, *tough* questions, and *soft* questions that might be answered in any variety of ways. (Unfocused or “soft questions” -- not tough questions -- are sometimes the most difficult questions to handle.)
- Be able to describe your organization, product, service or cause in a simple sentence or two.
- Rehearse the interview and the specific questions several times. Ask the media relations expert (and others) to critique your performance.

### Accompaniment/Arrival at Interviews

Whenever possible, interviewees should be accompanied by a media relations professional who can:

- Assist with arrangements or set-up.
  - Coordinate scheduling changes, transportation, etc
  - Take notes or record the session to corroborate the accuracy of interview comments later.
  - Supply or research additional/requested information
  - Police the direction of questioning and offer advice.
  - Critique the performance before a next interview.
- The interviewee should arrive fresh, ready to perform.
- Avoid feeling rushed. Arrive 10-15 minutes early.
  - Upon arrival, remember to *turn off* your cell phone. Even vibrating cell phones disturb interviews.

### Broadcast Interviews

- Radio and TV: On-air guests are usually asked to sign a standard model release granting permission to broadcast their image and words.
- Radio and TV: Guests usually wait in a designated guest area (“green room”) and will be given instructions on how to enter the studio, where to sit, etc. Note: Guests might meet the interviewer for only 1-2 minutes before an interview begins.
- TV: Wear appropriate attire. Dress according to how you want to be perceived. Example; A cowboy should

wear a Western outfit with boots and carry a lariat. Most other guests should wear comfortable business attire but avoid looking overly formal or stiff. Dark, solid outfits work best. Wear a light blue or colored shirt or blouse (not white). Avoid checks, stripes, and patterns or wild designs. No shiny or dangling jewelry.

- TV: Expect to spend 5-10 minutes in make-up (to eliminate a shiny face on camera).
- TV: The floor director will affix your microphone and remind you where to look: *at the interviewer*.
- At the conclusion, always stay seated and chat with the interviewer until excused. Never say anything here that you would not say on the air.
- Thank the interviewer and crew. Then depart promptly so the next segment can begin.

### Responding to Interview Questions: The Basics

- Body language matters. Smile! Be friendly!
- Sit up straight and lean slightly forward to look engaged and to open up your diaphragm. Don’t slump back, rock, or swivel in the chair.
- Always answer the question *asked*. Don’t assume that reporter has any ulterior motive.
- Always be accurate, truthful, and timely. What you say should reflect the latest news about your topic. Be sure to check news reports that morning!
- Avoid needless negatives. Negative comments suggest conflict, can be misinterpreted by audiences, or might prompt an unwanted line of questioning.
- Talk clearly, not too fast.
- Speak in complete thoughts. Never respond simply “Yes.” or “No.” Always use the opportunity to state or restate one of your 3-4 key talking points.
- Mention your product organization *by name* whenever practical to do so. Don’t respond, “We believe....” Always say, “We at XYZ believe....”
- Speak authoritatively. Use powerful language. Avoid “ums,” “like,” “I suppose,” and similar phrases that raise doubts about your expertise.
- When asked a *factual* question for which you don’t know the answer, admit “I don’t know.” However, avoid appearing stumped if asked your *opinion* on a topic you’d be expected to know about.
- Avoid flip, cynical or humorous responses that might be misunderstood or misquoted out of context – or make you appear to be smug or indifferent.
- Avoid making unintended *material financial disclosures* in violation of applicable securities laws.
- Be enthusiastic. Speak with conviction.

### Dealing with Difficult Questions: Broadcast

Interviewers on news, public affairs and entertainment shows strive to ask the questions their viewers want to

know about -- and would ask if they could be in the studio. Thus, one or more “tough” or off-the-wall questions should be expected.

- When asked a difficult question, listen carefully. Address *only* that aspect of a controversial subject that is actually asked. Don't invite questioning about other related issues you don't want to discuss.
- Use the *bridging technique* to respond to the question as *forthrightly*, *accurately* and *briefly* as possible. Then, without hesitation, use a transition sentence (beginning with words such as “*But ...*,” “*However...*,” “*On the other hand....*,” “*To the contrary ...*”) to redirect the conversation to an aspect of the topic you'd like to discuss (one of your 3-4 key talking points). This bridging technique is sometimes referred to as *touch and go!* Maintain control of the interview by talking until you fully complete your point. Then, start a new or related topic, if appropriate.
- Never speculate. Avoid making *unfounded* predictions about the future.
- Interviewees can simply decline to answer certain questions. Examples include questions that involve
  - frivolous, irrelevant or unsavory events
  - attempts to merely provoke controversy or to sensationalize a topic
  - an intrusion on the privacy of the interviewee or another person
  - trade secrets or other proprietary information
  - problems confronting a competitor
  - potential breaches of confidentiality
  - a pending business deal or announcement
  - a topic outside the ground rules agreed upon when scheduling the interview.

Don't just curtly decline to answer. (*Never* say, “No Comment”!). Instead, say, “I don't think it would be appropriate for me to comment on that....” Don't repeat the question, but go to explain *in one sentence* why it's not appropriate to answer. Don't elaborate.

### Dealing with Difficult Questions: Print/Bloggers

- Print media and blog interviews provide the opportunity to supply additional information after the interview but before the reporter's deadline.
- Use the same bridging technique described above to respond to difficult questions print interviews.
- Never go “off the record.” Never say anything that you would not want to be quoted as having said. The reporter might ask whether he or she can quote a juicy off-the-record comment. (Although this is a common practice in political reporting, it only works

because there is an *ongoing* co-dependency between the source and the reporter.)

- Providing “background” information (not to be attributed to the interviewee) can be helpful to a reporter. But be wary of providing information that might be unfavorable to your industry, government officials or others. Avoid gossiping.
- Don't express a personal opinion or experience if it's contrary to the official position of your organization.

### Ambush Interviews

Journalists sometimes intercept newsmakers coming or going from their offices or homes or from courthouses, and try to obtain quotes or interviews “on the run.”

- If ambushed, avoid appearing like a dog being chased. Stop and talk to the reporter(s). Be cool and courteous. Act professionally.
- If you intend to talk, consider whether it would be advantageous to deal with the media now or later. If later, propose a specific time when you will make yourself available. Then, fulfill the promise *after* you have fully prepared for the interview.
- If you don't intend to speak with the media, calmly explain that you don't plan to make any statement. Say nothing more. Calmly and slowly depart.

### After the Interview

- Be sure to provide promised information or other materials by the agreed-upon deadline
- For print interviews yet to be published, make a telephone call or send an e-mail to ask if you can provide additional information.
- Maintain any confidences shared by the reporter.
- Honor any promises of exclusivity.
- Update, annotate media lists.
- Send a thank-you note that invites future contact.
- If the published story contains a factual error, contact the reporter immediately. Be cordial and professional. Ask that the mistake be corrected so it is not repeated in repurposed versions of the story or future stories.
- Never ask for a retraction based on the angle or slant of a published interview. Media will gladly run corrections, but resist complaints of fairness or bias.
- Never threaten to go over the head of a reporter or editor or to complain about unfair treatment – especially because your organization is a major advertiser. Nothing alienates reporters more. Managers might listen politely, but steadfastly resist second-guessing their staffs or admitting mistakes. The only exception involves specific violations of the media organization's ethics standards.