

Guidelines for Talking With the News Media

You may be called upon to represent your company before the news media. Since some form of mass communication reaches almost every American, media interviews provide an excellent opportunity to promote your company and to advance its positions on a wide range of issues.

The media serve as gatekeepers. Reporters decide which messages will be communicated, but you can have a great deal of influence over what those messages will be. In an interview, you are talking *through* the reporter *to* the audience. With this in mind, it is important to be prepared when you speak with the media. Below are some guidelines that will help you prepare for and give media interviews.

Preparing for the Interview

Obtain Background Information

Before your interview, you should gather as much background information as possible about both the reporter and the story. This kind of background information may include the publication's reputation, e.g., Is it a conservative newspaper? Is it a liberal television news magazine?; the focus or "angle" of the story; the reporter's style, e.g., Is he confrontational? Does she have a reputation for expose-type stories?; other individuals already interviewed for the story; other individuals to be interviewed after you; the length of the proposed story; the story deadline; the length of time the reporter has been working on the story. Answers to these questions will help you prepare for the interview.

Determine Key Points

Before any interview, you should prioritize your message in an agenda containing two or three key points. Communications research suggests that people are able to digest and remember only a few points at one time. To be credible, you must back-up your main points with proof or "evidence." If you cannot provide proof, do not use that key point. In determining your key points, bear in mind that people want to know how an issue will affect them personally, in everyday life. Approaching a topic from this viewpoint will help determine your key points.

Having an agenda serves a dual purpose: first, it enables you to determine in advance what you want the interview to accomplish, and second, it enables you to make transitions back to the key points that form the core of your story. Remember that it is your story; do not let the reporter lead you astray.

An old adage about giving a speech also applies to giving an interview: tell the audience what you are going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you just told them. Constant repetition of your main points serves to reinforce your message. It also increases your chances that the reporter will remember what you said and share this with the audience.

Anticipate Questions

Before the interview, sit down and think through what questions the reporter may ask. Prepare answers that defuse these questions and bring the conversation back to your message. Practice answering tough questions before the interview.

The Interview

Stay Focused

Realize that you have a story to tell and that it is your responsibility to tell it. Guide the reporter to questions you would like to answer, and return to your key messages again and again.

Use Quotable Language

Reporters are looking for a few good quotes that summarize the story. Do yourself and the reporter a favor: provide them. This way, you control the message. Remember to keep your language positive, interesting, and vivid. Think like a reporter, and speak in headlines. Also, brief examples and analogies are very quotable.

Use Positive Language

If you are asked a negative question, respond with positives. Listen to the question. Take a moment to think, “Do I agree with the premise of the question?” Never repeat a negative question. Use transitions, as described below.

Use Transitions

Often, a reporter will ask a question that diverges from your message or frames your company in a negative way. In these instances, it is wise to use a transition to guide the conversation back to your message. Such transitions follow. Practice them and remember to use them during your interview.

- That’s an interesting question, but let me remind you ...
- Let me put that in perspective ...
- What’s most important ...
- And don’t forget ...
- That’s a good point, but I think your audience would be interested in knowing...
- I do not agree with the premise of your question. The fact is ...
- What I’m really here to talk to you about is ...
- Before we get off that subject, let me add ...
- Let me give you some background information ...
- Another thing to remember is ...
- While _____ is certainly important, don’t forget that _____ ...

Use Facts and Figures

Memorize key points of information that reinforce your message and use them throughout the interview. Use simple language in your interview. Remember, facts and figures provide evidence for the story you are telling.

Avoid “No Comment”

If you cannot respond to a question, explain why, e.g., “It’s in litigation,” “That’s proprietary information,” but don’t just say, “No comment.” If you do not know the answer to a reporter’s questions, offer to find out and get back to the reporter, or refer the reporter to another source.

Avoid “Off the Record”

Do not say things you would not like to see in print or on the air. There is simply no such thing as “off the record.”

After the Interview

Evaluation is one of the most important parts of any interview. After the interview, review the questions you were asked and how you answered them. Write it down—keep a record of what worked and what didn’t work and review your notes before your next interview. For broadcast interviews, review the footage and learn from it. For all interviews, use a small tape recorder during the session, and listen to yourself afterwards. Practice areas that need improvement.

For More Information

Additional media training and assistance will be provided upon request. Please contact Shannon R. GaNun at shannon@shannonganun.com if you have any questions or need further information. I look forward to working with you to promote your company.