



Preparing for media interviews

Introduction

Whilst it will not be appropriate, every time, to engage with the media in your advocacy projects, there will be many occasions when you may find it helpful to seek media coverage. It is likely, however, that your organisation will need, from time to time, to deal with the media. You may even have a formal media relations strategy. So you may well be required, either following your own efforts to secure coverage, or in response to other news, to be interviewed by the media – press, radio or television. This should be seen as a positive opportunity to communicate a message about your organisation and your policy proposals.

Preparing to be interviewed

The invitation

Sometimes, you will not get any notice of an interview, but will find yourself with a reporter on the phone or even standing in front of you. It will help you to discover exactly what the reporter is after before you start answering detailed questions, not least because this will give you a chance to collect your thoughts.

More often, the reporter will be responding to a press release, so you should have already done some preparation.

If the reporter is from radio or television, it is likely that the first contact will be to set up a formal interview, which gives you notice of what is coming and a chance to prepare. If possible, explore with the reporter the likely line of questioning.

Being interviewed, particularly for radio or television, can be nerve wracking – but remember that it is an opportunity for you to convey your message to a wide audience.

Your message

Be clear about your main message. Don't annoy the reporter, or your potential audience, by saying the same thing over and over again, but do ensure that you are consistent in your answers and that you keep reinforcing the main message. If you are being recorded for radio or television, it is more likely than not that your interview will be edited, so always communicate the main message first – clearly, simply and concisely, so that it is not lost in the editing process.

Stick to two or three points, at most – too many, and you will lose your audience. Wherever possible, include facts and figures from your research. Keep them simple – but they add credibility to your message.

Think about the questions in advance

Ideally, ask for a list of questions before the interview. This is common practice for television and radio and gives you the chance to think of what you want to say before you're asked the questions on-air.

If the interview is live, think carefully before answering every question and try to do so authoritatively. If the interview is being recorded, there is a little more

opportunity to re-answer if you make a mistake, but remember that you do not control the editing! One trick is, without taking a breath, simply to carry on saying something completely different like sorry I made a mistake. Then pause. Then start again.

If you don't know the questions in advance, get a few people together and brainstorm the likely questions. Then have someone 'interview' you using those questions. You need to be able to deal with all the likely questions, but don't appear too rehearsed.

Be ready for the unexpected question of a radio or TV interview, usually towards the end, which hasn't been notified in advance and which is intended to catch you off-guard.

Being interviewed

Answering the questions

Be as precise in your answers as you can. Try to avoid just answering 'yes' or 'no', even when the question is asked in that way. Use the opportunity to get your message across. As suggested above, keep reinforcing your key message.

Be positive. If you appear negative or confrontational, it will make it more difficult for your audience to take you, or your message, seriously.

Stay calm at all times. If you are on TV, you may find that the interviewer attempts to goad you into an emotional outburst. This makes good TV, but erodes your credibility.

Provide the facts – clearly and succinctly. Don't speculate, as it may leave you open to justifiable criticism. Don't worry about silences – it is the interviewer's job to fill them not yours. So when you have finished your answer, stop talking.

You may be able to help a press reporter, or a reporter researching for a radio or TV programme, with suggestions for other sources of information. If the chance arises, you should do so. It helps to make you look knowledgeable and helpful – and makes it more likely that that the reporter will come back to you when a comment is needed, perhaps on a different story.

Interrupting

Don't interrupt the interviewer. It's bad manners and, if it's live, is more likely to reflect badly on you than on the interviewer. If you really need to comment, then wait for the end of the question, but start the answer at the earlier point... "Before I answer the question, perhaps I can just address the point that you made about..."

Lying

Don't ever lie. It can be very tempting, if asked a question to which you do not know the answer, to exaggerate or even to make up a 'fact'. This will eventually be twigged, and it is you who will ultimately look bad. If you asked about facts, and don't have the answers, it is better to say that you don't have them, and that you will research the answers; or to explain why those facts are irrelevant (difficult if you don't know the answer though) and steer the interviewer back to the areas where you do know the facts. Better still, of course, is to ensure that you are properly prepared and then you will not find yourself in this position.

If the interview is not live then this might give an opportunity to suggest an alternative source to the reporter or to offer to find the information. If you do so, make sure that you keep your promise!

Television

In television interviews, your appearance is as important as the answers to your questions.

- Wear clothes that come across as smart and appropriate for your role. Be clean and tidy. Brush your hair. Avoid wearing anything that could distract the audience such as stripes and checks that don't work together or large swinging jewellery.
- Maintain eye contact with the person to whom you are speaking. Hopefully the interviewer will interview you in such a way that you don't look at the camera. Keep eye contact with the interviewer instead.
- Try to keep still, whether sitting or standing. There is nothing more distracting for viewers than people fidgeting or nail biting. If you are sitting, keep your hands in your lap. Do not fold your arms.

Body language

You are bound to be nervous, especially if you are unused to being interviewed, and this can come across through your body language. You may find yourself with a dry throat, or shaky hands. If you have prepared properly, then you should find that you can stay calm and come over as professional, knowledgeable and influential.

Do:

- Smile – especially if you are on television, but even for press and radio reporters, smiling will put you in a better frame of mind, but don't over do it!
- If you are sitting, keep your hands in your lap and don't wave them around
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer
- Listen carefully to each question and answer clearly and succinctly
- Keep calm

Don't:

- Don't cross your arms – it creates a barrier between you and the interviewer or, if on TV, between you and the audience
- Don't sit on the edge of your seat
- Don't rock on, or swivel, your chair
- Don't fidget
- Don't interrupt
- Don't give one word answers but, rather, use the opportunity to reinforce your message

Post interview

Follow up

If you have promised some contacts or some further information to the interviewer, make sure that you keep your promise. If you don't, the reporter will see you as unreliable.

Debrief

If you are being interviewed on radio or television, have some colleagues listen or watch; better still, record it. If the interview is reported in the press, collect the cuttings. Then, with your colleagues, review how well you think you performed. Did you get across the key message? Was it well reported? Think about how you can do better next time.
