

The media interview

A list of do's and don't's taken from the FAO media relations branch

Do's and don'ts

Be proactive

Simply responding to inquiries does not always allow you to get your key messages across.

When the media calls...

ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS TO ENSURE YOU ARE FULLY AWARE OF WHO YOU ARE TALKING TO

What is your name?

Whom do you represent?

What is the interview about?

What particular aspects are focusing on?

Are you talking to other people? Will they be interviewed at the same time?

What is your deadline? When will the story be run?

(Depending on the deadline) May I call back tomorrow? In an hour? 30 minutes? Ten minutes?

What is your phone/fax number or e-mail?

Don't be afraid to negotiate when a reporter calls for an unscheduled interview:

Be polite, helpful and friendly.

Stress that you need information first.

Don't say anything you don't want to see printed or broadcast.

Stay calm.

Don't say "no comment" or "off-the-record..."

Don't automatically agree to the interview or refuse it.

Good negotiation leads to:

A clear definition of the agenda and the boundaries of the interview.

The possibility of guiding the interview to areas on which *you* wish to focus.

The possible inclusion of people or references *you* may suggest.

Be careful

The reporter may try to interrupt with a "content" question, trying to lead you in the substance of the interview. Say "before we get to that", and continue to negotiate time to prepare.

If you cannot do the interview, say why and offer to put the interviewer in touch with the appropriate person.

Follow up quickly. Reporters have extremely tight deadlines.

Some ground rules

Don't view the reporter as either an enemy or a friend. The reporter has a professional job to do, and to do it well ought to challenge your statements.

Be prepared to live with everything you say to a reporter; if you cannot, *don't* say it.

"Off-the-record" is risky business since the reporter may find confirmation from another source and use the information.

"Not-for-attribution" means the reporter can use the information but not name the source.

Prepare for the interview – your message should:

give key points that you want your target audience (the undecided, the “don’t knows”) to know and to remember;

highlight for the reporter why your subject is important, what it will accomplish in the real world;

put your subject in newsworthy terms: what is new and significant, how it ties in with current issues, explains a trend, adds a new aspect to a current news story;

have a length of five to 20 seconds (the average television “clip” or radio “sound bite” – what you see and hear after the reporter has introduced the subject and before an interview comes on the air – is ten seconds) for the broadcast media or be no more than three lines for the print media;

Present or include memorable “word pictures”. By reinforcing these pictures throughout the interview they will come to dominate. (A well-known example is “think globally, act locally”).

Remember:

Check facts and statistics, consult others.

Your audience is neither the strong supporters, nor the strong opponents of your position. The target you should focus on is the undecided, the “don’t knows”.

A reporter or interviewer will often take what the opponents or critics say as the basis for interview questions.

Don’t get into a discussion with the reporter by zeroing in on the opponent’s point of view.

Concentrate on persuading *your* target audience.

Work on your messages:

Your goal is to be message-driven rather than question-driven. This means you must:

Know what your messages are

Consistently deliver *your* messages.

Assertively bring your messages into the interview.

Stay off the reactive question-driven approach, which may prevent you from delivering the messages you want to get across.

Don’t merely respond to questions; answer them, but move on to your messages.

A quotable quote is irresistible when:

It is brief.

It stands on its own.

It is in everyday language, not jargon.

It is colourful, a metaphor.

It is passionate, energetic.

It has direct, personal appeal.

Manage the interview

Avoid “Bait”

Don’t repeat “bait” words – loaded words that a reporter may use in questions, such as “kill”, “greed”, etc. When you repeat a “bait” word in your response you may have given the reporter a quote you would not like to see used.

Use “bridges”

When the reporter steers you away from the subject that you want to discuss, bring it back by bridging phrases that lead again to your messages: “this is not the real issue. The real issue is...” “Let’s look at it from this point of view...”

Overcome “blanks”

When you are at a loss for words, pause. Collect your thoughts. Stay cool, start anew. If you really did not understand or were not concentrating, ask the reporter to repeat the question.

Watch “off-the-cuff” remarks

Reporters may use any remarks, even those meant to be “off-the-cuff”, made before, during or after the interview. They may be eminently “quotable”. Don’t let your guard down.

Similarly, if the interview is conducted in your office, check the environment to see it does not convey any possible negative messages. Avoid being interrupted by telephone calls and control your facial expressions and body language.

Telephone interviews

Hold the mouthpiece several centimetres away from your mouth.

Collect your thoughts before answering.

Project energy and confidence, emphasize key words, speak slowly and clearly.

Sit up straight and animate your face; your tone will be warmer.

Don’t feel pressured to fill the silences, awkward as they may be, that the reporter may use to keep you going.

Repeat your messages.

Never lose your temper.

Avoid “ugh” sounds.

Radio-studio interviews

Maintain a pleasant attitude and good contact with the interviewer.

Animate your face to warm up the tone.

Enunciate clearly, speak slowly and vary inflection.

Keep your answers brief: maximum 30 seconds.

Think of the interview as an energetic dialogue.

Think of a person at home or in the car listening to you; connect with that listener.

Other guests in the studio

Don’t let them take control of the agenda.

Use bridges to return to your messages.

If you disagree, say so firmly but politely.

Don’t get personal; getting into a one-to-one with another guest will detract from your messages.

Show a sense of humour, but keep it from being cutting or sarcastic.

Speak most often directly to the other guests, not to the host.

“Open-line” radio interviews

In “open-line” radio, you, the guest in the studio, are questioned both by the host of the show and listeners who call in. Remember:

Your objective is to persuade the listener, not necessarily the caller.

Always show the caller respect.

If you become bogged down, politely “agree to disagree” and move on.

Speak directly to the caller, not to the host.

Television-studio interviews

Know before the interview starts what it will focus on, so that you are not caught off guard.

Arrive early to familiarize yourself with the surroundings and get comfortable.

While waiting, keep calm, breathe deeply, drink water (not coffee).

When seated on the set, let the crew put on your microphone.

When the interviewer introduces himself or herself, exchange a few pleasantries.

Don’t look at yourself in the monitor – it can destroy your concentration. If you are afraid you might be distracted by a monitor, ask that it be turned away.

Agree with the interviewer that you will look directly at him or her, and not at the camera.

Keep eye contact with the interviewer.

During the interview, project warmth in your voice, animate your face.

Think of the interview as engaging a dialogue with a viewer at home.

You could be on camera all the time, so watch what you do, even when you are not engaged in dialogue.

“Double-enders”

When the reporter is in one location (studio) and you are in another:

Look directly into the camera, not at any monitor or around the room.

Imagine the camera lens is the eyes of the interviewer.

Keep looking into the lens, even when the interviewer or other guests are speaking.

If there are other guests on the programme, address them directly, not through the interviewer.

Speak as if you were in the same room as the interviewer/guests. Don't yell.

Don't be surprised: in taped interviews, the questions may be asked by the camera operator or a producer, rather than the interviewer.

Make sure the earpiece is snugly fitted into your ear. If it falls out, smoothly put it back in and continue. If you cannot hear the question, politely ask the interviewer to repeat it.

When the TV comes to you

Choose a setting that will accommodate a TV crew and equipment. A TV crew needs 15 to 30 minutes to set up and another 15 minutes to pack up. If you are busy, your office may not be the best place for the interview. In any event, avoid a bureaucratic setting: get out from behind your desk.

Make sure all objects you would not want to be seen on camera are put away before the camera crew arrives. Think of an interesting backdrop relevant to your subject to enhance visual impact.

Relax. Be prepared to play a role (entering your office, answering a call, signing a letter) for an “establishing shot”.

After the interview, you may be asked to nod and simulate a dialogue with the reporter for subsequent editing purposes. The microphone could still be on, so don't say anything you might regret.

Either you or someone else should stay in the room after the interview to watch the reporter do the “re-asks” (in which the camera is turned to face the reporter and the original questions are asked again) to ensure the same wording is used as in the interview.

When the reporter and TV crew come to your workplace, the interview is almost always taped and edited. Therefore, pause before each answer while looking down and then look up and begin. It gives you time to think. Finally, just because the lights go off, it doesn't mean that the camera is turned off. Watch what you say and does; this can still be used.

Be brief in your replies.

Don't refer to a previous statement, it spoils the “sound bite”.

Don't use the reporter's name in the response, it kills the “clip” for other broadcasters.

Don't number (1,2,3..) or letter (a,b,c...) any answers; this spoils the “clip”.

Don't answer every nuance or aspect of the question – get to the gist of it and then move back to your message track.

Control the pace, slow it down. Put your head down while you listen to the question. Pause a few seconds, then raise your head and deliver a brief self-contained message while looking directly at the reporter who asked the question. (In this way, you give yourself time to think, without communicating embarrassed facial expressions).

Stand-up interviews

When interviews are conducted standing in a hallway, on building steps, at the back of a room following a speech or news conference, etc.:

Slow down. Give yourself time to think.

Don't let your words get ahead of your thoughts. Pause briefly once in a while to

Emphasize your words and again give yourself time to reflect.

Stay low-key and cool, regardless of how intense the questioning is.

Don't let the encounter go on too long; ten minutes is a maximum. Once you have said what you wanted to say, excuse yourself politely but firmly and leave.

News conferences

After the chairperson has set the agenda, deliver a short prepared statement before taking questions.

Stay calm. Don't over-react to loaded “bait” questions; don't repeat the emotionally loaded

word in your response.

Don't refer to reporters by name, it may kill the "soundbite" for the others.

Be direct; use everyday language, not jargon.

Look at one section of the room each time you look up. Deliver your message with conviction to that part of the room. Don't glance all round the room as you speak; in a close-up, this may make you look shifty and uncertain.

Answer the thrust of the question without becoming bogged down by details. Limit your answers to a maximum of 30 seconds.

Don't get into a one-to-one dialogue with a reporter. Suggest you or someone else meet him or her after the news conference.

Use visual aids to illustrate your points.

Repeat the messages you included in your opening statement during answers to questions.

Some tips on verbal communication

Pace: Too fast or too slow a pace will frustrate the viewer or listener. Vary the pace of delivery to keep your messages interesting.

Inflection: Vary the emphasis you place on words. This helps to draw attention to key concepts. Avoid a tedious, monotonous delivery. Stay away from "ugh", "um" and "OK"

Pauses: Pause before or after key words to emphasize their importance and communicate thoughtfulness.

Tone: Confidence is communicated by adopting a relaxed, measured speaking style. Keep your tone friendly. Speak as if you were engaged in a friendly dialogue with one listener or viewer.

Words: Use everyday, clear language to help your viewer/ listener understand your messages. Avoid jargon, "bureaucratese" or highly technical explanations. Don't bore your audience with run-on sentences.

Energy: Ultimately, when you talk, the energy that you project about the subject and in delivering your messages is what the listener or viewer will remember. Don't run out of steam at the end of sentences.

Some tips on non-verbal communication

More than half of what you communicate in a television interview is non-verbal:

Light up your face; an animated face connects your feelings to the words you speak.

Project an image of balance between low-key thoughtfulness when listening to questions or while others are speaking and energy when you speak.

Communicate warmth through your facial expressions and through open body language.

Maintain eye contact with the interviewer, without staring

Smile only when appropriate.

Don't distract with needless gestures.

Don't hunch your shoulders (sitting on your jacket helps keep the collar down and improves your posture).

Sit up straight; don't lean to one side.

Keep your feet flat on the floor with your legs together or cross your legs at the knee, pointing them towards the interviewer.

Don't put one arm back; it looks defensive.

Don't tilt your head to one side; it communicates uncertainty or weakness.

Some tips on dress and appearance

How you look, not what you say, will make the first and perhaps most lasting impression on the television viewer: Your clothing and appearance should distract as little as possible.

Properly used, they will reinforce what you say.

For men:

Avoid three-piece suits; they tend to look stuffy and too formal.

Don't wear black suits; they project a lack of trust.

Avoid extremes of colour, pattern or style. Conservative styles in the median range of colours, grey and blue in particular, enhance your image. Navy blue is the most flattering for almost anyone (except persons who are very fair or light-skinned; they could prefer charcoal grey).

Stay away from printed, closely striped, or short-sleeved shirts; wear either a white or a pale blue shirt. Wear ties that have a strong colour to them, such as burgundy, which will reflect colour into your face. Make sure your tie touches your belt buckle and is straight.

Beards or moustaches should be well groomed and not cover the upper lip. Since beards and moustaches tend to hide facial expressions, compensate with facial animation. If you are bald or have a receding hairline, ask for powder to avoid glare.

For women:

Extremes are out: avoid short skirts, flashy outfits and revealing necklines; also avoid outfits that are too severe or colourless – they may project coldness.

Strong colours project confidence (royal blue, emerald green, a not-too-bright red).

Wear a jacket and skirt combination or a well-tailored dress; avoid casual dresses.

Keep jewellery to a minimum.

Don't wear sandals, open-toed shoes or wildly patterned hosiery.

Avoid pure white blouses (unless worn with a jacket) and closely patterned stripes and prints that can create moiré patterns on the screen.

Keep your hair out of your face.

Some tips on difficult questions

Loaded: *“How much damage has this done to your organisation’s reputation?”*

Don't accept the premise tacitly by trying to ignore it. Instead, challenge it politely and firmly. Then quickly move on to your message.

Baited: *“Don't you think this kills it?”*

Don't repeat the bait word “kill”, not even to deny it. Refuse the question without repeating the bait word.

Personal: *“What do you think?”*

Keep your personal opinion out of it by saying so: “I don't believe the issue here is my personal opinion...”

Other's opinion: *“Why do you think the (...) government decided to do that?”* Refer the question to the appropriate authority. Speak only on *your organisation's* behalf.

You don't know the answer: Say you don't know and offer to get the answer for the reporter. Never lie; never guess.

You know the answer but are not allowed to say it: Give the reason why you are not allowed to answer: “This is confidential, it is before the courts, it would be inappropriate for me to comment, this issue is very sensitive, it is currently under review, negotiation, discussion...”

Two-options trap: *“Do you suggest increasing funding or maintaining the present level?”*

Ignore the two options, don't become boxed in. Answer with a straightforward message leading back to your theme track.

Emotionally charged, hostile: *“Isn't your organisation just ignoring the problem?”*

Don't respond with hostility or emotion. Make a quick, clean disclaimer. Restate the issue with less emotional words. If there is some truth to the allegation, admit it, but go on to rephrase the issue in your own terms.

Persistent: *“Then why do you continue to refuse to say...?”*

Politely but firmly signal that you are not going to give in. Repeat your message.

Open-ended, vague: *“Tell me about your organisation?”*

Ask the reporter to clarify the question, to indicate what aspect he or she would like to focus on.

Hypothetical: *“What will your organisation do if you don't come to an agreement?”*

Don't speculate. Label it as speculation: “I would not want to speculate...”

Rumour: *“Other countries are rumoured to...”*

Respond by saying: “It would be inappropriate to respond to rumours, we'll deal with it when it arises.”

Or say: "I have seen no evidence to support such a rumour."

Multipart: *"What impact will this make... and will your organisation be able to continue to...or will your organisation also have to...?"*

You don't have to respond to all the questions at once. Pick the one that is easiest to answer.

Advice: *"What advice would you give to your boss?"*

Don't give advice or recommendations to your boss in public.

Sympathy: *"This must be painful for you, considering all the difficulties you are facing?"*

Don't be lulled into agreeing.

Structure your responses

Envision your response to a question as three short, 30-second steps:

1. INITIAL BRIEF ANSWER – STATE YOUR MESSAGE: Get started by positioning yourself, use a "word picture" to set the theme and deliver a key message. Don't go into detail.

Encourage the reporter to follow up by throwing out a "hook" or lean on your initial statement or keep silent. (A "hook" is a statement that invites the journalist to follow up on your message – such as "we have a new approach" – without elaborating as to what it is.)

In any event, after 30 seconds you should keep silent.

2. ELABORATE – SUPPORT YOUR MESSAGE:

This may include a key fact or statistic, or a short description or other explanation of why you made your initial statement. Envision what will persuade your undecided, "doesn't know" viewer/listener or reader.

Again, after 30 seconds, keep silent.

3. EXPAND FURTHER – ILLUSTRATE YOUR MESSAGE:

Provide additional supporting evidence or use a prepared example or analogy to illustrate and further support your message; or throw in another message and briefly explain it.

30 seconds is, again, all the time you should take.

This way the interview will become a dynamic exchange between you and the reporter. Following this staged pattern will help you to keep in control of the interview, and will make the reporter follow you rather than you trying to keep up with the reporter.

Quick review

Be polite; never lose your temper.

Be helpful, if you don't know the answer, say so and offer to find it out.

Never lie; always tell the truth.

If you cannot tell the truth, don't be evasive; if you cannot give information, say why.

Stick to your area of responsibility.

Answer the reporter's questions, but return to your message track.

If you are not sure of the question, ask the reporter to repeat it.

Stick to the facts; keep your opinions out of it.

Stick to the issue; don't bring up issues or subjects that you don't want to see in the story.

Avoid jargon.

Repeat your messages. Each time you repeat your message you increase your chances of seeing it in the final news story.

Respect the reporter's deadlines; call back when you promised.

Keep track of what was said during the interview and watch closely for the story in print or broadcast; learn from it.