

Getting Ready for the Media Interview

A reporter calls and wants to interview you. There is more to this situation than simply agreeing and waiting for the first question. Making the media interview a positive experience requires preparation.

1. **Who should do the interview?**

Are you the spokesperson on the subject or issue? Does the subject belong to someone else, perhaps a subject matter expert? If so, perhaps that person should be the one interviewed. You took the call, but it does not mean that you are the best one to do the interview.

Let us assume that you have concluded that you are the lucky person who gets the opportunity to be interviewed by a reporter. Unless you have done it numerous times, you are probably thinking that you are not very lucky, but realize that with preparation a successful outcome is a real possibility, even a probability.

2. **Interview the reporter**

Ask questions. What is the story about? How is the reporter coming at it? Is the story the result of a complaint by someone? Maybe they are doing a local follow-up to a national story. It is unlikely the reporter has called you because it is a slow day in the newsroom and they wonder what interesting things your organization is doing, but it does happen. It's important, and valuable, to find out what prompted the reporter's call to you. Find out why they called you. Moreover, who else has the reporter spoken to? This is important for two reasons. You want to know if the call to you was prompted by someone with an axe to grind with your organization. That dynamic is quite different from the reporter doing a benign local follow-up to a national story. The other reason for inquiring about others being interviewed is that you may be able to help the reporter, and yourself, by suggesting other interviews that might make a positive contribution to the story. Finally, it's important to know when the story will be published.

There's a world of difference between a deadline two hours away and a deadline for a feature a week away. In the latter case, you have a greater opportunity to shape the story in a positive way for your organization. However, if the reporter's deadline is the same day you still have an opportunity for good preparation.

3. Identify the Audiences. To whom are you talking?

That's right, you need to consider who you're speaking to. Rather than thinking of "the public" as some amorphous mass of humanity think about groups of people that you want to reach. A useful way to approach this is by finishing the sentence, "I want to reach people who...." Some examples: If you are speaking about an issue involving the environment you might say, "I want to reach people who are concerned about the environment." An Internet Service Provider whose service has been attacked might say, "I want to reach people who are concerned about our ability to protect customer accounts." A government spokesperson speaking about a financial issue might say, "I want to reach people who are concerned about our ability to manage public funds." In each case by identifying people with a specific interest in your issue you can now think about what it is you want to tell them.

4. What is the Message? In other words, what do you want them to know about your issue?

Now that you have identified the people you are speaking to it is much easier to think about what you want them to know. If you have already prepared a communication plan for the issue or event, or if you have one for the organization as a whole, it should be easy to construct the messages that you want to deliver. The easiest way to approach this is to identify what we call W5+H2. That is Who, What, When, Where, Why, How and How much. If you identify the answers to at least three of those seven questions, you will have the substance to keep you on track through the interview.

5. One last thing—prepare for the worst

What is the worst, meanest, nastiest question that you could be asked? Now answer the question in the most straightforward, honest, but positive way that you can.

Follow this process and you will be well on the way to keeping your interview on track.

You will be delivering meaningful information to people who have an interest in your subject.

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