

Tool 2: How to Prepare for Media Interviews

How to Handle Interviews

Before the interview:

- Prepare and practice your message points. Your goal is to control the interview as much as possible and be sure your message points are communicated. Anticipate difficult questions and how you will answer them in a way that brings you back on message.
- Select no more than three key message points you want to communicate to the audience, and focus on getting those points across. Consider stories to share and draft a nine second sound bite.
- Know your interviewer. If possible, review the program on which you are to appear or read articles by the reporter who will interview you. Know the editorial stance of the station or publication.
- Know your audience. Each publication, newspaper, television or radio station has different audiences and needs.

During the interview:

- Establish your authority. Lead the interview—you are the expert. Set the ground rules for the interviews beforehand, including the length of the interview and the range of topics to be covered or questions to be asked.
- Make your messages easy to understand. Avoid using slang, jargon or acronyms. Use the stories and sound bites you've prepared. Speak slowly and deliberately, taking breaths as needed. Give short answers.
- Avoid pitfalls. Do not repeat negative questions or false information. Simply say: "I am not sure if that is the case." If you cannot answer a question, say so, check the facts and get back to the reporter ASAP. Never go "off the record."
- At the end of the interview (off camera and mic), offer to provide backup materials and other sources you may have thought of, and invite them to call if they need more detail.
- Never guess or speculate. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to get back to the reporter with the required information.
- Be relaxed and cordial without being too casual.

After the interview:

- Don't ask to review the story
- Work with the staff to follow up with additional information and answers
- Thank the reporter for their professionalism
- Seek corrections only to fix significant errors
- Expect to be heavily edited

Tips for Being Interviewed by Phone

- Arrange for a quiet room with no interruptions
- Use a landline in a quiet room and use the handset or a headset—don't go on speakerphone
- Smile to enliven your voice
- Stand up to make you alert
- Keep key messages on hand and check them off as you go
- Have water or tea on hand

Tips for Radio Interviews

- Answer in complete sentences—include the question in your answer
- Speak clearly
- Remember the audience can't see your gestures
- Use notes, but don't read or rustle the paper
- Treat a telephone interview as if you were in the studio— don't be distracted

Tips for Television/Cable/Video

- Wear conservative dress, dark colors, no stripes—or clothes appropriate to the story (walking clothes)
- Don't make broad, unnatural gestures
- Don't move around in your chair
- Look at the reporter, not the camera, unless you are told to do otherwise
- Sit comfortably and don't slouch
- Use a conversational tone, short, complete sentences and simple terms
- Stay enthusiastic/lively

Tips for Crisis Communications

- Stay cool
- Stay on message
- Ignore interruptions, finish your thought, and ask the reporter to repeat the question
- Don't get angry or defensive
- Don't be pressured by deadlines
- Never say “no comment”—either answer the question or explain why you can't

What to Wear on Television

The goal is to visually captivate your audience so they'll stay actively engaged and listening to your message. You will want to appear confident, dynamic and professional.

Wardrobe:

If you dress in a way that is traditional to your religion or culture, no one should expect otherwise. And if they do, tell them your wardrobe is not negotiable. Otherwise, follow the guidelines below:

- Wear an outfit appropriate to your organization. Most often that would be business attire. However, if you are talking about walking, you may want to wear walking clothes and shoes. Ask the host what they will be wearing and mirror their clothing style, if that is appropriate for you.
- Know that stripes, plaids and shiny fabrics do not look good under studio lights, and will distract the viewer. Wear dark shoes—white or light colors make feet appear larger.
- Do not wear a light-catching watch or jewelry that makes noise when you move.
- For people with darker skin tones, avoid stark white, black and red. Blue is best, along with forest greens and magentas.

- For people with lighter skin tones, avoid wearing light colors and white. Neutral colors of blue, gray, brown and khaki work best.
- For women, bring a scarf that is the opposite color of what you are wearing, in case your outfit is the same color as the set background. Tie the scarf around your shoulders and it will keep you from disappearing into the set. Men are wearing more scarves these days too—however, wear one only if it's something you would normally add to your look.
- Tip: If possible, keep an extra suit or jacket in your office so you are always ready for an interview. At minimum, tuck a scarf or tie in your desk drawer—to make your everyday clothes look more polished while on camera.

Hair and Makeup:

- If you regularly wear makeup, select natural tones for your skin. Use a neutral face powder, eyeliner, pastel shades of eye shadow, blush applied high on the cheekbones and a matte shade of lipstick.
- Make sure to use a clear, translucent powder to get rid of shine—and that goes for everyone, whether you wear makeup every day or not.
- Be sure to have a clean-shaved or well-groomed look with neat hair.
- Bring a small kit of items such as powder, hairspray, a comb, etc.
- Ask the crew if your appearance is okay. They may suggest adjusting your hair or smoothing your clothes.