



MEDIA TRAINING MANUAL

Thinking Through Your Media Strategy

Media Relations Basics

- **Goals of media coverage/good media relations:**
 - Raising awareness/ public education
 - Selling products
 - Changing behavior
 - Protecting your organization in times of crisis
- **Media are in business to make money.**

To do this, they must fulfill several needs:

 - generate content which will attract large audiences
 - make the complex understandable to the audience
 - get stories first and meet deadlines.
- **Whether you are dealing with a crisis, promoting a product or trying to change behavior, your goal is to influence people about what is most important to you.**

To do this, you must first help the media meet its needs by:

 - packaging the story in a way that hooks the media
 - making your story relevant and meaningful to the audience
 - providing a timely response.
- **Good media relations means establishing credibility.**

Standard tenets of media relations emphasize establishing trust and credibility with the media by communicating in good times and bad; consistently providing truthful, timely, up-front messages; being responsive to media inquiries; and serving as a resource for information about your industry. However, these tenets are not always applicable. It is important to keep in mind that; you *do not* work for the media and *are not* obligated to participate.
- **An interview is an opportunity to deliver a story to an audience.** It is not an intellectual exercise, a debate, an argument, an educational exchange or a friendly chat.
- **New values and practices** define how reporters define and cover news. News values include significance and proximity to the audience, novelty, human interest, and impact on history. In television, news values include a preference for visual stories and simple rather than complex stories.
- **The reporter's advantages:** Control over content, editing and story placement.
- **Your advantages:** The media needs you. You know more about your organization and the situation than your interviewer.

An Interviewee's Rights

Knowing your rights as a media spokesperson can help you feel less intimidated by the media.

- You have the right to decline an interview request.
- You have a right to know the nature of the reporter's inquiry.
- You have a right to thinking time. If a reporter calls with a question, you are under no obligation to answer immediately. Determine the reporter's deadline and get back to him.
- You have the right to tape record an interview.
- You have the right to request the presence of public relations or other counsel.
- You have the right to defer a question to a more appropriate person.
- You have the right to refuse comment about irrelevant or hypothetical issues, pending litigation or matters that would violate employee privacy.
- You have the right to stop an interview.
- You have a right to ask for a correction if the reporter seriously misrepresents the facts.

You do *NOT* have the right to preview the reporter's copy.

Responsibilities vs. Realities

When an interview is arranged, both you and the reporter have responsibilities to your employers.

Professional standards say...

- **A reporter's responsibilities are:**
 - Gather, cover or get a story
 - Report the story accurately
 - Report the story in a balanced way
- **Your responsibilities (If you agree to an interview):**
 - Serve as an advocate for your organization
 - Speak knowledgeably
 - Speak truthfully

Reality says...

Reporters may not have adequate time to research a story thoroughly. Reporters may let their own biases affect their reporting. And both you and the reporter may feel pressures from employers that conflict with these responsibilities. For instance, the reporter may feel pressure to sensationalize a story or exaggerate an expose'. You may feel pressure to delay or speak less openly than you would like about a topic.

Being aware of these realities and balancing responsibilities to your employer, the public and yourself is part of the challenge for media spokespersons.

Preparing for the Interview

Doing Your Homework

You would expect a reporter to do his or her homework before interviewing you. The reporter should know something about you, your organization and the industry. It is also appropriate for you to prepare for the interview.

- **Ask for information from the reporter.** The first step in preparing for an interview is being fully informed about what the reporter wants. When you receive a request for a media interview (or your PR staff secures one), your PR staff should provide the information.
- **Brief yourself.** You may need to do some research to gather facts or "ammunition" that supports your organization's position. Who are allies who also support your position? You should be equally familiar with opposing perspectives.
- **Get your hands on sample copies of the medium.** Familiarize yourself with the publication's or program's:
 - formats - length, depth
 - kinds of issues covered by this reporter
 - knowledge of interviewer on your topic
 - biases - liberal, conservative
 - interviewer's style (if broadcast) - friendly or adversarial
- **Consider the audience.** Who are they, in terms of demographics, lifestyles and values? How much do they know about the issues? What do they perceive about your organization? What do you share in common? What are their primary concerns?
- **Gather materials the reporter may find helpful.** Background information might include a fact sheet, biography, brochure, annual report, news clippings or position papers.

What to Expect: Print Interviews

The risks: Because readers can't see or hear you, your points may not come across in the writer's article. Because you have little control over content, some experts consider the print interview the riskiest type of interview.

The opportunities: Print is often the crucial medium for reaching opinion leaders. In every industry, there are business and trade press publications which are considered the "bibles" of these sectors. You need to be represented positively in them. Print articles can provide depth, context and more opportunity for quotes than are allowed by broadcast formats.

The process:

- **Phone interviews.** Because reporters are always under deadline, many print interviews, especially those seeking a quick quote, response or general information are conducted over the phone. Keep a tape recorder near your phone and tape record the interview.
- **In-person interviews.** The more important the story, and the more critical your perspective is to the story, the more likely reporters are to come to your turf for the interview. Use this as an opportunity to build a relationship - give them a tour, introduce them to appropriate others.
- **Have background materials ready.** Reporters may be unfamiliar with your field. Unless you know otherwise, assume the reporter knows nothing about your business or issue. Be ready to go back to square one to explain things and provide materials the reporter can take back to the newsroom.
- **Use tape recorders.** It is common for reporters to use tape recorders as well as take written notes during the interview. You should welcome this, as it increases the chances of being quoted correctly. In addition, you should tape the interview as well, as a protection against possible misquotes or quotes taken out of context.
- **Use notes.** The reporter will have notes; it is perfectly acceptable for you to use notes also. Unlike a television interview, no one will see you referring to them. Write down key messages, statistics or other information you want to be sure to get across.
- **Expect to be edited.** Interview subjects may become frustrated when a lengthy interview results in only a single quote or comment being used in the article. Keep in mind that some stories are developed over a period of time after talking with scores of experts. Space limitations and the desire for a variety of perspectives may limit your exposure.
- **Don't expect to be the sole focus of the article.** In order to get an interview; reporters may give you the idea that your organization is the focus of the story, when in fact it may be only one of several organizations profiled. Avoid raising expectations by trumpeting news that a major story on the company is coming. In other words, "Don't count your chickens..."

- **Expect your adversaries to be quoted.** In looking for balance, the reporter may seek out the opinions of those who disagree with you. Anticipate their arguments and get across messages to deflate them.
- **You don't have to go it alone.** If you feel intimidated by the interviewing scenario, suggest that another appropriate person join you in the interview. This gives both spokespeople thinking time," while the other is talking and you can jump in and help each other respond to questions.

What to Expect: Broadcast Interviews

Risks: Delivery flaws can detract from your message. Any mistake will be a very public one.

Opportunities: Your charisma and concern can work for you, so choosing a dynamic spokesperson is critical. Because the audience can hear your voice or see your face, you address the audience on a personal basis and have more control over the message. Radio and television are the best channels for reaching a mass audience.

- **Watch or listen to the program.** One of the best ways to know what to expect is to listen to the interviewer in action. Is their style friendly, objective or adversarial? Are they knowledgeable about your issue? Do they demonstrate any biases?

Radio interviews

Radio interviews may be taped and edited in the studio or broadcast live. Radio journalists often conduct interviews over the phone. Big events and news stories may be covered by live remote.

- Your voice is your most important tool. Begin with high energy and a strong first statement.
- Be conversational and upbeat.
- Beware of radio talk show hosts who tend to ridicule those who disagree with their positions.
- Notes may be used for radio interviews, since listeners can't see you.

Television

- **The television studio.** A television studio can be an intimidating environment. The bright lights and commotion caused by equipment and technicians moving around and even seeing yourself on a monitor can be distracting. Anticipate this and don't let the environment unnerve you. If possible, take a tour of a local studio before your interview.
- **Taped interviews.** In a taped interview, your responses will be cut apart in the editing room later and only portions of your answers will be selected for use. From a typical 10-minute interview, less than a minute (or three 20-second sound bites) are used in the final story.
 - **Advantages:** Because the tape will be edited, you have the luxury of pausing before you deliver your answer. The editor will never use this dead air, but it gives you a moment to formulate an effective response.
- **Live interviews.** The live interview may be the most nerve-wracking, but it also gives you the most control - your words can't be edited; nothing can be deleted. Concentrate on the host or interviewer, and focus on getting your key messages out.

- **The television talk show.**

- **Soft news talk shows.** Audiences watch soft-news talk shows because they like the hosts. Interviews are often friendly and chatty, with the first question being, "tell me about the program, your work, your book, etc." These shows present a good opportunity for getting your positive message across. Avoid arguing - the audience will sense hostility.

Expect to have a warm-up "pre-interview" with production staff before you go on the air. The pre-interview establishes what is expected of you, the direction the interviewer intends to take, and how much time you will be allotted on air.

- **Current event talk shows.** Often current event talk shows feature a debate among a panel of guests with opposing viewpoints. Even if hosts aren't adversarial, the other guests may be. Getting your point across requires having pointed concise messages and aggressively working them in.

"In most of the stories television cares to cover, there is always "the right bite," the most violent, the most bloody, the most pathetic, the most tragic, the most wonderful, the most awful moment. Getting the effective "bite" is what television is all about."

Robert McNeil, *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*

Developing Key Messages

The most critical step in preparing for an interview is developing your message. You must go into the interview knowing exactly what you must get across to the audience.

For every interview, have three points in mind that you want to be sure to get across. These are your key messages. Write them down and have them in front of you. For television interviews, where notes are not possible, commit them to memory.

Key messages should be:

- **Few** - No more than three for most interviews. Don't overload your story - go in with a concise, coherent set of messages. Most audiences won't remember more than three points about any topic, so don't overwhelm them. Better to give them three points they'll remember than many points which they won't remember at all.
- **Brief** - Even for print interviews, think in terms of "sound bites." A key message should be no longer than one sentence.
 - "Our product is safe."
 - "Our service is the most state-of-the-art available."
 - "We have never, and will never, tolerate racial discrimination."

If you can't fit it on the back of a business card, it's too long.

- **Memorable** - We remember language that paints a picture or takes a strong stand. Use active verbs and colorful, emotionally charged language.
 - "Read my lips: no new taxes."
 - "Service and value are the twin engines that drive our business."
- **Tailored to the audience.** Key messages might be different for a television or radio program reaching a general audience than for a business publication reaching investors and executives. Consider what each audience needs to hear.

Messages To Build Credibility

Making your key messages believable is critical to your success in the interview. Key messages can sound like empty promises if they are not backed up by supporting evidence. How will you back up each key message?

- **Establish your organization's credentials.** Track records, industry leadership, community service.
- **Demonstrate your shared concerns.** Establish common ground between the organization and the audience. How are your priorities similar?
- **Facts.** Evidence about what you've done, why it's best, how you know.
- **Statistics.** Numbers can be persuasive. Bring statistics home to the local level - say one out of three Georgians instead of 11 million Americans. Interpret data for the reporter - don't expect him to decipher numerical data accurately.
- **Endorsements.** Support for your position from authorities, experts, citizen groups and other coalitions that support you.
- **Analogies or comparisons.** Put the issue into perspective.
 - "The difference between cellular service and digital service is like the difference between adding machines and supercomputers."
 - "The proposed space mission is the next "giant leap" for us all. To be witness to such a voyage is like being there when the first fish crawled out on land."
- **Personal experiences or anecdotes.** These "humanize" the spokesperson as "one of us." Look for examples the general public can relate to:

"I know when I go to the grocery store, I look at the labels and want to know what's in my food. My children eat these products. We don't expect any less from our customers."
- **Emphatic, dynamic delivery.** Convey with your voice and body language that you believe in what you're saying.

Why Prepare?

"Words are like birds. Once you let go of them, you can't get them back."

Rehearsal

Never wing a planned interview! Rehearsal is critical to building your confidence and ensuring that you can work your key messages in smoothly.

- **Practice out loud** - Not just "in your head."
- **Enlist a colleague to role-play as the interviewer.** Share your written list of most-likely-to-be-asked questions and the ones you'd least like to be asked. Instruct the interviewer to:
 - Ask tough questions
 - Digress to matters that aren't your key concerns
 - Ask observers to critique your performance. Can they identify your key messages without knowing them in advance? Do you offer enough support for your points?
- **Practice getting in your points.** Practice "bridging" from a topic you don't want to talk about to one of your key points.
- **Don't stop if you make mistakes.** If you misspeak, calmly repeat your statement as you'd like to have it recorded.

In addition, if this is a television interview:

- **Practice shortening your responses.**
- **Practice getting in memorable "sound bites."**
- **Videotape the rehearsal.** What's the overall image you present? Are you animated and emphatic? Do you appear nervous? Do you sound conversational?

Making the Most of the Interview

You've researched the media, the audience and the issue; you've developed key messages; you've rehearsed and role-played. Now it's time to meet the press.

Calming your nerves

- Recognize that nervousness is normal.
- Channel your adrenaline into a more energetic delivery.
- Use travel time to the interview to practice main points out loud.
- Arrive early and get a feel for the surroundings.
- Try clenching your hands or toes as tightly as you can for a full ten seconds, then releasing.
- Bring a "friendly face" to studio interviews and make eye contact with that person.

Meeting the interviewer

- **Shake hands and smile**, even if you know the interview will be adversarial. Project an image of confidence.
- **Use the interviewer's first name**, even if they are calling you "Mr." or "Ms." Calling a reporter, "Ms. Walters" or "Mr. Rather," may come off as defensive, sarcastic or put you in a subordinate position.
- **The moment you meet the reporter, you're "on."** Off the cuff statements made in the elevator or on the way to lunch may turn up in a story. **There is no such thing as "off the record."**

Listening to the question

Listen carefully for the reporter's intent. If you misinterpret the question, your answer may seem confusing or evasive. If you are unsure of the question, rephrase it before answering.

Delivering Your Message

- **Be ready with a strong opening statement.** Many times, the reporter will begin with an "easy" question. This is your best opportunity to get your point across in a dynamic way. Some options:
 - **Connect with the audience:** relate a common experience the audience can identify with.
 - **A firm stand:** a strong statement that leaves no doubt what your position is; or a challenge to opponents.
 - **Amusing or interesting analogy:** to put the topic in perspective.
- **Avoid jargon.** Speak in language the typical listener or reader will understand.
- **Speak in a loud, clear voice.**
- **Restate key messages.** Repetition of your main points will ensure the audience remembers them. Restate them in slightly different ways to avoid sounding redundant.
- **"Flag" main points** that you most want to see in print or on the air. Flags prioritize for the audience what you consider to be most important.

Message flags:

"Let me make this perfectly clear."

"The most critical aspect of this is..."

"What people need to remember is..."

"The key idea is..."

"The most exciting part is..."

"Don't forget that..."

- **Gesture naturally.**
- **Look for feedback from the interviewer.** Nodding and eye contact mean, "continue, what you're saying, I'm interested." This is a place to insert supporting statements and examples. Raised eyebrows and quizzical looks suggest you may have used jargon or said something that needs explanation.

Television interviews:

Let your body language work for you.

- **Keep energy level high** - don't look bored. Your gestures and facial expression should be animated.
- **Sit erect, leaning forward slightly.** This projects alertness and control.
- **Look the interviewer in the eye.** Speak to the interviewer, not the camera.
- **Avoid distracting movements.** Swiveling in your chair, tapping your feet, toying with pencils or other objects, stuffing your hands rigidly in your pockets or behind your back, and tightly clasping your hands give a nervous and defensive appearance.
- **Avoid sudden movements.** They may take you out of camera range.
- **Stay poised until you're sure the taping is over.** After the interview is complete, you may remain on the air for a few minutes, such as when end-of-show credits are superimposed over the picture. Many novice guests have breathed a sigh of relief, flopped back in the chair and said "I'm glad that's over," only to learn that the "ON AIR" light was still on.

Strategies for Difficult Questions

Difficult questions

- **Hypothetical questions.** "What if?" questions ask you to speculate about the future or possible events. Refuse to answer them.
Response: "I can't speculate any better than the next person about hypotheticals - let me tell you what actually happened in a related instance."
- **Putting words in your mouth.** "Would you say that...?" or "would you agree that...?" questions are often loaded questions. You run the risk of having the reporter's language attributed to you. If a question contains negative language or words you don't like, don't repeat them.
Response: "No, let me put it this way..."
- **Direct question.** Very direct questions deserve direct answers. Answer the question, then bridge to a key message.
Reporter: "How many jobs will be lost in the merger?"
Response: About 300, but we are doing everything we can to soften the blow..."
- **Questions you didn't anticipate.** Know how to stall for time. Even a few seconds can help you gather your thoughts.
 - Pause for a moment before answering.
 - Comment on the question. "That's an interesting question. I'm glad you asked it because there are a lot of misperceptions about..."
 - Restate the question. "Let me make sure I understand. You're asking me how we came to discover the employee fraud."
- **Questions you don't want to answer.** The question may be irrelevant, or answering truthfully may be damaging to the organization.
 - Bridge to what you really want to talk about. "That's a complex issue that we'd need a whole panel of experts to untangle - what I think the people really want to know is..."

If the question delves into proprietary information, say, "I would like to answer that, but it would be too helpful to our competitors."

If the question is too personal, try broadening it: "How do you balance career and family?"

Response: "That question illustrates the growing awareness of the challenges facing working women..."

Interviewer Techniques and Traps

- **Machine gunning** - rapidly firing a series of questions at you.

Trap: Trying to answer all the questions.

Technique: Choose the question that you want to answer.

Example: "Well let me start with the issue of..." Why don't I put some of this in perspective for you.

- **Interrupting** - Never letting you finish a thought, cutting you off mid-sentence.

Trap: You acquiesce and you never are able to get your point across.

Technique: Politely continue your statement

Example: Smile and say, "I'll be happy to get to that, but as I was saying..."

Hint: Ask yourself if your answers have been too long or too technical. Does the reporter have a reason to be interrupting?

- **Dart throwing** - A hostile attack on you, your company, or its products.

Trap: You react angrily and repeat negative language, missing an opportunity to deliver a positive message point.

Technique: Remain calm, pause before you respond, ignore the attack and bridge to a message point.

Example: Reporter: "Your company's signage is a blight on the community. Are you too money-hungry to be sensitive to the community?"

Response: "We are evaluating our current signage. The important thing is, we have always listened to our customers and this is just another example of it.

If you feel the dart-thrower is totally off base, politely object to the characterization.

Example: "I think that's an unfair generalization."
"Can you tell me where you got that information - it's news to me."
"That's an unfounded accusation that's nothing more than a rumor."

- **The dumb-dumb.** This interviewer hasn't done his or her homework and doesn't seem to know what to ask.

Trap: You only respond to the reporter's questions and don't get your important points in.

Technique: Bridge to important points.

Example: "I think your audience might be interested in knowing..."
"That's true, but you know, the critical thing is..."

- **The broken record.** A reporter may ask you the same question several times in different ways. This is an attempt to get just the right sound bite. Perhaps you have not explained your position clearly or concisely.

Trap: You continue to respond in the same way, failing to give the reporter something he or she can use.

Technique: Continue to get your key message in, but try restating it in different ways.

- **Needling.** A reporter won't take your response for an answer and challenges your response.

Trap: You cave in and say in effect, "no not really," losing all credibility.

Technique: Stick to your guns.

Example: Reporter: "Come on now. Do you really expect the public to buy that?"

Response: "Absolutely, John." (Then back up your point)

Controlling the Interview

- **Recognize openings where your messages fit.** When the reporter pauses, when the reporter doesn't show any sign of interrupting, when the reporter nods, continue to expand on your points. Look for links in content that will allow you to bridge, or segue, from one point to the next.
- **Bridge to your key points.** Bridging shifts the focus of discussion from one aspect of the issue to another. It involves dealing with the question briefly and honestly, then promptly following that response with your message.

Examples of Bridging

"Yes, (the answer), but in addition to that...(your message)."

"No, (the answer), let me explain...(your key message)."

"I don't know about that, but what I can tell you is..."

"That's the way it used to be, here's what we do now."

"That's an interesting question, it reminds me of..."

"Let me put that in perspective..."

"What's important to remember..."

"What's most important is..."

"But don't forget..."

"Before we get off that subject, let me add..."

"What this means is..."

"While that is certainly important, don't forget that..."

"As I said..."

"Yes, but I think what's really important to consumers is..."

- **Turn negatives into positives.** Shift the focus from a negative to a positive aspect. For example:

Reporter: "Mr. Smith, your earnings report was below expectations. Is this the beginning of a trend?"

Response: "No...and that's not what's important here. What is important is that we are on schedule to be fully operational by January 1st, and as anyone in our industry can tell you, that's going to create a temporary blip in cash flow...that also ensures a very bright future financially."

- **Stay on track.** If the reporter keeps digressing to an area you don't want to discuss, continue to bridge to those topics that are important to you.
- **Repeat important messages.** Repetition is the key to retention. Restate your main points and back them up.

- **Don't mistake the reporter for the audience.** The reporter is simply the conduit to for delivering your message to the audience. Speak to them.
- **Keep your cool.** Reporters are sometimes deliberately argumentative to elicit a response. You may disagree with the reporter, but do not lose your cool, particularly on television. The tougher the question, the shorter the answer and the calmer your demeanor.
- **End the interview on a positive note.** A call to action, an upbeat forecast for the future, a restatement of your thesis, or a summary of your main points are desirable endings.

"To build may have to be the slow and laboring task of years.
To destroy can be the thoughtless act of a single day."
- Winston Churchill



Interviewing No-Nos

- **Never lie to a reporter.** Your credibility is a priceless asset. Don't take the risk.
- **Never speak off the record.** Remember Connie Chung and Newt Gingrich's mother.
- **Avoid being identified as an "anonymous source."** People can usually figure out who you are.
- **Never use the phrase "no comment."** There are other ways to say that you aren't at liberty to speak on an issue. Always give a valid reason for not speaking, for instance, "a legal case is pending," or "that information is of a proprietary nature."
- **Never lose your temper.**
- **Do NOT mention how much your organization advertises in the reporter's medium.**
- **Do NOT tell broadcast reporters you think 20 or 30 seconds is too short of a time to adequately tell your story.**
- **Do NOT tell a reporter you will provide information only if they submit questions in writing and you can respond in writing.** They will assume you have something to hide if you won't speak face to face.
- **Do NOT request that the reporter mail you a clipping or video unless the medium is unavailable in your area.**