



MOVING THE MESSAGE

A Guide to Being an Effective Spokesperson

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About this handbook

Public relations and media work is a critical part of any campaign. Elected officials often perceive newspaper editorials as an indicator of public opinion, potential funders are often impressed by organizations that “make the news,” and news coverage informs the public and can garner public support for our issue. Because of this, effective media relations can often make the difference in the success or failure of a campaign.

Although professional public relations staff can be very effective at moving your message, the best media campaigns feature ‘real people’ as their spokesmen. However, a little skills training and practice are necessary to effectively ‘move the message.’

The following pages offer practical tips for dealing with the media – from responding to questions and handling a “crisis” to proper television appearance and interview techniques. This Handbook does not address how to plan a media campaign or pitch stories to the media, but rather it focuses on how to be an effective spokesperson for your issue in the context of a campaign.

Whether your encounter with the media takes the form of an editorial board meeting, a talk show appearance or a telephone interview, this guide will provide you with the knowledge and confidence to help you get your message across accurately.

This handbook does not discuss how to craft a media campaign, but assumes the user is working within an established campaign with specific goals and media messages.

Table of Contents

<i>About this handbook</i>	0
<i>Understanding the Media</i>	3
Television and Radio	3
Newspapers.....	4
<i>Rules for Dealing with the Media</i>	4
Before the Interview.....	4
During the Interview.....	7
After the Interview	10
<i>Interview Techniques</i>	11
Radio Interview Techniques	11
The Telephone Interview	11
Television Interview Techniques	11
Your Appearance and Delivery.....	12
More Tips for Camera interviews.....	13

Understanding the Media

To start, don't view reporters as "the enemy." See them as "message carriers" who can help you convey information to the public by way of radio, television or newspapers. The way in which your message arrives depends in large part on your clarity, candor, brevity and preparation when speaking with the media.

Remember that the job of a reporter is simply to report the news. Reporters are responsible for gathering facts, soliciting comments from all sides and relaying this information to their audiences as accurately and objectively as possible.

Reporters, especially print reporters, are trained to be adversarial – to challenge and confront their sources to ensure that the information they are receiving is, in fact, true. So don't be intimidated when a reporters push you, they are only doing their job.

Despite what some people in business and politics believe, the vast majority of "bad" or inaccurate stories are not the result of a reporter with an ax to grind. Instead, bad stories typically result when a reporter does not fully understand the subject, does not have access to all the information needed for a balanced story or is ignorant of the facts. This means that the best way to prevent bad press is to be a teacher and help reporters understand the issue. Toward this end, your comments when speaking with the media must be clear, concise, credible, instructive - and quotable.

You must be sensitive to the fact that reporters generally work against strict deadlines. If you aren't responsive and accessible when a reporter calls, you're taking a chance that the reporter will be forced to write his or her story without your input. This robs you of the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions the reporter has about your subject, or to make sure your side of the story is included in his or her report.

Also, remember that the media is a business that operates on basic profit-and-loss principles. Radio and television stations sell commercial time. Newspapers sell advertising space. Even public radio and television stations, which exist on corporate and government grants and private contributions, must operate as a business or they will not operate for long. This means that in order for your issue to be reported, it must be framed in such a way that the audience of your target media outlet will be interested in it. Otherwise, the media outlet will have no interest in your story.

Television and Radio

Since television and radio stations sell air time, every program is planned right down to the second. Electronic media programmers live by the stopwatch. This means that a television crew taping an interview at your office or campaign headquarters may spend an hour – usually less – conducting the interview. But what you typically see on the evening news is a ten-second clip, which may or may not be a fair depiction of what you were trying to say and the messages you were trying to get across.

A typical 30-minute local television newscast contains about as much written copy as one column in the Wall Street Journal. That 30-minute newscast is about 22 minutes of news, weather and sports, after time is allotted for commercials. So unless your main points are clearly stated throughout your interview, they may be missed. Your main points may also be lost if you try to qualify your answers with too many conditions, if you use too many examples or statistics, or if you lapse into technical or “insider” jargon. Your job is to convert complex information into terms and anecdotes that the general public can easily understand and to which they can readily relate.

What television reporters want, and what serves you best, is a brief, clear and concise statement that communicates your position in less than 20 seconds. Remember, the average “sound bite” today is about ten seconds or 25 words - so brevity and clarity are essential to a successful interview.

The same is true for radio interviews, where ten-second “sound bites” are the preferred length. A common practice in radio is to tape an entire interview over the telephone, extract one or two ten-second excerpts from the tape and write a brief story about the topic. Your quotes, in the words of one veteran radio news director, will be “icing on the cake,” with the thrust of the story being written and read on the air by the reporter who conducted the interview.

Newspapers

The news of the day is the last thing to be inserted into a newspaper. The paid advertisements are first, followed by the standing features, columns and departments. The space left over is called the “news hole.” Late-breaking developments from around the world change the shape of the news hole very quickly. As a result, your story could be incorporated into a larger story, edited down to a few short sentences or be “spiked” or cut altogether – it all depends on what else is going on that day.

To minimize the risk that your story or comments could be lost, use the same brevity that you use when talking with the electronic media. Likewise, make sure your story is relevant, timely and genuinely newsworthy. In other words, consider what is noteworthy about your issue: is it the first time something happened, have you discovered a new trend, does your news impact an upcoming political decision, or is your story one of human interest? Avoid rehashing a story that has already been reported on unless you have a new twist or something to add to it.

Rules for Dealing with the Media

Before the Interview

Be prepared. Find out what the reporter wants to talk about before your interview. Most will give you a general idea, but be prepared for surprise questions. If needed, provide the reporter with any relevant background information before you meet. If possible, learn

about the reporter's past work so you have a better understanding of his or her techniques and perspective.

Anticipate questions. Know what questions are likely to be asked, prepare your responses and thoroughly rehearse your answers.

Limit your messages. Generally, limit yourself to no more than three key message points. The more information you try to relay during an interview, the more likely you'll confuse the reporter or your audience. By limiting your messages, you'll make sure that your key points are included in the story. If you have too many messages, your most important points could be lost.

Memorize message points and key soundbites. You don't want to script every answer to potential questions, so focus your preparation on remembering key points that can be articulated in a variety of ways. The goal is for the reporter to truly understand the issue. However, you want your printed quote to be memorable to those who hear or read it. The most effective speakers do this with preconceived soundbites. Soundbites are catchy phrases that people will remember. The idea is to explain your issue in detail to the reporter so that she understands it, but have your soundbite be the clip played on the air. See boxed text below for more on soundbites. If your soundbite is a good one, the reporter is sure to use it.

More on soundbites

A Soundbite is a short pithy, attention-getting quote that communicates the gist of your message. Most TV and radio broadcast “bites” last 8 to 10 seconds. In print, you will probably get one quote that fills up one short paragraph, maybe two if you’re lucky. The best bites contain action words, puns, or verbal twists-even a touch of humor. Do not attempt to explain everything in your bite; that is a sound banquet that will be edited down to just one quick quote.

Some good examples of soundbites:

“The arts are the R and D for culture.” (Peter Coyote speaking on behalf of an arts foundation NPR Morning edition, December 12, 2003).

“They say Wall Street is whizzing, that stocks are up and the economy is good. It’s whizzing all right, on you and me and other Americans that are working harder than ever for less and less.” (Jim Hightower, Radio commentator and author)

“You don’t have to be straight to be in the military, you just have to shoot straight.” (Barry Goldwater speaking in support of ending the ban on gays in the military)

“We want to be shareholders, not sharecroppers.” (Rev. Jesse Jackson, launching a new campaign to place minorities in positions of power in corporations.

“It’s about time western science caught up to traditional ecological knowledge.” (Leaf Hillman on the discovery of a ‘Spring Run’ gene in Chinook salmon.)

Avoid “no comment.” While there may be limited instances in which you have nothing to say to the media, but be very careful. “No comment” to most people is synonymous with “guilty as charged” – it sounds like you’re hiding or afraid. Before granting an interview, decide what you can and cannot say. Tell a reporter matter-of-factly when you can’t release information – but reassure him or her that you’ll provide this information when it is available for public knowledge. Some information is obviously proprietary, but it helps if you can describe why you must withhold certain details.

Be sympathetic to deadlines. Reporters work on tight schedules, so always try to accommodate them. Ask when they need information from you and always follow through. If you can’t grant an interview, be sure to explain why. Being unavailable implies that you are hiding something.

If you fail to return a reporter’s phone call, if you stall or postpone interviews, or if you ignore requests for information, you may kill your side of what normally would be a balanced, two-sided story.

At the same time, be sure you have time to prepare and rehearse before granting an interview. Don't be pushed into an interview without being prepared.

Watch out for "exclusives." Avoid granting exclusive interviews or special articles. If you do grant an exclusive interview, don't give the same information to other stations or publications. If a reporter develops a story and comes to you for information, respect his or her rights to that story.

If in doubt, ask yourself if the story or article is newsworthy enough so that everyone would cover it. If so, don't grant an exclusive.

If two reporters seek the same information from you, tell each that the other is working on the story. This should prevent conflict and keep you from being caught in the middle.

Establish and understand the ground rules before your interview. If you agree to speak "on the record," everything you say in the interview may be quoted and attributed to you. If you speak "not for attribution," you may be quoted, but the quote won't be attributed to you by name or title. If you speak "off the record" or "on background," the reporter will use your information without linking it to you with quotes or attribution.

On the record or off?

When talking to reporters assume everything you say is "on the record." This means anything you say could appear in quotes and be attributed to you. In other words, reporters never ask "can I quote you on that?" in real life the way they do on TV. If you want to provide information without being directly quoted, it is customary to answer a question with, "off the record I can say..." This means your quote may be used, but it will not be attributed to you. Instead, you may see something like "one citizen who asked not to be identified said..." Finally, you may offer to provide some background on the issue, but you don't feel the information should be quoted. Usually you would do this only with reporters you have a good working relationship with.

Unless you know for certain whether a particular reporter can be trusted, it's always best to assume you're speaking "on the record."

Prepare a "Press Packet." A great way to make sure that a reporter has all the relevant information in hand and has accurate quotes from you is to provide a press packet. In the packet, which is typically a folder with inside pockets, include any relevant background information in the form of a fact sheet, your contact information, contact information for other relevant spokespeople, and quotes from you in the form of a press release. Typically, staff will provide you with materials for a press packet.

During the Interview

Never lie. You may get away with it for a while, but sooner or later, you'll be caught.

Be careful what you say. As a general rule, never tell a reporter anything you wouldn't want to see reported on the evening news or printed on the front page of your local newspaper. Remember, if you tell a reporter something that is newsworthy, his or her job is to report it.

Remember that a media interview is not a conversation. Be on guard and keep focused throughout your interview. Don't let a reporter lull you into a false sense of security. Reporters talk to you because they want a story, not because they want to be your friend.

Be a "teacher" – help the reporter understand your topic. By helping a reporter understand your issue, you'll dramatically reduce the chances of a bad or inaccurate story. This will enhance the chances that the reporter will seek you out on future stories as well.

Make absolutely sure you understand a reporter's question before responding. If you're unsure about what a reporter is asking, don't be afraid to say so, and then ask him or her to repeat or rephrase the question.

If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Don't try to bluff your way through an interview; you could end up looking like a fool or a liar. There's nothing wrong with telling a reporter that you don't know the answer to a question – or that you'll get back to him or her later with the desired information. If you tell a reporter you'll get back to him or her, ask when their deadline is and make sure you meet it.

Keep your answers short and to the point. Remember, the typical TV or radio sound bite is about ten seconds or 25 words, so pack your messages into short, colorful and memorable quotes. The more you ramble, the greater the chance that your message will be lost or diluted. And be specific, not vague - otherwise, it will sound like you're avoiding the question. See the section on "Before the Interview" for tips on how to prepare your answers.

Personalize your story. If the issue directly affects you, include this in your message. If the issue is loss of jobs due to decrease in fish populations, say so: "As an unemployed commercial fishermen..." Other examples include: "As a member of a tribe dependent on a healthy fishery..." "As a recreational rafter..." "As a mother concerned about water quality..." etc.

Be clear and concise. If a reporter rephrases your comment inaccurately or tries to "put words in your mouth," quickly respond with a clear, concise statement of exactly what you mean. Don't accept unfamiliar facts or figures. You can start your response with: "I'm not familiar with that, however, I would like to respond to your main question..."

If you know that the facts or figures are correct, don't pretend to be ignorant. If the facts or figures are wrong, correct them immediately.

Repeat your key messages throughout the interview. If you stick only to your key message points, the reporter will have no choice but to include them in his or her story. Don't just answer the reporter's questions, use them as a bridge to the points you want to cover. To get back to the story you want to tell, use transitions like "that's a good question, but remember ...," "before we move on, I just want to add..." or "I can't stress enough the importance of ..."

Keep control of the interview. Even though you're not the one asking the questions, your answers can help lead the reporter back to the main points you want to make. You may want to think of it as gracefully answering the question you were supposed to be asked instead of the question you were asked. For more on this refer to the personal example boxed text below.

Personal example

I was working with a local citizens group to organize a protest against a USDA sponsored biotech conference. The protests were held to highlight the dangers of industrial agriculture and genetically engineered foods. The press was very interested in stories about all the "anarchists" that were allegedly coming to "burn down the city." We did not want the story to be about anarchists, but about the issues of industrial agriculture and genetically engineered foods. During an interview a local radio reporter repeatedly asked if we had told the anarchists "not to come." I answered at least three times during the interview that "we hoped everyone concerned with the way their food is grown would come and protest." After the interview, when the microphones were turned off, I explained to the reporter that I didn't know who the anarchists were nor did I think they were the real issue. That evening the quote I repeated three times was the soundbite used on his report.

Don't use a reporter's negative word or phrase as part of your answer. Always restate a negative or hostile question in positive terms when you respond. For example, if a reporter asks you if by stopping suction dredge mining on the Salmon River you are taking away people's property rights?" don't respond by saying "We aren't taking away property rights." Instead, say "We are protecting the cold-water refuges for salmon while allowing miners to continue mining using techniques other than suction dredging."

Use hostile questions as a bridge to areas you want to discuss. Always keep returning to your key message points during an interview. And state them as positively and persuasively as possible. You can also diffuse hostile questions by saying something like "It may seem that way, but let me tell you how it looks from my perspective..."

Remember Mark Twain's advice: "Never get into an argument with people who buy their ink by the barrel." Don't be afraid to set the record straight or challenge a reporter's wrong assumptions. But remember that you can disagree without becoming disagreeable. State your case calmly and reasonably. Be firm, not combative. And never lose your temper.

Use common words, not insider jargon. To help reporters and their audience understand your story, speak in their language, not yours. Using terms like acre-feet, c.f.s., riparian, and anadromous will lose most audiences in a hurry. Instead, refer to 1,000 acre-feet as “enough water to flood 1,000 football fields a foot under water” or riparian habitat as “the plants and animals that live along rivers.”

Use statistics sparingly. If a dramatic statistic will help illustrate your point, use it. But don't swamp a reporter and the audience in a sea of numbers – you'll only confuse them. Use stories, anecdotes and your personal experiences to help explain your point – they're more memorable than most statistics.

Don't try to limit a reporter's questions. One oil company executive once agreed to a network interview only on the condition that he not be asked to comment on allegations that his Houston refinery was polluting the ship canal to Galveston Bay. Once he was on camera, with his refinery puffing away in the background, the first question the reporter asked was: “Why didn't you want us to ask you about your refinery's impact on the ship canal?” (From “The Executive's Guide to Handling a Press Interview,” Martin, page 15)

Feel free to ask for a second take. If you get tongue twisted or misspeak, as long as you are not on a live broadcast you can relax. Simply tell the reporter that your statement did not come out as intended and you would like to restate your answer. If you think of a better response to a question that was posed earlier in the interview, you can ask the reporter if you can restate your answer for the camera or microphone.

To summarize everything in this section: ***Don't answer a reporter's questions, respond to them.*** Every time you speak to a reporter whether it's a print, TV or radio reporter, consider it an opportunity to move your message. It's not about telling the reporter what you think he or she wants to hear or addressing the comments of your opponents. It is about responding to the reporter's question with your message. A good example is the activist who was asked her age and she responded with, “I'm 42 years old and like many people in their forties I'm concerned with...” The activist answered the reporter's question, but also used the occasion to respond and advance her message.

After the Interview

Never ask a reporter if you can review his story before it is aired or goes to press – but be sure to let him know that you are available to confirm facts or clarify information if needed.

If a story doesn't appear, simply remember that space is limited and judgments are constantly being made about the value of each story by editors.

Interview Techniques

Radio Interview Techniques

Most radio interviews are taped over the telephone. Sometimes the reporter tucks the mouthpiece under his chin, making it seem like a bad connection – so don't shout into the phone.

Again, state your main point at the beginning since your interview may be heavily edited. Speak only when the interviewer is finished speaking so that your voices don't overlap. This makes it easier to cut the reporter's voice and insert a newscaster's voice later on, which sometimes happens.

If you need to pause, don't say "ahh" or "umm." Silence will be edited out – but your "ahh" may not be. Concentrate on the message to your audience, not on the reporter.

To help relax, you may want to sway in your chair, shuffle your feet quietly or keep a glass of water nearby to wet your mouth and throat.

The Telephone Interview

When a reporter calls, you should be guarded in what you say until you are certain about the purpose of the call and understand exactly what information is wanted.

Assume that your conversation is being recorded, especially if the caller is a radio newscaster. Normally, a reporter will request your permission to record your conversation, but play it safe – ask to be sure.

If the reporter asks a particularly tough question, simply say you need time to prepare a response and that you'll call back. Ask what his or her deadline is, then try to accommodate it to the extent possible.

If the questions reach a sensitive area, say that you would rather not discuss the matter over the telephone and invite the reporter to your office or headquarters.

And remember – always concentrate on what you want to say to your audience, not the reporter.

Television Interview Techniques

Try to be yourself. That may be easier said than done, especially with all of the activity and bright lights. But projecting a positive image on television is possible if you:

- Have a clear communications objective
- Maintain a positive approach when stating your messages

- Look your best

Your Appearance and Delivery

Be yourself, and keep it simple by wearing something that makes you feel comfortable. If you are a spokesperson for a specific constituency, dress to represent the constituency. For example, an elected Tribal Councilmember should look professional; a ceremonial leader may endeavor to dress more traditionally in order to communicate visually what perspective he or she represents.

If the goal is to look professional, here are some quick tips:

For Men

- Wear muted colored neckties and avoid small patterns.
- Avoid flashy tie clasps, cuff links and other jewelry – they distort the picture.
- Shave just before the interview, especially if you have a heavy beard.

For Women

- Avoid white or light-colored dresses or suits – they tend to darken your face.
- Avoid small patterns – solid colors are best.
- Wear dark shoes instead of light.
- Avoid wearing large flashy jewelry that may distort the screen.
- As for makeup, your “everyday” makeup is fine for television. If you don’t normally wear makeup, a light powder will help reduce shine.

General Tips for Men and Women

- Check your appearance and smile in the mirror before you go on camera.
- Make sure you are comfortable with the way you look, the way you are seated and the overall setting.
- If you wear glasses, make sure they are clean. If they’re photosensitive, wait until the glass is clear. If you are interviewing outside, you may want to remove your glasses if they remain dark. Don’t wear sunglasses.

More Tips for Camera interviews.

Eye Contact. Look into your interviewer's eyes most of the time, or look at fellow panelists if you are talking to them. Try to make eye contact changes smoothly. Don't look at the monitor or stare into the distance when someone else is talking. Try not to let your eyes wander or dart back and forth from the interviewer to the camera – it will make you look sneaky and disinterested.

Keep good posture. This sounds obvious, but remember to sit up straight - without being stiff. Keep your feet on the ground and your hands in your lap or on the arms of your chair when you are listening. Sit forward in your chair. Don't scoot back because it makes you slouch. Lean forward slightly to show interest or when you want to make a point. If standing, put your left hand by your side and use your right hand for gestures when speaking. Do not clasp your hands in front of you. To stop side-to-side swinging, put one foot half a step ahead of the other. Back and forth swaying will not be detected on camera.

Smile. Smiling will make you look and feel friendly, accessible and relaxed.

Focus on your interviewer's eyes, even if he or she is looking at his notes or stopwatch. Ignore everything else happening around you.

Don't let it throw you if a reporter or interviewer asks the same question twice. Simply answer the question again, perhaps more concisely. Keep your answers short because, in most cases, you will be given about 45 seconds on the air. Remember to start with your conclusion to make your main point immediately.

Even though you may actually be reaching millions of viewers during your interview, imagine yourself talking to a group of two or three people – quietly, in their living room. Your voice level should be pitched slightly below that of the interviewer.

Should a reporter try to speed up the interview by interrupting or pulling the microphone away before you finish your point, don't talk faster. Briefly state your point with every answer that you give. And if the reporter leaves the microphone under your chin after you've made your point, don't ramble on. You can always restate your main point – if it's too repetitive, it will be edited out.