

Preparing for Media Interviews - Tip Sheet

Here are some tips to increase your confidence and success in media interviews.

The purpose of the interview is to get the interviewer to help share your key messages.

- Focus on the messages you want to see appear in print/on air.
- Support your messages with stories that humanize them and/or stats that add third-party validation.
- Pause to think about your answer before giving it, as this will improve response quality (except in live broadcast interviews).
- Speak in brief, complete sentences and try to make sure each sentence can stand alone as a good message.

Remember that reporters are not your target audience.

- Always keep in mind that reporters are neither your friends nor the ultimate target.
- Target your answers at the people you want to hear your story.
- Base your answers on the reporter's level of understanding. Explain things that might not be obvious to an outsider.
- Visualize a member of your intended audience and talk to them.

Be brief and favor short words over long words.

- Why? Because most print quotes are usually one to two sentences (18-20 words) and the average media quote on newscasts is just over 7 seconds.
- Limit your answers to 25 seconds, especially for TV or video interviews.
- Avoid jargon and keep it simple.
- End with a vocal downtick to make it clear you're done. Try to avoid trailing off.
- If a reporter stays silent after you finish your answer, avoid the temptation to fill the silence.
- If there is a pause that feels awkward, you can always say, "I think that hit my main point. Do you have other questions?"

Don't bury the main point.

- People's attention spans are short, so make your most important point first.
- Command attention with something short and powerful, then explain the details.
- Exception: if questions are very broad (e.g. "Tell me about your company"), go with "why + what" — why you started the company (problem that needed solving) and then what you do for whom.

Everything you say is fair game.

- Reporters can use anything you say in their stories, so don't consider an interview over just because the camera is shut off or your microphone is removed.
- Consider all pre- and post-interview discussions "on the record."
- Only say things you wouldn't mind seeing in print or hearing on air.

- Make sure each sentence can stand alone as a message.
- Back yourself up with tangible evidence whenever possible.
 - “The evidence/research shows...” vs. “We believe...”
 - “We’ve learned from customers that...” vs. “We feel...”

Reporters’ questions don’t always map to your messages.

- Reporters might find controversy and inside information juicy, so don’t expect every question to be a softball.
- Always answer the question asked, but bridge back to one of your key messages as soon as possible.
- Answer difficult questions in the affirmative.
 - Rather than “No, we did not do” or “No, we have no plans to...” (whatever they’re implying), say “Here’s what we did...” or “These are our plans...” or “Yes, but the most important thing to remember is...”.
- If they ask you something you don’t know, an effective technique is “Our [title X] is probably the best person to answer that question, but here’s what I do know...” and reference a related fact or anecdote – or (if it’s not a live broadcast/podcast interview), say you don’t know but that you will get back to the reporter with an answer in a timely fashion (and be sure to do what you promise).
- If asked for a specific prediction you don’t want to make (e.g., “Do you think this new product will be popular?”), answer more generally (“In my experience, market conditions are a big factor in any company’s sales results. Right now, we’re concentrating on enhancing our current market leadership by...”).

Great info is necessary, but how you speak matters, too.

- Your tone and delivery can either enhance or hinder the effectiveness of your messages.
- Pump up the volume — Most speakers talk about 10-15% louder than normal. Breathe deeply to make your voice fuller and more resonant. Be the biggest “you” possible.
- Limit filler words such as well, umm, uhhh, y’know...
- Notice your tone — if your speech is monotone, your audience is less likely to listen/believe you.
- Pay attention to the speed at which you speak. On average, people speak 150 words per minute. Vary your pace to keep a listener engaged.
- Every so often, use silence to emphasize a big point.

Body language counts.

- Great body language will make you more likeable and relatable. By the same token, even if you say all the right things, bad body language can cause problems.
- Eye contact, posture, and gesturing convey as much as words.
- Keep body language open, not closed.
- If sitting, sit up and slightly forward – no crossed legs (except at ankles).
- Avoid swivel chairs (or lock them).
- Only nod during questions when you agree with what is being said.
- Whenever possible, stand, gesture and smile (even during phone interviews).
- If standing, put one foot slightly in front (stops sway).

Face your fear.

Pretty much everyone gets nervous before media interviews. Here are some ways to get past your discomfort:

- Remember, perfection isn't the goal — telling a good story is.
- Arrive early so you aren't rushed.
- Take about a dozen slow, deep breaths before your interview.
- Flex and release different muscles before your interview.
- Dress in appropriate yet comfortable clothes without loud or complex patterns.
- Focus on how you can help the audience (make it about them, not you).
- Stay present, even if you make an error or two (no self-critique).
- During edited/taped interviews, if you lose your train of thought or fumble an answer, ask if you can have a retake.

There is no substitute for practice.

- Stand in front of a mirror or use your phone to record yourself answering likely questions out loud.
- Always do at least one dry run before important interviews.
- If you have a verbal filler problem, identify an object/situation (e.g., the smell of rain, a street sign, music being played, a daisy, a dog, etc.) and talk about it in complete sentences for 30 seconds, allowing yourself to pause in between each sentence.