

City of Red Wing Media Training

March 16, 2015

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Once you are on tape or quoted in the paper, you can't take it back. And it's even more challenging now, due to the Internet. Your comments are not just out there for a day, they are out there forever in the speed of a few clicks of a mouse. However, there is an art to making media coverage work in your favor.

Here are some basic skills that will help individuals faced with a media interview.

Basic points

- Reporters are neither your friends nor your enemies
- Keep your own messages in mind
- With preparation, you can influence the outcome of the story

Your mission is twofold

- Meet the reporter's news needs if you choose to
- Get your message across

When a reporter calls

- Never engage in an immediate interview. Tell the reporter you are busy at the moment (which is *always* true), but emphasize that you want to respond as promptly as possible
- Get the reporter's name, phone number, email, deadline and a brief summary of what the reporter wants to know
- Arrange a time at which you or the reporter will initiate a second call
- Take some time to prepare for the interview

How to prepare

- Consult with the appropriate content expert(s) on the topic at hand
- Determine one to three key messages you want to get across in an interview
- Think of a human story and/or compelling statistics that illustrate each of your key messages

- Remember that the reporter has limited space and time, so prepare clear, concise, quotable answers
- Using the information the reporter gave you in response to your earlier questions, anticipate what the reporter will ask
- Be sure the most important information you have is in the first one or two sentences of your answer. Be prepared to support what you say with specific examples and data
- Anticipate questions that will be difficult to answer. Work on the answers until you are comfortable.
- Think about what your ideal quote on this subject would be. Practice saying that quote out loud

What are key messages?

Key messages are the 1-3 most-important points about your subject that you want to convey in an interview. It takes some time and hard thinking to boil down everything you know about the subject into the most important points.

Remember, the key messages must be what's most important to the reporter's readers, listeners or viewers, not what is the most important to you and your organization.

When developing key messages, make sure they meet the following criteria:

- They're true
- They're concise
- They're memorable
- They sound like a human being, not an institution
- They can influence your audience

How are key messages used?

1) As an answer to a question

Sometimes, you will get a question from a reporter like, "What's this all about?" If you get a general question like this, recite all of the key messages as your answer.

2) **Logically connect a key message to the question**

This is a bit trickier. You will be asked questions you don't want to answer, and you can't evade them. You need to quickly answer the specific question, then get back to territory you feel comfortable with by attaching a logical key message.

Example:

Interviewer: What does the president think of the governor's political troubles?

Spokesperson: Not much. The president is concentrating on his initiatives concerning education, the environment and the economy.

Lesson learned: The spokesperson answered the question in two words, then used the rest of his answer to insert one of his key messages about the president's priorities.

3) **Repeat key messages**

Don't worry about sounding like a broken record. Stay focused and repeat your key messages as often as you can. That way, you give the reporter context and your audience is more likely to remember your key points.

Interview preparation checklist

Before doing the interview, answer these questions:

- Which reporter or anchor will do the interview?
- Why do they want to talk with me?
- What kind of story are they doing?
- What publication, station or website is represented?
- What kind of information do they want?
- Do they want to shoot video or take photos?
- When will the story be published or broadcast?
- How will the interview be used?
- Who else is being interviewed and supplying information?
- How much time will the interview take?
- Where and when will the interview be held?

- Should I record the interview?

Have I prepared by...

- Defining my communications objectives and key messages?
- Organizing and identifying the support I will need from my staff?
- Developing sample questions?
- Developing sample answers?
- Determining the ground rules (mine and theirs?)
- Gathering evidence to support my assertions?
- Identifying a human example that will illustrate my points?
- Preparing important numbers or statistics for the reporter in written summary, table, charts, or graphs?
- Preparing notes I can put in front of me as I interview (radio and phone only)
- Conducting an interview rehearsal?

Conducting the interview

Remember, the reporter's job is to tell a good story – not hurt you and make you look bad (nor help you and make you look good). Don't be affected by the reporter's charm, aggressive demeanor, or apparent sympathy with your point of view. Only pay attention to the content of the question.

Be brief, simple, clear and slow in your answers

- Use short sentences
- The less complex you are, the less room for error
- Don't use jargon
- Make your point at the top, and don't beat around the bush

Have in mind what you want to say

- Insert key messages where they logically fit

Support your points

- Use human anecdotes, comparisons and examples
- Choose two or three compelling statistics

Don't over answer the question

- When you have said what you want to say, stop talking – don't fill the silence
- Avoid going off on tangents

If you don't know the answer, say so

- Don't bluff
- Say you will find out the answer, and do so. Call back the reporter quickly

Answer the tough questions truthfully

- Don't dodge. If something has not worked out as well as you hoped it would, say so. Explain why

If you aren't going to answer a question, explain why

- NEVER say "no comment" without an explanation. Often, even if you say "no comment," the reporter will use what you say anyway
- Legitimate reasons not to comment include:
 - o Proprietary information
 - o Pending litigation
 - o Internal review not completed

If a reporter asks several questions at once, choose one

- If two related questions are asked, answer them in the order you choose
- If a barrage of questions is asked, choose the one you like best

Correct mistakes, tactfully

- If the question is based on faulty information, or a false premise, say so simply, matter of factly, and politely

- Do not condescend

Be creative (within reason)

- Use metaphors and descriptive language, if that comes naturally
- Use humor only if it is not open to misunderstanding
- If you're unsure, don't use humor
- Let your voice work for you – be expressive

Don't try to sell the reporter – sell the audience

- The reporter is not your audience. The people who will read, listen to, or watch the reporter's story are your audience. Speak to them.
- When you're on camera, don't look at the camera! Look at the reporter.
- Use your hands as you speak on camera

Ending the interview

- If a reporter has failed to ask a key question that will help sell your perspective on an issue, raise the subject yourself.
- Offer to be available for clarification as the reporter writes the story.
- If you have provided statistics in response to questions, check them again with the reporter. Offer to email him or her any additional facts to ensure accuracy.
- Never ask for pre-approval of statements attributed to you. You won't get it, and your credibility will plummet for asking. Your best opportunity to head off mistakes is to offer to be available for follow-up calls.
- Remember – anything you say when a reporter is around – even if you aren't speaking to them directly – may be quoted!

Special advice: Broadcast news interviews

- Make your point in 6-9 seconds
- Make sure your points are clear and easy to remember

- Viewers and listeners remember two or three main points if they are listening and watching attentively. When they are cooking dinner, or chatting about school with the kids, chance are they will only vaguely recall what the story was all about
- Any interview is free publicity for your organization, as well as an opportunity for positive public relations if you are temporarily in a tough spot
- Content can be easily overshadowed by video in television stories. Your non-verbal cues and the video can have a greater impact than what you actually say. Keep this in mind when agreeing to an interview location and allowing cameras access to your facility

Clothing and other appearance-related choices

- Dress comfortably and conservatively. Choose something that complements your coloring and physique. Avoid white fabrics with busy patterns.
- Navy blue is an excellent color choice. Research has shown it connotes trustworthiness – that’s why politicians wear navy – and campaign logos often include it.
- Red is a great accent color. It’s considered a power color that, generally, should be used conservatively.
- Minimize accessories. Avoid lots of jewelry. Don’t wear dangling earrings. Stay away from scarves.
- Check your hair. Use hairspray or mousse if needed. An ungroomed head of hair is a major distraction.
- Trim beards and moustaches.
- Use makeup modestly. If you’re granting an in-studio interview, ask about makeup (women and men alike). Studio lights are unflattering.
- SMILE! (when appropriate).