

How to Prepare for a TV Interview

Mike Andrei, Director of College Relations at Daemen College, in Buffalo, New York, created this checklist for a Buffalo/Niagara area Public Relations of Society of America (PRSA) seminar series on media relations in August 2003. Use this checklist to prepare for your next Television interview.

I. Broadcast Basics:

- a. Connecting with the camera: your posture (sit straight, don't slouch) and on-camera demeanor says a lot about you; it's important to conveying your message.
- b. Eye contact: whether with the reporter, or the camera – it is critical. (If you're not sure whether to look at the reporter or the camera, simply focus on the reporter; the camera will be focusing on you).
- c. Confidence on-camera; it works to deliver even a difficult message.
- d. Be yourself. Try to relax and speak to the reporter in conversational language. Avoid using "buzzwords" specific to your industry or organization that the reporter or the audience will be unfamiliar with; they will likely not make it into the story.

II. Interview Basics

- a. Stay on message; know what points you are trying to convey, and stick to them.
- b. Avoid being sidetracked into a subject not directly related to the subject of the interview. You can accomplish this by returning to your key points.
- c. Stay calm, no matter how much the reporter may try to get a strong or emotional reaction from you.
- d. Never argue with a reporter, especially when you are on-camera. Just Don't Do It.

III. Staying on Message

- a. Know your subject matter. Work from bullet points or short statements. Do not try to repeat long passages of material on-camera. Reading from a note pad or the top of your desk is an ineffective way of conveying your message.
- b. Answer succinctly. Keep your responses to three or four sentences at most. Keep in mind that most stories on local television newscasts are one and one-half minutes average length. The producer will edit your responses down to "sound bite" length, usually no more than 10 to 15 seconds. Giving long, wordy answers will give the reporter more control over what you will be saying in the story.
- c. If the interview topic is complex, i.e., pricing of natural gas, and the many factors that enter into why it fluctuates – or increases – whittle down your responses into three or four sentence "bites."¹
- d. When you have completed your response, stop talking.

¹ Note – Paul McAfee helps clients establish their three or four key messages, which the clients can use as their "bites."

IV. Getting That Message Out: Pitching a Story

- a. Fold pitches to television stations into the overall media strategy for your company or organization. Use tactics that focus on the specific needs of broadcast journalism. For example, if a hospital or health organization's media relations strategy is based on building awareness and support of the services they provide, use examples of success stories in the community – individuals whose lives have been saved or improved as a result of your organization's quality care or the dedication of its staff.
- b. Target your pitch to the reporter at each station who covers your organization's beat, if you have a good working relationship with that reporter. Most often, however, it is more advantageous to send your news release or pitch directly to the assignment editor in each newsroom.
- c. If you are going to make a specific announcement on a specific day, send the release a few days before your announcement. Follow up with a fax to the assignment editor on the morning of the day of the event.
- d. As we all know, television is a visual medium. *Always* have opportunities for the reporter to obtain compelling video that illustrates your story, and that will capture the attention of the station's audience.
- e. Build relationships with assignment editors as someone who understands what the needs of broadcast journalism are, and is familiar with the focus and content of each station's news programs.

V. Crisis Communications (Very briefly ...)

- a. In the event of a story requiring immediate attention, such as an explosion, or people killed, it is of paramount importance to gather as much accurate information as quickly as you can. You'll need it.
- b. Set up a press conference as quickly as practicable. Get the time out to all news outlets by phone. Getting your company's or organization's response out in what is likely to be a difficult environment is key to beginning to bring a media crisis – and the crisis itself – back under control.
- c. You may be called upon to be the company spokesperson. Push for the highest level company official possible to address reporters' – and the public's – concerns. The company image and public trust often hang in the balance. Take responsibility if the company is at fault.
- d. In a crisis, people want information. Be honest, and work to solve the crisis. Exxon Valdez, Enron, and a host of others have shown – clearly – how not to handle crisis communications.
- e. If you're going on-camera, stay calm. Use a personal routine, or just take a moment to yourself – whatever works to help you relax.

VI. Points to Remember

- a. The reporter – and most likely a producer – will control the final content of the piece. The only control you will have is over what you say, and how you say it.
- b. Do not feel that you should fill empty space after you've given a response. If you are not prepared to elaborate – don't.
- c. The story is an opportunity to get your message across to customers, shareholders, and the public. Use it as such.

VII. Some Final Thoughts

- a. Most reporters are honest and straightforward. But be aware of "tricks of the trade." Walking in with cameras rolling, switching topics, trying to pressure you into making a quick statement, "for the 5," or whatever.
- b. If you are not sure if the camera is on, or if your pre-interview conversation is being recorded, ask.
- c. If the interview is set up to explore a specific topic, but the reporter immediately starts in on a different one – one that you're not prepared for – make a clear, calm statement: "It was my impression that we were going to discuss Mr. Jones' complaint regarding his service interruption. The additional information you are requesting is not immediately available, but I'll try to get back to you with it later today."
- d. Be responsive. If a television reporter or producer calls looking for a "source" or "expert" in a given area, it will very likely be for that day's news broadcast. Keep a ready reference of your organization's executives, professors, doctors, or researchers who are willing to do broadcast interviews on short notice. Successfully scrambling to provide an expert for a reporter or producer – particularly more than once – is the sort of action that helps build your organization or firm's newsroom reputation as a good one for information. Reporters are no different from any one of us. They'll utilize a resource that is dependable and that helps them get their job done quickly and easily. You can be that resource.
- e. Remember to Have Fun. Being prepared, relaxed, and confident helps a lot.

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