Although media interviews can sometimes be intimidating, if you and the other managers in your organization follow these guidelines, the interviews should accomplish what you want them to.

**What to Do When a Reporter Calls**

Reputable reporters will always identify themselves as reporters. Always ask what they want and be sure to keep these points in mind:

- If you’re not the person they need this time, tell them who is—if you know.
- Try to be helpful—take the time to get phone numbers and addresses right.
- Ask what kind of story they’re doing—who they’ve talked to and what they’re looking for—what facts and figures they need.
- There are two basic rules for dealing with reporters: Always return their phone calls promptly and always tell the truth.
- Always respond to reporters—even if you’re just calling to tell them you don’t know the answers to their questions. Reporters are like elephants. They never forget public officials who lie to them, don’t return phone calls, or give them wrong information.
- Make sure you give media calls top priority. Media representatives are usually working on short deadlines. If you don’t return their calls, you will give them a negative image not only of your agency, but of all public servants.

**What If the Reporter Wants an Interview?**

If the reporter wants an interview, find out the subject and scope before you agree—or ask your boss to agree—to be interviewed. Ask who else the reporter has interviewed or plans to interview. If this is a broadcast talk show, ask who the other guests will be and what topics will be discussed. Also, will it be taped or live?

You control the parameters for any interview—time, place, and length. Keep time with reporters short—that way you’ll both be forced to focus on the issues you want to talk about. Fifteen minutes should be long enough for radio; 30 minutes for TV, including time for equipment set-up and break-down; as long as an hour for print. If you allow too much time, you might end up saying things you didn’t mean to say.

**How Do I Get Ready for a Media Interview?**

- Do your homework. Review all the materials you can get about your agency, not just the material the reporter is asking about. Decide what you want to talk about.
- Refine your three positive talking points. These are the three main points you want to make. Keep
them positive. Keep telling yourself his is an opportunity. With a little thought, you can anticipate the reporter’s questions and tailor your answers according to the three ain points you want to get across. From your point of view, the interview should be driven by these messages, not by the questions. Plan to use your three points as the foundation for all the questions you will be answering.

- Practice talking in 20-second sound bites. Practice making your points clearly and briefly. Don’t use doublespeak, government-speak or jargon-phrases no one else understands. Talk in plain language. Use appropriate words. Speak in the active voice, rather than the passive.

- Organize your ideas logically—from general to specific; or from specific to general; from positive to negative; step-by-step; or from most important to least important.

- Figure out how to personalize and humanize your information; tell how it affects the viewer or reader.

- Get some show-and-tell materials ready—a book, a simple graphic to illustrate a complex statistic, or perhaps a model of what you’re going to talk about. If you have videotape, get an extra copy ready to give to the correspondent.

- Find out everything you can about the reporter or correspondent. What is his or her reputation for fairness? What stories has the reporter done? What types of stories has the publication or station done in the past? Are the stories long and in-depth, or short, lacking details? What is the slant to most of the stories?

- Scan the news of the day to make sure you’re prepared for any last-minute questions. For a TV interview, watch the news show to see how much air time each story gets. If this is a print interview, scan the latest issue of the publication.

“Dos” for the Interview

Do your homework before you talk to a reporter. Be prepared for the reporter’s worst questions with three positive points you want to get across. Practice what you want to say. Remember you’re selling your activity. Talking to a reporter is an opportunity.

Speak in short sentences using plain language. For TV and radio, think in terms of 20- or 30-second answers. This assures the reporter will use what you say.

Smile. Act like you enjoy what you’re doing. Call reporters by their first name. Look interested and alert.

Tell a positive story. You do a lot of good things; tell the reporter about your three positive points.

If you don’t know the answer, say, “I don’t know.” If you do know the answer and can’t tell it now, tell the reporter when you can give him or her the answer. Refer the reporter to someone who does know the answer, or offer to find out who does.

If a TV station offers you makeup, take it. The TV camera will add 10 years and 10 pounds. Remember, the TV pros all wear makeup.

Dress conservatively and simply. Be remembered for what you said, not what you wore. Ignore this rule if you’re a rock star.

Stop talking when you’ve made your point. Don’t ramble on and on. Don’t speculate. Stick to your key message. Let the reporter worry about the empty air space.

If a reporter asks several questions in a row, pick the one you want to answer. Or, ask the reporter to
repeat the question.

Have show-and-tell material. A simple pie chart works well. Have a videotape? Take it, too.

Take advantage of the opportunity at the end of the interview when the reporter asks if there is anything you’d like to add. Repeat your three talking points and summarize.

“Nevers” and “Don’ts” for the Interview

Never say, “No comment.” “No comment” means “guilty” to most people when they hear it.

Never say anything “off the record.” Assume all microphones are live.

The most important rule: Never say anything to a reporter you don’t want to see on TV or read on the front page of a newspaper.

Never lie to a reporter.

Never lose your temper. Be polite, but firm.

Never use profanity or slang. Don’t say anything that could even remotely be construed to be off-color, sexist or racist. Don’t comment on anyone’s age, religion, or politics. Tell jokes ONLY if they are self-deprecating.

Never say “uh.” Drop all the uhs from your speech. Make your pauses silent.

Never wave your hands. Don’t bob and weave your head around. Sit still.

Never answer hypothetical questions. Don’t speculate. Be specific. Stick to what you know.

Never comment on what others have said, particularly if you haven’t seen or heard it. Don’t verify something that might not be true.

Never use doublespeak, government-speak, or jargon. Use numbers in an interesting way. Make your information easy to understand. Personalize your information. Relate it to the reporter. Humanize it.

Never talk to a reporter without doing your homework. Prepare. Turn the interview into a sales call.

Never stop talking after you’ve answered a “yes” or “no” question. Keep going. Say something like, “Yes, but you should also know...” Or “No, but let me elaborate...” But keep your response very brief and to the point.

At the Interview

Smile and enjoy yourself. Relax the reporter and you’ll be relaxed, too. Tell the reporter you’re looking forward to the interview. The best way to diffuse a hostile situation is to be warm and accommodating.

When the interview begins, remember that you are the expert. Don’t smile and nod your head as the interviewer asks a question—just look interested.

Make sure your body language and speech patterns back up your sincerity. To combat nervousness that an audience might interpret as insincerity or untruthfulness, sit up straight and take deep breaths. Don’t sit back on soft seats. Sit on the forward portion of the seat cushion and keep your back as straight as possible. If your mouth is dry, bite the sides of your tongue—it will make you salivate. Stop talking when
you’ve made your point. Many people say things they didn’t mean to say after they’ve made their major point. Don’t worry if there is silence. It isn’t your job to fill it up.

Don’t let the reporter put words in your mouth. If the reporter uses inaccurate facts when asking a question, correct the error. Don’t fall into the black hole of “no comment.” Instead say: “That’s not the critical issue, this is...” Or, “That’s currently part of a lawsuit. Our policy is not to discuss ongoing litigation...” Or, “We’ll have an announcement about that later this week.”

If this is a TV interview, remember that TV is not always fair. TV’s visual impact can make stories more emotional than any other media. You are not seeking the truth—don’t let yourself get pulled into such a search. You are not there to answer questions; you’re there to elaborate on your three talking points.

Never lose your temper. TV’s visual impact will magnify your emotional response.

Let the reporter know you are keeping track of the interview. Ask if you can tape the interview and have a tape recorder ready. Turn it on when the interview starts. Tell the reporter that you want to evaluate how clearly you are answering the questions so that you can be a better source.

Never forget that the interview isn’t over until the reporter leaves. TV correspondents commonly shoot B-roll, sometimes called cutaway footage, or cutaways. These are used to fill in the interview so it isn’t just a talking head. B-roll also makes the final produced story more visually interesting. Camera crews usually leave the sound on while taping the B-roll. The reporter might ask you again how you really feel about an issue. Make sure you repeat only what was said earlier, as the mike is still live and anything you say is being recorded.

Sometimes, radio or print reporters will also leave their tape recorders running to capture any off-the-cuff remarks that you might make.

If you are giving a telephone interview, assume the reporter is taping the conversation. That way you won’t have any regrets later.

At the end of the interview, thank the reporter for the opportunity.

The media world isn’t equal: There are inequalities when you agree to a media interview. Reporters can cancel at the last minute. You can’t. If you can’t make the interview you’ve agreed to, you must provide a substitute. Reporters can be late, but you can’t.

“What Ifs...”

• What if the reporter interrupts or tries to rush you? Ask to finish your statement and begin what you were saying again. Don’t start in the middle; make a complete, but succinct, statement.

• What if a reporter catches you when you’re not prepared and tries to interview you? Smile and walk away—even if the video camera is rolling and the reporter is sticking a mike in your face. Tell the reporter you’re glad to see him or her, but you don’t have time to talk now. Give your phone number and suggest they call your office to set up an appointment. Never talk to a reporter unless you’ve taken the time to prepare.

• What if the reporter asks how you “really feel” about an issue? Give the same answer you gave before. There is no room for your personal opinion, only your professional one. If you don’t say it, the reporter can’t use it.

• What if there is a silent, awkward pause after you’ve answered a question? Smile and wait out the pause. The reporter is using one of the most effective techniques in interviewing—getting you to volunteer information. Stop talking when you’ve made your point.
• What if you don’t understand the question? Ask the reporter for clarification. Some reporters don’t ask clear questions.

• What if you can’t think of the answer to the question? Smile. Be serene. Ask the reporter to repeat or clarify the question while you take a mental break. Buy time by saying, “That’s a good question.” If you really can’t come up with an answer, tell the reporter you need to look it up or consult with someone else and offer to call the reporter later in the day with the answer.

• What if you start to answer a question and make a mistake? Start over. If this is a TV or radio interview, tell the reporter you are going to start over.

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