



# Media Interview Skills

## *how to maintain control of an interview*

### **Do's**

- Your messages should form the basis of the agenda that you want to get across in your interview. Remember that you are the expert and you are in charge.
- Be honest. If you don't know an answer, don't make it up—it will come back to haunt you. Tell the reporter you will look into that information
- Listen to the question. People speak 125-150 words per minute. The brain processes 400 wpm. What do we do with the extra time? We start formulating our answer. Focus on what the person is asking.
- If you don't understand the question, ask the reporter to repeat it. This gives you time to think.
- If you don't know the answer, say so. But offer to get the information, and then make an appropriate transition to your message point.
- Less is more. You can't be quoted if you don't say it.
- Bat down any wrong information before answering the question. Silence gives consent.
- KISS. Keep it short and simple.
- "Yes," "no," and "I don't know" are perfectly good answers. Then transition to your information or reemphasize your message.
- Personalize what you are saying, and try to be informal. If you must use technical terms, explain them, and try to provide an analogy that the interviewer – and the audience – can relate to.
- Multiple-part questions are the easiest to answer. Answer those parts of the question you feel comfortable with and then move to the next question.
- If you know the reporter's name, use it, but not too often.
- Remember, you are in control of the interview.
- Have printed materials to offer the producer or reporter that reinforce your message points.
- Stop speaking once you have answered the question so your message is not lost. Interviewers may use silences in the hopes that you fill them – this could lead you into saying something you might regret.



## Don'ts

- Never say “No comment.” Translation: guilty as charged. Explain if material is confidential, or refer to another agency, when appropriate.
- Don't answer statements.
- Don't answer speculative questions unless it is your area of expertise and you feel extremely confident about the future.
- Don't volunteer more information than the question requires.
- Don't repeat the negative (for example, “I'm not a crook”).
- You don't have to answer a reporter's hostile question. Rephrase it and move on. If you make a mistake, stay calm, admit it, and correct it promptly.
- Don't allow yourself to be interrupted.
- Never answer for another person's organization.
- Do not say anything off the record! Respond with a simple, “I won't go off the record.” Consider everything, even post-interview banter, as on-the-record.
- Don't use negative language even if the interviewer has used it.
  - Example, you could be asked “Is your company greedy?” Rather than using “greedy”, a “baited” word, in your response, say “No, that's incorrect/I disagree...”
- Don't evade questions
- Don't use jargon and/or technical language. Avoid acronyms.



# Practice Techniques for Staying on Message

## **Pivot & Bridge:**

- Acknowledge the reporter's question (you never want to ignore it outright).
- Transition to a topic that more closely aligns with your core messaging goals.
  - "I have heard that concern from some. I think the real issue is..."
  - "I feel the important thing we need to focus on is..."
  - "Thanks for bringing that up; however, it's also important to emphasize..."
  - "Some say that, but what the research shows is..."
  - "Yes, that debate will run and run, and today we are focused on"
  - "I agree that needs answering, and I will in a moment, but first, I would just like to say..."
- Pivot from unfriendly/irrelevant questions.

## **The Pause:**

- Pause for emphasis.
- Pivot from unfriendly/irrelevant questions.
- Pausing is one of the most powerful tools you have when you speak.
- Pause and breathe before and after your main points, and you will frame them up for the audience.
- Pausing helps you listen to your audience. How are they reacting to your words? Do they need time to catch up? Do they have questions?
- Pausing helps you listen to yourself. Pausing also helps slow down your pace of speech and aids in finding exactly the right words. As a result, they use fewer filler words like um's and ah's.
- Pauses help engage your audience. Using pauses gives your audience time to reflect on your words and start making connections with their own experiences or knowledge in real time.



## **Blocking:**

- Use during an interview when a reporter asks a question the spokesperson can't or won't answer. An example blocking phrase would be, "Never ignore the reporter's question. A good spokesperson will acknowledge directly if they can't speak on a certain topic right now and transition the conversation appropriately."
  - "I can't answer that, but what I can tell you is..."

## **If caught off-guard in a situation where information hasn't been verified:**

- "We are still gathering information. As we learn more, we will share that information..."
- "This is a developing situation, and I am headed to a briefing now..."
- "We understand that you have questions about this incident, and we are working quickly to gather more details that we can share. We expect to provide another update as soon as we have verified information."

## **See-Stop-Say:**

- **See:** look down, see the text, and record it in your mind.
- **Stop:** After looking down—look all the way up.
- **Say:** Say the phrase you've just recorded in your mind.