

**Media skills notes and tips**

**Why media training?**

In our digital age the words you speak travel further and faster than ever before – and potentially live forever on the internet:

* If you work well with media you will build **reputation, profile and even market share**
* If you don’t work well with media you can do **a lot of damage**
* You have **limited control** both during and after the interview.

**Working with media for win-win**

The most effective media interviews result in win-win; the journalist gets a good story and you succeed in transmitting positive messages about your organisation and your projects. In order to achieve win-win, you need to:

* Understand how media works
* Engage with journalists on their terms and in their language
* Have your own clear **agenda**
* **Practise** what you want to say in interviews
* Learn techniques for **controlling the interview**.

**The media as filter**

People often equate media interviews with talking into a **loudspeaker**: they believe what they say will come out in print, on air or online bigger and louder but essentially unchanged. In fact the media works more like a **filter:** what you say comes out modified by the judgements and priorities of journalists and editors and the other people whose views they seek about ‘your’ story. You can only control your **input**, not the media **output**.

**What makes news?**

Journalists are not interested in issues, initiatives or strategies. They think in terms of ‘stories’. A good story in journalistic terms needs to tick most or all of these boxes:

* **Different** (*ie* unusual, and preferably extreme)
* **Interesting** and r**elevant** (to their target audience)
* Supported (by **evidence** and **statistics)**
* Quotable (including colourful **soundbites)**
* **Human** (about people).

**The problem with journalists**

Think of journalists as people who need your help rather than tricksters who are ‘out to get you’. They need help because:

* They have to write/broadcast about hugely **complicated issues**, cloaked in baffling terminology
* Most journalists – even specialists - **don’t know much** about your area of expertise, and some know nothing at all
* They are always in a hurry to meet **ever-tighter deadlines**.

**The problem with experts**

Your main problems can be summarised as follows:

* **Politeness.** Your job as an interviewee is not to answer each question directly and honestly but to use every question as a springboard to get back to your agenda. Otherwise you could get through an entire interview without mentioning any of your messages
* **Failure to prepare.** Good interviews never happen by accident but as a result of careful preparation (see ‘preparing for an interview’, page 3)
* **The ‘Curse of Knowledge’.** This tends to afflict people who have accumulated so much knowledge about their specialist area that they have lost touch with what non-experts can understand and are unable to communicate about it simply.

**Different agendas**

When it comes to interviews you and the journalist have very different – usually opposite – agendas.

* While they are interested in **extremes**, you will usually prefer a **balanced** approach
* They have to stay on the **surface** of a story but your instinct is to go into **depth**
* They want it **simple** but you know it’s **complex**
* They want **soundbites** but you would rather give a **considered opinion**
* They want **instant comment** but you need **time to prepare.**

**Bridging the gap between you and the journalist**

* Keep it simple, with **no jargon** and minimal data and detail
* Set the scene by starting with the **‘big picture’** (the context)
* Have a small number of **clear messages**, supported by compelling **‘proof points’**
* **Repeat** your messages in different ways to make sure they are received and understood.

**What to do when approached by a journalist**

* **Think about whether you are the right person to do the interview.** They may need to talk to someone more senior or with a different remit
* **Play for time.** Arrange to call back after you have had time to prepare
* **Ask questions** before the interview – about publication/programme, audience, angle, others being interviewed
* Offer to provide **background information** before the interview
* **Don’t get into a conversation.** To the journalist, it’s an interview
* **Respect deadlines -** journalists can’t change them.

**Preparing for an interview: messages**

* Be clear about your overall **messages** and the **context**  in which they make sense
* Restrict your messages to **your area of expertise and responsibility.** Don’t be tempted to stray beyond your remit
* Suit the messages and the **language** they are couched in to the **audience** of the publication/programme
* Support your messages with appropriate **evidence** and **examples**
* Reduce your list of messages to no more than 3-5 and set them out in priority order to create a ‘**story flow’**.

**Preparing for an interview: questions**

* **Brainstorm** all the questions you might be asked
* Take the initiative by addressing difficult questions before they are asked – this is called **attitude softening**
* Practise **bridging** from difficult questions back to your key messages and **reframing** negative questions or assertions into positive statements *(see below)*.

**How to give a good interview**

* Be **enthusiastic** about your subject
* Get **straight to the point** rather than building from background
* Focus on **‘benefits’** (impact) rather than **features** (characteristics)
* Use short words/sentences and **vivid language** for maximum impact.

**Additional tips for broadcast interviews**

* Make it look and sound like a **really interesting conversation**
* Keep your **speech** clear, well-paced and animated
* Maintain **eye contact** with the interviewer
* Keep your **body language** alert and engaged but relaxed. Avoid defensive, aggressive or slumped postures, and distracting movement or gestures.

**Bridge out of disaster**

Use bridging when you **don’t know** the answer or you **can’t give** the answer or you don’t want to go **off track.** A bridging phrase moves you away from the difficult question and back into the comfort zone of your key messages. Good examples include:

* ‘I’m not an expert on that…but what I *can* tell you is…’
* ‘Yes that’s interesting…but I think it’s *more important* to focus on…’
* ‘I can’t speak for that organisation…what I can say about *this* one is…’

**Reframe negatives as positives**

Reframing is a subtle but effective technique for turning a negative question or assertion into a positive statement. Good examples include:

**Q:** Why is this intervention so expensive?

**A:** Let me tell you how this intervention adds value…

**Q:** Isn’t this change quite difficult to achieve?

**A:** Here’s what people have to gain from making this change…

**Q:** Isn’t this all a bit ‘Nanny State’?

**A:** When it comes to diet people need all the help they can get.

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