

INTERVIEW TIPS

Speaking with the media, especially on camera or radio, can be a stressful experience even for the veteran spokesperson. It doesn't have to be! This compilation of spokesperson tips is designed to help you prepare, execute, and follow up on an interview with the media and to look and feel your best throughout the process. Remember, you are the expert!

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- **Establish control.** Be flexible, but schedule the interview at a time that is **convenient** for you but that is still **timely** and works with the journalist's **deadline**. Some spokespeople prefer to be interviewed by phone because it's easier, but if the reporter prefers a studio interview, do your best to get there. Sound quality is much better in the studio, and making a visual impression on your audience maximizes the opportunity
- **Know what you're getting into.** Don't be afraid to ask questions before accepting an interview. When it comes to advancing racial and economic justice in right wing corporate media, the adage "Any publicity is good publicity" doesn't necessarily apply. Many of us feel compelled to leap at a media opportunity without **evaluating its potential impact** on our organizing goals. Upon examination, you might find not all publicity is created equal. Be sure you know the **angle** the journalist is coming from and who, if anyone, will be interviewed at the same time to **anticipate possible questions**
- Provide the interviewer with a one to two-page **fact sheet** in advance of your interview. This gives reporters a chance to understand the meaning of the story—not just what the story is. Your interview, or the clip they choose to use, has a better chance at being placed within your **context**, and allows you to **focus on delivering your message** rather than spending precious time providing back story
- **Take time to prepare.** Even the most skilled media spokespeople will take a few minutes to prepare. If the reporter is on deadline, ask to call him or her back in five minutes and use that time to **double-check facts** and develop your **key messages**. Preparation helps you stay focused, give meaning to your words, and handle interruptions or distracting questions. And remember to **practice out loud**
- **Get the logistics straight.** Make sure you have everything you need to get to your TV or radio interview, including the studio address, cross streets, floor or suite number, and any building security information you need. If the booker is not at the studio location, make sure you have the name and number for a studio contact if there is an emergency or problem with building security

LOOKING GOOD!

- **Avoid white, black, or small prints**, which don't work well for on-camera interviews. Patterns, plaids, floral, checks, stripes, polka dots or other printed attire tend to "dance" on camera. Medium solid shades in gray, blue, brown or pastels work well, and if you're feeling bold, wear **bright singular colors** that 'pop' like red, pink, orange, etc.
- Avoid apparel or accessories that **distract the viewer** from what you're saying. Stay away from jewelry that may flash, dangle, or make noise when they come in contact with each other or with a lapel microphone
- If you're debating others, try to bring an **extra shirt** in case someone is wearing the same color as you
- **Attention to hair and makeup** is important because the lights wash you out, make your skin sweaty and shiny, or generally can distract viewers. While some TV stations do makeup, some spokespeople prefer to do their own makeup, particularly those concerned about the studio's ability or experience working with your complexion and features. Stick to matte, low shine products in neutral colors

AT THE STUDIO & ON AIR

- If you're nervous, greet the reporter at or prior to your scheduled arrival time, and excuse yourself to check the mirror and to review your key message points in the restroom
- Throughout the interview, remember to **relax and be yourself—you're in control!** Try not to think about the audience and focus on having a chat with the interviewer
- 93 percent of the message a TV audience gets from you is non-verbal. Avoid **distracting body language**, including moving your eyes around too much, uncontrolled facial expressions, "talking with your hands," or gesturing wildly. Smile sincerely and use good posture by sitting or stand straight. Keep hand movements below your shoulders and close to your body—if it helps, pick one or two hand gestures and stick to them
- **Say the reporter's name** in your answer from time to time such as, "Marta..."
- **Talk to your grandmother.** Talk—don't lecture. Explain—don't read. Make sure to avoid jargon, lingo, and acronyms specific to your work. Respect your audience and don't make assumptions about what they do or do not know. You should keep all comments simple, direct, and congenial, and make your points clearly and slowly
- **Speak from the heart.** Be passionate. If you're not enthusiastic, why should anyone else be? If possible, find ways to personalize and humanize the information so what you say really means something to the audience
- **Call for action.** Leave the audience with a specific compelling reason to contact your organization after the show. For example, mention a report or case study that people can download from your website, or mention an important upcoming event that viewers can attend or a concrete action they can take

STAY ON MESSAGE

- **Hook the interviewer** by saying something like, “There are three important points,” you hook the interviewer (and audience) into waiting for you to share those three points. Plus, you reduce the chances of being cut off before you make your points
- **Never answer questions you don’t understand.** Interviews are two-way streets. If they ask you a question that’s vague or needs clarification, ask. Don’t ever answer a question you don’t thoroughly understand. Even if you’re live ask a reporter to repeat the question or rephrase it. Never speculate, be accurate and specific and most importantly, **tell the truth.** If you don’t know the answer, say so and say you’ll get back to the interviewer about it as soon as possible. **Never say “no comment”**
- **Think before you answer.** You can buy yourself time by saying, “That’s a good question” and pause before you begin your answer to get your thoughts in order. This helps you to avoid one-word answers like yes and no, which don’t help **get your point across.** Expand or bring the conversation back to your main message
- **The more you say, the more you stray.** A lot of spokespeople get misquoted because they say too much. Say what you have to say as simply as possible and stop! It is not your responsibility to fill the silence. Too much information and too many details create confusion and misunderstanding and can result in inaccurate reporting, so sit back and let the interviewer ask the questions
- **Don’t repeat the reporter’s bad phrasing.** For example, if a reporter says, “Aren’t juvenile delinquents more likely to commit crimes as adults?” don’t respond using that bad phrasing by saying, “Juvenile delinquents.” Instead, turn it around to something positive. “The program that we’re here to program that helps youth in the juvenile justice system transition into a positive responsible adulthood by...”
- **Beware of leading questions.** Some reporters try to influence interviews by saying “Would you say” or “isn’t it true that.” Avoid falling into the trap and agreeing with them. If you don’t agree or what they’re saying is untrue, say, “No, actually, the truth is that.”
- If an interview starts on the wrong topic, be sure to bring it back to what you’re really there to discuss. You can do that by **bridging** off-topic questions to your response by using **pivot phrases** like, “Well, that’s an interesting question, but what we really need to address is,” “In my experience,” “The point I’m making is” to redirect the conversation to your message. You can also **flag** important statements by saying, “The most important thing here is” or “The real issue is.” These phrases get the reporter’s attention—and the audience’s attention, and that is whom you want to touch

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- **Shake hands and thank** the reporter for her interest and time
- Make sure the interviewer has all **your contact information** or leave a business card for any questions that may come up later or for future opportunities
- If you have one, **bring your book** or other materials to leave with the interviewer

- Follow up with the interviewer or outlet about **one week** after the release of the interview. Ask about its distribution and for any questions or feedback they've received from. Ask how they felt about the interview and for suggestions to help you improve. If the interview went well, this follow up allows you to **suggest other possible story angles** in which you play a part. You can position yourself for future interviews
- Ask for **referrals** if appropriate. What other shows on the station or channel might be interested in your campaign, community, or organization?

SEE FOR YOURSELF

Watch these video clips for examples of spokespeople who did—or didn't—use the tips above:

- Katie Couric interviews Sarah Palin on SCOTUS: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rXmuhWrlj4&feature=related>
- Coleman suits scandal press conference: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VySnpLoaUrl>
- Matt Lauer interviews Tom Cruise: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cc_wjp262RY
- Keiko Fujimori on candidacy (Spanish): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjZuVUdW7lg&feature=related> ((3:01))

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To schedule a spokesperson training, coaching session, or inquire about the Center for Media Justice's strategic communications services, contact Alison Roh Park at (510) 698-3800 ext. 410 or alison@centerformediajustice.org