

Communications for dialogue & advocacy



Interview skills

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Communications for advocacy

Media relations & social media

1. Introduction

Business member organisations (BMOs) to engage in private public dialogue and to advocate an improved business environment. An essential part of advocacy work is communications.

This handbook will help you to learn a range of techniques to be employed before, during and after being interviewed by journalists. It is aimed at those responsible for talking directly to the media, Board of Director members and CEOs for example. Learning about how to be interviewed – and undertaking role plays in advance of major interviews – will instil confidence that you can communicate effectively and make it more likely that you will persuade and influence your target audiences.

Being interviewed by the media can be daunting. But there are some basic rules and techniques which will increase your chances of being effective. Remember that you are the expert, and that is why the media has asked for an interview with you. Being interviewed is a great opportunity to talk about the work that your organisation does, or the importance of its impact. Broadcast interviews are particularly good for this because you are appearing in person and cannot easily be misquoted. The interviewer will want you to perform well, as it will make for a better interview. They may challenge you to justify your answer, but they will not be trying to trip you up unless they are investigating some wrong-doing and think you are hiding something.

So, the aim of this handbook is to develop your communication and public relations skills by delivering effective interviews: to identify target audiences; to hone key advocacy messages; and to engage more effectively with the media.

By the end of this handbook you will be able to:

- Identify types of interviews the media requires;
- Identify your audience and create talking points (soundbites);
- Prepare for an interview;
- Anticipate the types of questions the media will want to ask you;
- Handle tricky questions;
- Improve your body language;
- Look and sound the part; and
- Evaluate your own performance.

2. Types of interviews

2.1 Impromptu or scheduled?

There are two types of interviews which the media may require from you:

An impromptu (that is, unscheduled) and so you are unprepared:

- Usually involves questions on topics with which the interviewee *should be* familiar;
- Most likely to take place at a conference or during a crisis; and
- Can also be used by a reporter to get a differing opinion or a balance on a story already being worked on (not directly about you).

The scheduled (that is, pre-arranged) interview:

- Usually the topic of the interview is known beforehand. Journalists do not like submitting specific questions beforehand however;
- Most likely to take place at a prearranged venue like the interviewee's office or media office; and
- Will usually form the main topic of a news story directly related to the interview.

2.2 Types of media

Different media channels request slightly different content from their interviewees as follows:

Television wants:

- Footage they shoot usually in locations that are visually compelling;
- Interviews with key people on location; and
- A connection between your issue and the lives of ordinary people.

Radio wants:

- Provocative interviews with interesting, knowledgeable people;
- Live interviews in the early morning (drive time) period; and
- Interviewees who can take questions from listeners.

Print wants:

- Experts who can speak about an issue in depth;
- Strong opinions; and
- Thoughtful analysis.

Online audiences want:

- Informal and humorous language;
- Participatory dialogue; and
- Blogs and Vlogs updates

3. Who should communicate with the media?

It is ideal for a BMO to have someone specific to deal with media relations, such as a media relations/communications officer, and to allocate a person to speak directly with the media which might be high level board members and CEOs.

The spokesperson can be a:

- Senior official from the secretariat
- Member of the BMO's executive committee

He/she should:

- Have considerable experience in dealing with the media
- Be a strong communicator that lives out the values of the organisation
- Have contacts with key media personnel
- Support the strategic framework and deliver on the brand promise

The media relations/communications officer must:

- Ensure that all media get the needed information and guidance to understand the organisation - and in this case an advocacy issue
- Check facts before supplying information to the media.
- Be a relationship builder and maintainer
- Initiate media coverage
- Monitor media coverage and take appropriate action

4. Before the interview

Before agreeing to an interview, it is important to know why an interview is being requested. This may be obvious if it is in response to a press release you have sent the media, but it is still important to check the following:

- What is the angle or context of the interview?
- What is the likely line of questioning?
- Will it be live or recorded?
- Who is likely to be viewing or listening to the interview when it is broadcast (the target audience)?

Ask yourself if the interview is likely to be to your organisation's advantage or disadvantage. Will it help you achieve your overall communications objectives? Will it enable your organisation to communicate its key messages to its target audiences? Are there any negatives?

Many people want to know what questions will be asked. Do not be surprised if the journalist does not tell you. They may not know precisely what questions they will ask, because they will need to react to what you say in the interview. However, it is legitimate to ask what areas of questioning are going to come up.

You receive a phone call from a journalist. It is up to you to ask about the story's focus. Are you the right person to be interviewed or is somebody else far better equipped to deal with the journalist's request?

What type of story is needed?

- TV or radio package, just a "soundbite," video only?
- Print, feature, news?

Remember:

- Reporters want interviews TODAY.
- Return reporter's calls as soon as possible.

4.1 The six questions the media will want to ask you

Journalists are often trained to ask the following questions, so it is a good idea to understand the topic of the interview and anticipate the questions you will be asked in line with the topic. You could even try rehearsing these questions beforehand with a work colleague or family member:

- **Who** will do, said or did something
- **What** will be done, was said or it happened
- **Where** it will be done, it was said or it happened
- **When** it will be done, it was said or it happened
- **Why** it will be done, it was said or it happened
- **How** it will affect people or how it was done

4.2 Preparing for an interview

The day or hour before the interview make sure you prepare thoroughly. Think carefully about the likely questions and responses.

What is your overall communications objective? How will this interview contribute to your objectives?

Think of human examples that illustrate the point you are trying to make. Real stories about real people are very powerful.

What are your key messages? Will the messages be about the impact of an issue? Some facts which leads to a change? What facts do you wish your audience to remember?

Do not intimidate yourself psychologically. Consider the impending interview as a discussion with someone about something you know about. Most journalists are generalists, not experts. You are the expert. That's what journalists and the general public expects from you.

Prepare talking points/communication points/key messages about the topic, and list the topics several points you want to be made known about the topic.

Consider the various angles of each point to anticipate the interviewer's questions, and prepare the best replies possible by:

- Considering the thinking and expectations of your audience (the journalist and the general audience)

- Express ideas in terms an audience understands, putting across results NOT processes
- Find the humanity and human emotion in your topic
- Express the story by putting across how ordinary people are affected
- Know your subject/topic
- Practice ahead of time
- Prepare “block answers.”
- Have answers in mind.

4.3 Talking points

Talking points/communication points/key messages, whatever you wish to call them are vital to convey to an audience.

Once you have studied who your audience is going to be, for example if you are appearing on a TV talk show, it’s likely your audience will be professionals with an interest in your subject.

The next thing to do is prepare three messages you want people to know when you’re finished giving your interview.

Identifying messages to be used in interviews:

What are key messages?

Key messages are the core of your communication activities, in this case giving an interview. Key messages open the door to meaningful communications with your audience, because they bridge what your audience already knows and where you are trying to take them.

You have a story to tell through your interview—whether to educate, discuss, promote or advocate. Within every story, key messages are the messages you want your audience to remember and react to. They are the Message, the essence.

Key messages are a means to an end. They assert your organisation’s viewpoint. Key messages are opinions that you can back up with proof and case examples, which you demonstrate verbally in your interview.

By prompting your readers to ask questions, key messages immediately get audiences involved in your issue.

Key messages prompt your audience to ask “Why”? “How”? Etc... Key messages get your audience curious about what you have to say. Curiosity is the first step to participation.

A key message is the thing you want people to remember after they have heard you being interviewed.

Key messages need to be simple and easy to grasp. This helps the audience understand what you are trying to say, but it also means you are more likely to remember them in the heat of doing a broadcast interview.

Examples of key messages could be:

- We are launching a new survey which has some shocking results which are...
- We are calling for the government to do this...
- We want people to engage via our website and blog (so here is the web address)

In a three minute broadcast interview, try to focus on getting across just three key messages. Any more than that will sound confusing.

4.4 Soundbites

A soundbite is a term employed in TV and radio, used to describe a phrase which is easily picked up on by the media.

- Sound bites are very short phrases that sound good and appear to sum up a point or express a situation.
- Sound bites are for use mainly in radio and television but they also work when quoted in print.
- Can be a phrase extracted from a longer phrase, or one specifically delivered to be a sound bite

4.5 Interview preparation guide

When a reporter calls you to request an interview, do the following:

- **Write down the topic** that is to be covered on the top line of the **Interview Preparation Guide**.
- Determine your **key messages**. What three ideas do you want to get across to the reporter? Write these on the **Interview Preparation Guide below**.
- List **three possible questions** a reporter might ask. Be sure to **prepare answers** to these questions. Write questions and answers on the **Interview Preparation Guide**.
- If time permits before the interview, **ask a colleague to interview you about the topic in question**. The colleague needs to put themselves in the mind of the journalist and ask searching questions. Ideally, video the interview (even if just on your phone) and go through it carefully afterwards.

Topic: _____
key messages

1

2

3

Possible question

Your response (sound bite)

1 _____

1 _____

2 _____

2 _____

3 _____

3 _____

4.6 Physical appearance

For all interview situations, but most importantly for TV, your appearance precedes any responses you might give. The way you are dressed could influence the manner in which questions are asked and could influence the way replies are perceived by the audience.

Overdressing gives the impression of vanity and any reply will be judged with that in mind. Bad dress combinations can give the perception of you as not being in control. If you cannot dress yourself properly how can you handle such topics?

Some patterns, such as close pinstripes or dotted material used to play havoc with analogue TV screens. This is not the case anymore but be careful with drawing attention away from what you have to say because the audience is focussing on that bright and colourful tie you are adorning.

Do not wear white in a television studio. The light balance will affect any dark complexion. Clunky, jingly jewellery interferes with audio and distracts viewers. You cause the audience to lose attentiveness.

Your comportment also plays a major part on how you come across in television and how you sound in radio. If you comport yourself to know everything you will sound pompous on radio and look like a faker on television. Aim to look like a professor – one who looks like s/he knows and speaks knowledgeably.

Show enthusiasm. Even in radio (and certainly for television) facial expressions and hand and body gestures affect the way you sound. The more physically animated you are, the more exciting you will sound. Do not overdo this at the risk of being "fake".

Forcing yourself to appear “cool and collected” usually leads to boring interviews. You can only pull this off if you really are cool and collected and extremely prominent and knowledgeable.

1.2 Interview checklist

Here is a list of things to consider before your interview:

- Familiar with the show or publication?
- How will the interview be used?
- One source or one of many?
- Taped or live interview?
- On TV -- what to wear?
- Developed a conversational style?
- Rehearsed all possible questions and answers?
- Have concise key messages?
- Body language and facial expressions in control?
- No use of jargon?
- Have you prepared notes for your own reference?
- Are you prepared to answer questions without resorting to "no comment"?

5. During the interview

This section guides you on what to do and how to be during an interview. During the interview, imagine it is like a conversation between you (the expert) and someone who is interested in your work, but who does not know anything about it.

Focus on the person who is interviewing you and try to engage them in the subject. Make them interested by talking with passion and authority. Ignore all the surrounding technology like a camera or microphone. Just talk to this one person. Do not think too hard about the audience. They are simply eavesdropping on your fascinating conversation. Remember, if you have on air nerves then in essence a live interview gives you more control as it cannot be edited.

1.3 Body language

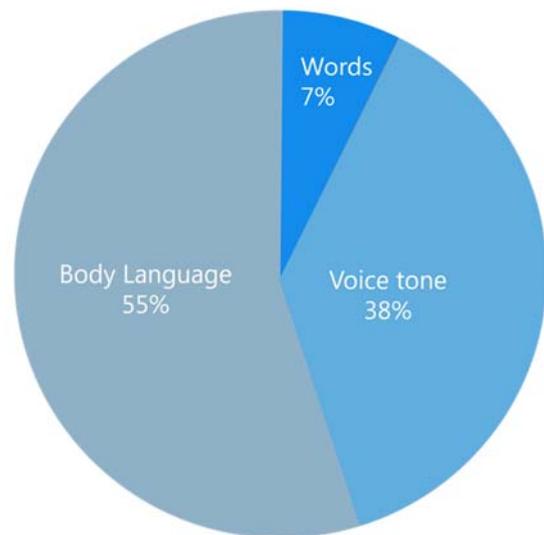
For TV and video interviews for YouTube and for vlogs to be uploaded online, people will remember what they see more than what they hear unfortunately. What you say accounts for just seven per cent of what people remember.

You can persuade an audience to like you by appearing confident yet friendly, and do the following things:

- Do not play with keys or money.
- Sit still or stand straight.
- Beware of swivel chairs!

- Eye contact should be with the reporter, not the camera (though that can be tricky if the reporter does not stand close to the camera).
- Look down as you consider a response, not up toward the sky.
- Keep your composure at the end of each answer.
- Do not roll your eyes.
- Whatever movements you make with your body and head, your eyes must be steady and should be trained on the interviewer. If they do move away, it should be in a naturally normal conversational way. Shifty eye movements result in a shifty perception of you.
- Any movements you make must not involve the furniture. Do not rock or swivel in your chair.

Figure 1: What people remember



Source: Professor Albert Mehrabian, 1971

5.1 Speaking voice

The Iron lady, Britain's first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had speech lessons to lower the tone of her voice, so that she sounded more authoritative. In terms of your voice, it is helpful to aim for:

- Distinct
- Enunciate well
- Pace of your speech is not too fast and not too slow
- Inflection – avoid going up at the end of sentences

Remember:

- Be prepared. Prepare in advance key ideas you wish to get across. Anticipate key questions and use those to express your objectives.
- Be positive, Turn negative questions or statements into positive responses. Do not be curt.
- Be honest. Tell the truth. If you try to bluff, it will show. Your credibility is crucial.
- Be brief. Crystallize your ideas into a few short phrases that summarize what you are trying to communicate.
- Be yourself. Keep your voice at an even pace. Act naturally. Avoid technical language (jargon) or "big" words. It does not impress anyone.
- Be comfortable, confident and take charge. Relax. You know more about the story topic than the interviewer.

- Be energetic. Be animated to a degree. Use gestures, facial expressions and body language to add vitality to your words. (Just don't overdo it.) Keep your eyes steady.
- Be focused. Put your full attention on the interviewer. Look directly at the person asking the questions. Do not be concerned with distractions.
- Be prepared.
- Be positive.
- Be honest.
- Be brief.
- Be yourself!

5.2 Responding to interview questions

Make your responses as simple and short as possible without being curt.

Always give the most important thing first in a brief response, then if needed expound.

Do not add a different topic by straying in your replies. If the interview is cordial, let the interviewer lead.

Stop speaking after you have completed your response. Don't keep talking just because the interviewer appears to expect more.

During the interview do not keep thanking the interviewer. Leave that for the very end of the interview.

Do not reply to a question by referring to an earlier response "Like I said earlier..."

If you momentarily have to think about how to phrase a reply, be silent while you think. Do not fill the time with "er...", ah..., um..."

Being an expert means that you are safe to say you don't know. But do expound on why you are not in a position of knowing about something.

Do not reply to questions on behalf of another party (surrogate spokesperson). The way you present a fact on their behalf may not be the way they would wish it.

Do not reply to hypothetical questions as fact. Best not to respond to them at all unless it is clear in the spirit of the interview that it is hypothetical and your hypothetical response is hypothetically your personal opinion. Rule of thumb is don't respond.

Remember:

- Do not keep talking.
- Let the reporter fill "dead air."
- Pause after complete statements.
- Practice information management.
- Do not speculate. Stick to your subject. ("What would happen if...?")

For broadcast interviews:

- Short answers (20 seconds or less) if videotaped. Longer for studio interview.
- Stay seated after the interview.
- Assume you are "live" at all times.

5.3 Handling tricky questions

Some interviewers can become hostile; others are just uninformed. Do not get caught in an emotional or intellectual game with the interviewer. Following are some "interviewer types" and question traps and some responses you may want to try. Handling tricky questions is easier if you prepare for the worst case scenario and rehearse beforehand. Remember it is highly unlikely you will get an interviewer who wants to put you in a bad light.

Interviewer types

Machine Gunner. Asks so many questions that you do not know which one to answer first.

Response: "Well, you've asked several interesting questions. First, I'd like to address..."

Interrupter. Jumps in before you have had a chance to complete your response.

Response: Let him complete the interruption, then say: "Before I answer that, I'd like to complete my thought."

Paraphraser. Tries to put words in your mouth; e.g., "Do you mean to sit there and tell me there is no problem with..."

Response: "No, that isn't what I said. What I said was..." and repeat your point.

Unprepared Interviewer. May have vague questions or require you to provide a lot of background before you can get to your key message.

Response: Take the opportunity to steer the interview in the direction you want to go. Rephrase the question to make it more specific. "By your question, I think you're referring to...let me put that in perspective."

Strategies for handling question traps:

Either/Or. When the answer is not "black or white," say so.

Absent Party. Do not get trapped into being a spokesperson for another individual, business, or organisation or into criticising an absent person or organisation.

False Statement. Correct incorrect information immediately. Do not repeat the misinformation; this only reinforces it.

Hypothetical. You do not have to answer a question that is hypothetical or conditional. It presents a scenario that never occurred.

5.4 Crisis communication

Your BMO may be called in to respond to a crisis in which you may be directly or indirectly involved. In a crisis:

- Do not get mad
- Do not nod in agreement that you understand the question when the answer will be negative.
- Stay "on the record."
- Deal with rumours swiftly
- No "no comments."
- Be prepared
- You are the expert
- Concentrate
- Practice
- Take a deep breath
- Prepare your voice. (No cola, chocolate or milk/dairy.)

6. On the record

You should treat any discussion with a journalist as 'on the record', which means they might use it in a story. Just because an interviewer has closed a notebook or switched off a recorder it does not mean they have stopped being a journalist.

If you have a very good relationship with a specific journalist it may be possible to fill them in off the record on some background which may help them to understand a controversial aspect of the story. But only do this rarely and if you are completely confident that they will respect your confidentiality.

7. After the interview

After you have been interviewed, you should evaluate how well you did before you do another interview. Here are some questions you may wish to ask yourself to evaluate your performance. Did you:

- Communicate your objective using key messages?
- Create soundbites (short/snappy/memorable quotations)?
- Keep control of the interview?
- Remain calm?
- Listen carefully to questions?
- Bridge from hostile or irrelevant questions?
- Use short, succinct sentences?
- Maintain credibility?
- Keep good eye contact with the interviewer?
- Control body gestures – use hand motions appropriately, stop that shaking leg?
- Project a strong, positive image of a person people would trust?

8. Final tips!

By following these final "Be Attitudes" you should be successful in any interview:

- Be prepared. Prepare in advance two or three key ideas you wish to get across. Anticipate key issues that will come up and be prepared to use those issues to launch your objectives. Think of questions you would ask. Ideally, then role play with a colleague or, even better, a friendly journalist, so that you are not only prepared but rehearsed as well.
- Be positive. Turn negative questions or statements into positive responses. End every answer on a positive, upbeat note.
- Be honest. Always tell the truth. If you do not and try to bluff, it will show. Your credibility is crucial.
- Be brief. Crystallize your ideas into a few short phrases that summarise what you are trying to communicate.
- Be yourself. Keep your voice at an even pace. Act naturally.
- Be energetic. Be animated. Use gestures, facial expressions and body language to add vitality to your words. (Just do not overdo it.)
- Be focused. Direct your full attention on the interviewer. Look squarely at the person asking the questions. Do not be concerned with distractions.
- Be comfortable, confident and take charge. Relax. You know more about the story topic than the interviewer. If not, you would not be interviewed.

Further reading



- Siegel, L, (2013) 10 tips to help you ace a media interview, https://www.prdaily.com/Main/Articles/10_tips_to_help_you_ace_a_media_interview_14894.aspx



This series of advocacy competence handbooks – divided into modules and units – is intended to support business member organisations (BMOs) to engage in public private dialogue and to advocate improvements to the business environment. You are free to use the units and other materials provided that the source is acknowledged.

Foundation Unit

0. Introduction to advocacy & dialogue

Module 1: The policy process

1.1 Understanding policy and regulation

1.2 Policy analysis

1.3 The process of formulating and reforming policy

Module 2: Policy positions

2.1 Identifying, understanding & framing issues

2.2 Preparing policy positions

2.3 Influence & argumentation

Module 3: Communications

3.1 Communications & public relations

3.2 Media relations & use of social media

3.3 Interview skills

Module 4: Written communications

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4.2 Writing press releases

4.3 Preparing written documents

Module 5: Managing advocacy projects

5.1 Planning an advocacy project

5.2 Budgeting & financial management

5.3 Evaluation of advocacy

Module 6: Managing a BMO

6.1 Leadership, strategy & business planning

6.2 Governance and ethics

6.3 Members and member services

Module 7: Research

7. Research methods



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