



Telling Your Story to the Media: A How to Guide

Introduction

Reporters and designated spokespersons have a common goal: Inform audiences about issues that matter to them with reliable, accurate and understandable facts, figures and context. However, stories may not always turn out the way you hoped so the purpose of this handbook is to help improve your ability to communicate successfully.

Purpose of Media Relations

Within all large organizations, positive media relations are essential. Good media relations means building strong working relationships with journalists. This leads to transparency, accountability and, ultimately, better informed news consumers. By working effectively with journalists, you can help facilitate balanced exposure for your organization in the news or, at the very least, mitigate negative news coverage.

What reporters want

Most reporters simply want a good story. They need something new and interesting to tell their readers, viewers and listeners. They also want this new information to be relevant to audiences – how it impacts their daily lives or the community in which they live. Reporters need information that is clear, concise and compelling. This information can come from a number of sources but, generally, they need your organization’s side of the story to present balanced coverage.

Most reporters are fair and will treat you with respect. But they can also be tough. Fierce competition and personal drive will often lead to tough questions or to areas outside your expertise. But no matter how aggressive the situation gets, it’s really just your answers that matter since questions are rarely reported.

Today’s media environment

Reporters work in a world of increasingly tight deadlines, shrinking resources and demands to serve multiple platforms. Gone are the days when a reporter would be required to file just one story per 24-hour news cycle. In addition to assembling news items for print, radio and television, today’s journalists routinely must deliver pieces for print and broadcast as well as their organization’s online news service. A growing number of media outlets have also created Facebook pages and Twitter accounts through which their journalists can reach ever larger audiences with their stories.

Technology has also spawned a new breed of media communicators – the “citizen” journalist. Equipped only with cell phone video cameras and their PCs, ordinary citizens worldwide are uploading dramatic, entertaining, and memorable images and watching them go “viral” on YouTube. Increasingly, these compelling visuals are then picked up and distributed by mainstream media.

The bottom line of this new media environment is that spokespersons – regardless of which organization they represent - can no longer assume that their words, the way they deliver their messages, and how they are perceived will remain strictly regional or even national in impact. The potential of a much wider reach must be considered in any media interview preparation by your spokesperson(s).

Interview Preparation

Even seasoned communicators take time to plan before doing a media interview. Here are some logical steps you should consider.

Objective

First ask yourself, why am I doing this interview and what do I want to get out of it? Maybe the objective is to tell audiences about a new initiative. Perhaps it is to correct the record or react to

assertions made by third parties. Whatever the objective, this first step puts you on the right road to preparing a focused response to media enquiries.

Story Line

If you had a chance to write the news story, how would it look? When the story you want to tell is clear in your mind, there's a good chance the interview will stay focused and the responses sharp. The final news item may contain many points of view but your organization's contribution should reflect your part of the story.

Key Messages

Once the story is clear, preparing the right messages should be easy. Media lines may already exist on a particular subject but they need to be adapted to each interview situation and put in some kind of logical order. Internalize the media lines, then write down some words in bullet form that will act as visual prompts for each one of the messages. The ultimate media lines should clearly reflect step one, the Objective.

Validation

Once the news story appears, check to see which information you provided the reporter has been picked up. If at least one of the key messages is used in a quote or at least paraphrased, the interview can be considered a success.

The Interview

If you see the interview as a threat, chances are the outcome will not be very positive. On the other hand, if you see it as an opportunity, the opposite should be true. Talking with a reporter may be a rare occurrence but we all attend meetings and the mental preparation and comportment for both are not much different. Both are strategic exchanges of information conducted in a businesslike manner. Neither an interview nor a meeting is a casual chat with friends or family.

When your organization's communications staff sets up the interview, they will clearly find out what the reporter is looking for. Maybe not the exact questions but at least the story angle. They will ask about the reporter's deadline, where the item may appear and when, and who else the reporter may be speaking with. Most importantly, they will specify the length of time granted for the interview. Clearly, they will never agree to long, open-ended interviews where spokespersons can easily be led off topic.

My Messages

The messages you prepare are not unlike a script. Even great orators need some kind of outline before they speak - all the more reason why your spokespersons should put a lot of thought into preparing their key messages and even more effort into delivering them during an interview.

Write them out long hand, or preferably in bullets, on a single page. Place them in order of importance since you may get only one chance to deliver the top line message. In a phone interview, check off the messages as they are delivered. It often helps to mentally say, "The most important thing about this story is..." and the key message you write down will quickly follow.

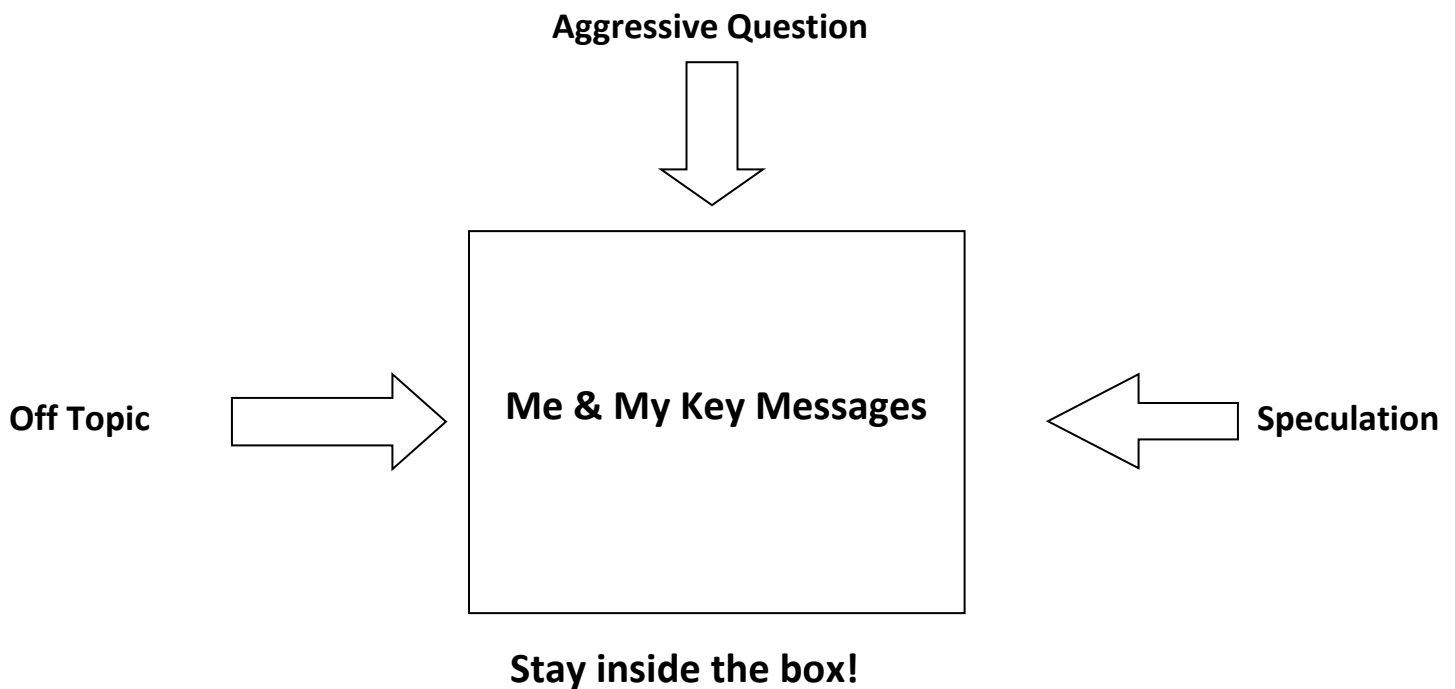
While there is no golden rule, the 3 x 3 suggestion is worth considering. That is, three key messages with each one delivered three times during the course of an interview.

What can go wrong

Even if your key messages are delivered properly, reporters may still try to get more information than anticipated. This could lead to discussing areas outside of your expertise, saying something that could jeopardize an investigation, making comments contrary to your policies, speculating, offering a personal opinion or discussing privileged information. All of these should be avoided.

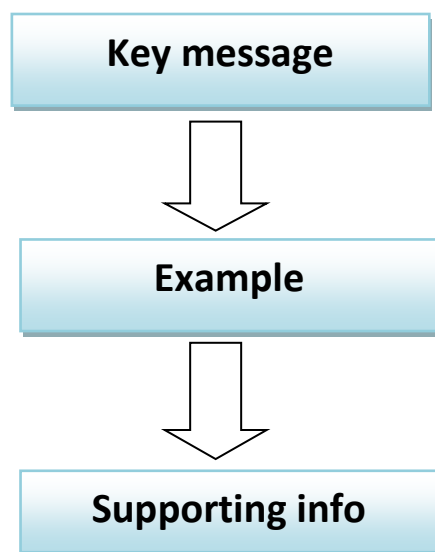
Stay inside the box

The popular saying, “Think outside the box” doesn’t have a place in media relations. Quite the opposite.



Delivering key messages

While reporters have their own arsenal of techniques, so do spokespersons. There may be a dozen or more questions but only two or three answers form the essential part of a story. The answers are reported, rarely the questions. The most successful technique spokespersons employ is the proper structure to deliver clear, concise and compelling messages.



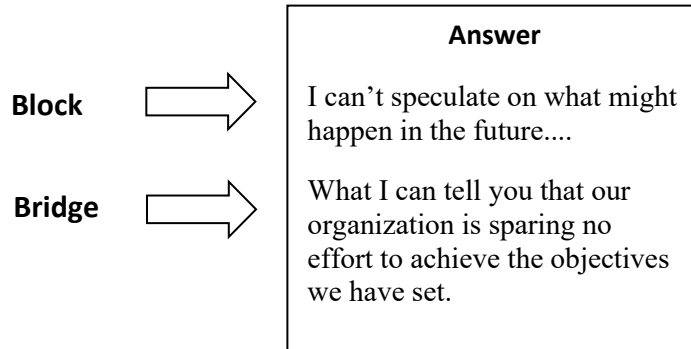
In everyday speech, we often put the most important point at the bottom of an answer. Effective spokespersons are able to place the key message at the top, in other words, front-loading. The real experts are also able to wrap up their answer with the key message at the bottom as well.

Steering the Interview

From the outset, it might appear that reporters have the upper hand in an interview but there are many ways spokespersons can steer the dialogue in the direction they want.

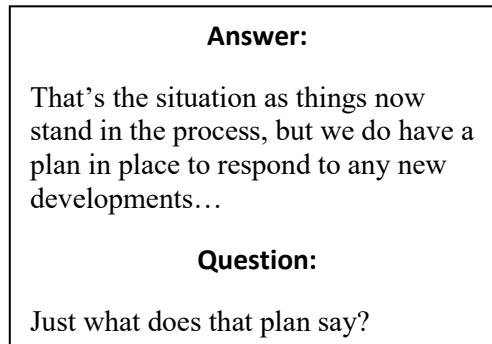
Bridging & blocking

This technique helps keep the answers on track or to return to a key message that bears repeating. For instance, if a reporter poses a hypothetical question, feel free to say:



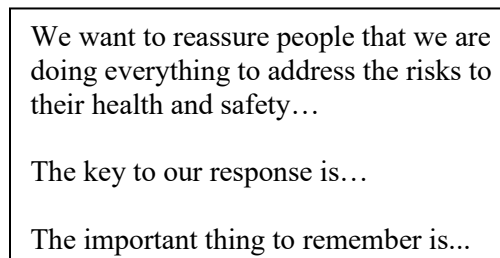
Leading the Interview

An open-ended answer can help lead the interview to your advantage. For example:



Emphasis

Key messages can be underlined to draw a reporter's attention to them and help increase the chances they will actually be used in a news story. Here are some examples:



Good Practices

The stress of an interview can have a negative impact on the outcome. Here are a few steps to lower the temperature and build confidence:

Rehearse

If you have access to a media relations or communications advisor, get them to set up a mock interview. This will test both your key message delivery and reflexes in handling the unexpected.

Tough Questions

Think of answers to the tough questions in advance, not just the easy ones. Most reporters will already be familiar with the basic news story and will be asking questions with a bit more edge.

On the Record

Everything said to a reporter - before, during and after the interview – is reportable. The temptation is to let your guard down outside the formal series of questions. Some reporters get their best quotes, from their standpoint, during the less formal conversation in the opening warm-up or just before saying goodbye.

Pacing

When nervous, the tendency is to talk quickly. Consciously slow down. This makes it easier to compose clear answers and direct your brain back to relevant key messages. A more deliberate pace also makes it easier for the reporter to properly understand the answer and avoid inadvertently misquoting you.

Key message checklist

Especially in a phone interview, it's best to have key message bullets on a single page as a quick reference that will prompt appropriate responses. Check off each key message as you deliver it.

Composure

Don't take it personally. Reporters can be aggressive and their questions pointed. This is not directed at the spokesperson per se. Take your time before responding in a cool, clear manner.

Plain language

Most reporters work for mainstream media and their audiences are not necessarily experts in your field. Tailor the language to average readers, listeners and viewers as you would with family and friends so that they will easily understand the issue. This means avoiding jargon or acronyms that may be second nature to your organization, but sound foreign to a mainstream audience.

Outcomes and Examples

Make the story come alive by giving examples of your organization's achievements or how it benefits people in a particular community.

Correct inaccuracies

Reporters don't always get it right. If you hear some wrong information in the question, don't be afraid to politely correct it. If inaccurate facts and figures are allowed to stand, they are very difficult to get corrected in subsequent news items.

Clarify

Questions may often be unfocused or contain many subordinate mini-questions. If unclear, ask the reporter to repeat the question, or paraphrase in your own words to confirm you properly understood.

Short and simple

Even complex issues can be explained in 30 to 45 second answers. Lengthy responses are often unfocused and contain no key message. Help the reporter write the story you want to see by sticking to one brief answer to each question.

Confirmation

Very few reporters are subject matter experts so it's best to confirm at the end of the interview that everything was clearly understood.

Additional information

Not every fact or figure may be at your fingertips during an interview. Rather than guessing at an answer, undertake to find the right information and send it to the reporter within his or her deadline.

Answers count

Don't wait for the perfect question to give the perfect response. If you do, chances are some of your key messages will never be delivered. Find a way to both answer the question while weaving in a key message. This is especially true with the first answer in an interview. Opening questions are usually broad enough to allow you a natural bridge to your top-line key message.

Anything to add?

At the end of interviews, reporters often ask their subject if they have anything more to say. This is a golden opportunity to repeat the top key message or add one other message that was missed earlier.

What to avoid

Personal opinions

Spokespersons speak for your organization or institution, not themselves. Avoid using the pronoun "I" in answers. Instead, talk about "our organization." It's then clear this is an official and not personal response.

Provocative questions

Avoid denying reporters' negative or provocative assertions. Too often, the denial ends up in a quote and audiences don't believe the spokesperson while the organization's true position is buried. Better to skip the natural temptation to deny and go straight to the real answer and your key message, which almost always starts with the very next sentence.

Multiple questions

Often questions are unfocused and contain statements or numerous sub-questions. Pick the one question that best serves your purpose and answer it. Reporters can always come back with follow-ups if they need more information.

No comment

A flat "no comment" to a question sounds evasive. Provide a reasonable explanation why the question cannot be responded to.

The silent treatment

Especially in phone interviews, some reporters will deliberately not pose a follow-up question and let the silence between you hang in the air. It's a deliberate attempt to draw out a longer answer. Avoid the temptation to fill the silence and ask the reporter if there are any further questions you can answer.

Third parties

Reporters will often toss out some information or quote they received from another entity or public interest group and ask your spokesperson to respond. Avoid the temptation to respond, especially if you haven't seen the quote. "I'm not familiar with what has been said by Group X so we're not in a position at this time to give a position," is a safe answer.

The yes/no question

Reporters like black or white, not gray. They might present a series of facts or statements and ask you to respond with a simple yes or no. Avoid the trap and go to a fuller answer that provides context and nuance. Reporters may not be satisfied with this type of response but they can only report what you give them.

Interrupted answers

Impatient reporters interrupt you in mid-answer. If you allow this to happen, it throws you off message. Better to ask the reporter to allow you to finish your answer before taking the next one.

Summary

1. Treat interviews as business meetings
2. Prepare and practice
3. Know and deliver your key messages
4. Front-load your key message
5. Understand your limits and stay inside the box
6. Accentuate the positive
7. Maintain control of the interview

Interview checklist

- Find out about the reporter. Your communications team keeps news clippings and can provide copies of previous articles.
- Talk to colleagues who have been interviewed by the same reporter.
- Decide when and where you will do the interview – by phone, in person, in front of an outdoor backdrop or TV double ender.
- Research current files on the subject and review existing media lines, backgrounders and fact sheets.
- Find out what your key stakeholders have recently said publicly about your subject.
- Prepare key messages on one page and number them in order of importance.

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- If possible, have a communications advisor attend. They can tape record the interview and call time-out if it exceeds the allotted time.
- Stay calm, confident and in control.
- Key messages are your anchor and should be repeated often.
- Review the final news story when it appears and verify which messages the reporter picked up.