

Fielding Interviews

Interview Requests

A news media interview can be one of the most important efforts you will ever make on behalf of your organization. With the explosion in the number of news outlets, especially in broadcasting, cable, and online, the odds of being asked to do an interview have increased dramatically.

If you are a “good interview,” the media will come back to you as often as they can. If you are not, they may turn to someone else, perhaps someone antagonistic to your position.

The initial request for an interview will probably come in the form of a telephone call from a reporter, editor, or producer. Before committing to an interview, you or your staff should try to find out:

- The name of the reporter who will be doing the story.
- What kind of information they want from you.
- Who else they are interviewing for the story.
- How the story came to their attention.
- How much time they expect to spend talking with you.
- The angle or theme of the story.

Before the interview, you or your communications staff should research:

- Whether the news organization has any apparent point of view or bias concerning you, your organization, or your issues.
- How the news organization has covered this or similar stories in the past.
- How much the reporter already knows about the subject.
- The reporter’s general style.
- How friendly or antagonistic he is likely to be.

Having this information in advance will minimize the element of surprise and help you prepare for the interview efficiently and strategically.

Interview Preparation Checklist

Before talking with any reporter, quickly run through the following series of questions:

- What is your strategic objective? Why are you doing this interview in the first place?
- Who is your target audience? Who are you trying to reach?
- What are their concerns and expectations?
- What questions are you likely to be asked?
- What categories do the anticipated questions fall into?
- How will you respond to each area of likely questioning?
- What questions should you avoid answering, and how do you plan to do it?
- What key message do you want to deliver no matter what? How do you want the story to be told? What do you want the target audience to remember?

Making Your Message Memorable

Just making your key point is never enough. You have to make sure that the reporter and the audience will remember it. There are a number of ways to make a message stand out and be remembered:

- **Word Pictures:** To get fresher milk, you'd have to keep a cow in your kitchen.
- **Quotations:** As Harry Truman used to say, "The buck stops here."
- **Startling Statistics:** New York City schools enrolled nearly a million students last year, a number roughly equal to the entire population of Nevada.
- **Metaphors:** We are a top-of-the-line company. You don't really expect us to sell our products at bottom-of-the-barrel prices.
- **Similes:** Our economy is on a course as disastrous as the Titanic heading for an iceberg.
- **Anecdotes:** I will never forget the day Joe Smith walked into our office with an idea to quadruple our production without spending a penny. He wanted to switch from flea collars to flea cuffs.
- **Analogies:** Denying tobacco subsidies to North Carolina is like telling Hawaii it can't grow pineapples. This is like asking us to dance Swan Lake wearing skis, and then complaining that we aren't very graceful. Blaming us for what happened is like punching out the mail carrier for delivering your credit card bill.
- **Alliteration:** It is a case of potholes and politics.
- **Pop Culture:** We are as dependable for our clients as Tom Brady is for the Patriots.
- **Colorful Action Words:** Overhaul vs. improve; launch vs. start; slash vs. cut.

Stay On-Brand

- When corresponding on behalf of SIOR, make sure that your SIOR designation is included in your signature
- Wear your SIOR pin to all SIOR-affiliated events, interviews, and speaking opportunities
- Inform Alexis Fermanis (afermanis@sior.com or 202-449-8226) of any interview opportunity you are participating in

Takeaway Tips

Regardless of the medium, there are some basic techniques that will help you gain confidence, maintain control, and ensure success in any media interview.

- **Prepare:** Whether you have 10 minutes or 10 days to prepare for an interview, use the time wisely to gather your facts, decide what you want to accomplish, and focus on what you want to say.
- **Keep it Simple:** No reporter is likely to remember more than one or two points, no matter how many you try to get across at any one time.
- **Understand the Audience:** Who does this news outlet reach? Why do they matter to you? Are they customers? Regulators? Politicians? The general public? Are they likely to be friends or adversaries? What are their concerns? What worries them? What makes them angry? What makes them happy? What do they expect of you?
- **Remember Your Mission:** You are doing the interview in order to make your point to an important target audience. Answering the reporter's questions is only the first step, a means to an end, never the end in itself. The news media is not your target audience.

- Don't Shy Away from Bridging: After you have worked through the process of identifying the categories of questions you are likely to be asked and coming up with solid responses, you need to decide on the key message you want to deliver in the interview and how you plan to do it. The technique is called bridging. If the reporter happens to ask a question that relates directly to the message you want to deliver, your answer would, of course, be that message and nothing else. But what if the reporter decides to ask a question from a different category? Going straight to your message without answering the reporter's question, however, will damage your credibility. So always be sure to answer the question that the reporter asks before adding a bridge phrase and moving on to the main point you want to make.
 - Example
 - Question: Something else
 - Response: Prepared response → BRIDGE → Your Message
 - Useful bridges include:
 - and...
 - but...
 - on the other hand...
 - what is really most important here is...
 - what you really need to remember is...
- Remember the Reporter's Mission: The reporter is not doing the interview to ruin your day. The reporter is only interested in getting a good story. You can help yourself by helping the reporter get a great story, one that includes your message.