

PREPARING FOR A MEDIA INTERVIEW.

Checklist 115



INTRODUCTION

Good media coverage, whether it be in the press, trade journals, on radio or television or via newer platforms such as websites, blogs and social media can be valuable in raising awareness of your organisation, creating a favourable impression and building your reputation. Current technology allows an image or remark to be broadcast to millions instantly so the media can prove a powerful and valuable ally but can also act as a negative force destroying relationships of trust and reputations which may have taken years to build up.

You may be reluctant to talk to the media or have had bad experiences in the past. However, doing an interview gives you an opportunity to give your “side of the story.” If you are nervous or shy, adequate preparation is likely to make you feel more confident. Handling the media effectively can lead to greater awareness of a brand, increased sales of a product or service, enhanced perceptions of an individual or organisation and improved competitive advantage. It can also help you to put a message across to a specific audience, explain your position on a topical issue or limit damage in the event of a crisis.

Conversely, handling the media ineffectively can result in a collapse of confidence, a damaged and tarnished reputation, a reduction of influence and respect, confusion, rumour and incorrect or unfair perceptions of a person, product or organisation, missed opportunities or even the end to a profitable business.

The way you handle media contacts, whether proactively or in response to a situation or event, can turn a situation around and create a lasting impression. Doing a successful interview requires clarity and control – it is all too easy to lay yourself open to misunderstanding or misinterpretation, or to be drawn into speaking carelessly and saying things which you later regret. To avoid these scenarios, you will need to plan and prepare carefully and take a calm and measured approach to the interview. This checklist provides guidance on preparing for an interview with the media, with specific guidance for different types of interview conducted across varying media platforms such as radio, TV etc.



DEFINITION

A media interview is any conversation with a journalist, broadcaster or blogger, whether it is live or recorded, conducted over the phone, by video link, via email or face to face. This may include radio or television broadcasts, and interviews with journalists from printed or online publications, and even social media.

1. Accept the interview and start to plan for it

Never be rushed in to giving an interview. Consider whether the offer is a good opportunity for you and comes from a reputable broadcaster or publication. In most situations, you will want to accept the offer in order to promote your business or to put across your version of events. Once you have accepted, it is usually helpful to decide what you want to achieve and then list no more than five points that you want to get across.

In situations when there has been some kind of disaster or crisis, you may need to step in quickly and at least make a brief comment, even if this does not consist of a full in-depth interview. This can put you in a difficult position as you will have to make some quick decisions about what to say and how to say it. Nevertheless, preparation can still help you as - a good business continuity plan will include guidance on how to deal with the media in emergencies. Certain stock phrases can be useful e.g. "Our people are working incredibly hard to resolve this and restore our usual standard of service."

2. Prepare and anticipate likely or difficult questions

Preparation is a highly useful way to avoid being tripped up. Consider the following questions:

- › What is the focus of media interest? For example, in the case of radio or TV broadcasts, what is the programme about?
- › Will the reporter or interviewer be referring to a particular source of information, e.g. a press release? If so, make sure that you have read this beforehand and are clear about the contents.
- › What does the interviewer already know and what do they want to learn?
- › How long will your contribution be?
- › Who else is being interviewed (e.g. a competitor or customer)?
- › Where will the interview take place and who will the interviewer be?
- › What questions are you likely to be asked?
- › Who is the audience?

As part of your preparation, make sure that you have answers ready for any difficult questions. Don't be afraid of politely challenging questions, assumptions or incorrect information, and make sure that you get back to the points you want to make, rather than being distracted by questions about other topics.

Are you an invited expert or are you defending an action taken by your organisation? This will determine the interviewer's style of questioning, and in the latter case, it is important to clarify in advance with your line manager what you can and cannot say.

3. Get comfortable and establish a rapport with the interviewer

If the interview is taking place outside of your home or workplace, do your best to arrive at the venue early so that you aren't rushed and can familiarise yourself with the surroundings. Talk to the interviewer beforehand and attempt to establish a rapport. It is also worth checking your appearance as this will certainly influence the interviewer, and depending on the type of interview, may also influence the viewer. Calm your nerves by breathing deeply, and using whichever relaxation techniques work for you. Focus on your opening sentences and the first main point to get you into the swing of things.

It is important to know what the journalist is looking for from the interview so that you can match their requirements with your own. Understand the journalist's motivation and remember that they have a job to do. Although they may not wish to trip you up, they may well do so inadvertently through lack of care, time or preparation. Remember to focus on your main points and use them as the substance with which to address the questions.

Don't assume that the journalist or your audience possess the same knowledge and information that you do. Keep the message clear and remember your objectives. It is also important to avoid using jargon or acronyms, and not to patronise the interviewer or the audience.

4. Project the right image – and don't be hostile

Be friendly, lively and enthusiastic, but don't put on an act. Convey your personality and your message in your tone of voice. It is important to appear confident, remain calm and not to become hostile; in most cases, the reporter really is simply trying to elicit information and not to cross-examine you.

If you are being interviewed in relation to a controversy involving your organisation, do not offer excuses or appear defensive. If your organisation has clearly made errors, an apology comes across well. It is not helpful to say "No comment!" or to be unavailable to answer questions. If you wish to take the line that the organisation has now taken action to minimise the likelihood that such an event will happen again, the audience will want specific details or evidence, such as examples or statistics, to prove this.

Beware of entering into informal conversations and giving information 'off the record'. Assume that any information you give to a reporter will be quoted.

5. Develop good relationships with the media

Consider generating your own stories and establishing ongoing relationships with the media, rather than seeing interviews as "one-offs." The media are frequently undervalued, mistrusted or only used in a crisis: a proactive approach to the media can be of enormous value in establishing understanding and goodwill.

Media training courses have become increasingly popular in recent years and may be worth considering if you are in a position where you need to deal with the media on a regular basis. Good media skills courses can help you to gain confidence, overcome fears of making a gaffe and give you practice in handling difficult questions.

6 Handling the press interview

1. Preparation

- › Newspaper and magazine interviews carry particular risks as you are dependent on the reporter's version of events. Ensure that you understand each other, the facts are correct and that the reporter understands the story.
- › Find out about:
 - › the reporter's 'angle' on the story and check that you are happy with it
 - › the target audience for the interview
 - › whether others with opposing views to your own will be quoted.

2. The interview

- › Provide good quotes - the written equivalent of the sound bite.
- › Remember that the press likes to present interesting rather than balanced accounts, and prefers to give examples or tell stories rather than provide general information.

3. Afterwards

- › You may wish to consider asking to see the article before it is published; be careful in making this kind of request however, as it may be considered offensive. Offer to take a call from the journalist later if they wish to double-check any points.
- › Remember that journalists are people too. If you behave in an agreeable manner and take their needs into consideration they will (usually) reciprocate. Be hostile, defensive or obstructive and you are unlikely to get an empathetic write-up.

7. Handling the TV interview

Some aspects of TV interviews are similar to radio interviews but consider the following points in addition:

1. In the studio

- › Dress appropriately: plain colours, no fussy patterns, avoid jewellery
- › Get used to the environment: arrive early and meet the interviewer if possible
- › Ask about the line of questioning: what is the first question etc.?
- › If you're offered make-up, accept it.

2. On location

- › If you are hosting the crew, find out beforehand what special arrangements they need for the shoot
- › Talk to the reporter(s) as soon as they arrive. Check that you see the situation the same way, and find out whether they need background information
- › Have your own ideas about where you would like to be filmed: consider any distractions and make sure that the background is suitable.

3. During the interview

- › Sit comfortably, and be friendly and natural
- › If in doubt, be serious - smiling can be misunderstood
- › Use positive body language
- › Don't fidget - relax!

8 Handling web chats and social media interviews

1. Preparation

- › Familiarise yourself with the technology being used. If you are totally unfamiliar with the medium you are using for the web chat, you may need to spend significant time learning about how it works.
- › If you feel very uncomfortable with using the technology, it may be better to decline the invitation, or at least have someone more knowledgeable on hand on the day to help you.
- › Have a back-up plan in case of any technical difficulties e.g. more than one device to access the internet .
- › Prior to the interview, check any “ground rules” or time limits with the interviewer.
- › Ask the interviewer if you can help spread the word about the web chat beforehand, using your own (social) media channels.

2. During the interview

- › Make sure you are able to type quickly enough to reply to questions rapidly. If you are a slow typer, get a trusted colleague with good typing skills to type the answers you dictate
- › Remember that people cannot “hear” your tone of voice online, so be careful in your use of humour.
- › Web chats are usually more informal but this does not mean that you should not take the time to ensure accurate spelling, grammar and punctuation.
- › Make sure replies are concise and written in an appropriate tone and style for the medium and the audience.

3. Afterwards

- › Check whether the conversation will be recorded or summarised anywhere and share the link with your networks to give the interview greater reach.



POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Managers should avoid:

- › being patronising or using jargon
- › becoming hostile, abrasive or flustered
- › being rushed into giving an interview or an answer
- › assuming the interviewer and audience know about you or your subject
- › ignoring the question
- › addressing problems. For pre-recorded interviews, ask to do it again if necessary.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

100 great PR ideas from leading companies around the world, Jim Blythe
London: Marshall Cavendish Business, 2009

Damage control: why everything you know about crisis management is wrong, Eric Dezenhall and John Weber
New York: Portfolio, 2007

Effective media relations: how to get results, 3rd ed, Michael Bland, Alison Theaker and David Wragg
London: Kogan Page, 2005

Evaluating public relations: a best practice guide to public relations, Tom Watson and Paul Noble
London: Kogan Page, 200

These books are available for loan to members from the CMI Library. [Click here](#) for more information.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Coping with the media in a crisis: succeeding where BP and Toyota failed, Tom Maddocks
Strategic Direction, vol 29 no 6 June 2013, pp 3-4

Facing the press, Steve Hemsley
Training Journal, May 2009, pp 42-46

These articles are available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at:
www.managers.org.uk/library.

INTERNET RESOURCES

6 tips for taking control in media interviews – Microsoft Business
<http://www.microsoft.com/business/en-us/resources/management/leadership-training/6-tips-for-taking-control-in-media-interviews.aspx?fbid=-sQeRDOJI5a>

RELATED CHECKLISTS

- 096** Face to face communication for interviews and meetings
- 200** Ensuring clear communication



NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- › Unit EC4 Communicate information and knowledge



MORE INFORMATION

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