

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA: A BASIC SURVIVAL GUIDE

GENERAL TIPS

CARDINAL RULE: DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE MEDIA.

- Because you'll avoid them.
- They'll do the story anyway. (And probably get it wrong because you were avoiding them.)

MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA AND YOU AREN'T SO DIFFERENT:

MEDIA

Serve the public by meeting demand.
Represent an organization.
Are people doing a job.

LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

Serve the public by meeting demand.
Represent an organization.
Are people doing a job.

NEWS IS EVERYWHERE ALL THE TIME:

- News coverage is designed to help build the audience for profit-making media.
- Reporters prefer stories about something that is wrong. ("Real news is bad news." Marshall McLuhan)
- We live in an age of "sound bite" journalism.

COMMUNITY JOURNALISM CAN BE DIFFERENT:

- Your local newspaper, radio or TV station is also interested in reporting what is going on in the community, what services are available to the people who live there, and telling the stories of people in the community.
- Good news or "feature" news also has a big part to play in educating the community about the services you provide and your local media outlets are interested.

HOWEVER, IN GENERAL, THE THREE C'S OF REPORTING ARE:

1. Conflict
2. Criticism
3. Controversy

A PRACTICAL VIEW OF THE NEWS:

- News is what is perceived as new today.
- Reporters are looking for the three C's.
- Whenever possible, turn negatives into positives. For example, interest in a program at your health department that begins because of controversy can end up informing people about a service you provide.

INTERVIEWS AND PHONE INQUIRIES

THREE KEY POINTS:

1. Ask questions before answering them.
2. Interview the interviewer. Anticipate the questions your answers are likely to trigger.
3. Have your own agenda and make opportunities to talk about it.

WHEN A REPORTER CALLS, ASK QUESTIONS INSTEAD OF ANSWERING THEM.

- What is the story about and what type of story is it?
- Who have you talked to and what documents have you seen?
- How does our health department fit into the story?
- What is the interview format?
- When will the story run and what is your deadline?

AGREE UPON A TIME TO CALL THE REPORTER BACK, THEN HANG UP AND ASK YOURSELF:

- What do you think the reporter believes about the story?
- Are you the best person to respond? Who is?
- Be certain your director or public affairs staff is aware of the call.
- Gather information the reporter wants.
- Decide what you can say and how you can say it.
- How can you get your organization's message in?
- What questions will your response trigger and how will you answer them?
- Where does the health department fit into this story?

NEVER:

1. Answer questions unless you feel you are fully prepared. (Even if it's just a couple of simple questions, offer to call the reporter back to give yourself a few minutes to think about your answers and jot down notes.)
2. Go into an interview just to answer a reporter's questions. (Have your own agenda: what message can you get out for your organization in this interview.)

WE LIVE IN AN AGE OF SOUND BITE JOURNALISM:

- No matter how complex the subject matter is, be brief. This means you say less. It also means what you say should be well thought-out. (10–15 seconds, 2–3 sentences)

- Work your message into every answer so it doesn't end up on the cutting room floor. This is especially important with TV and radio.
- Reporters are bound to ask tough questions, you are not bound to answer them.

Don't respond to questions about patient or client confidentiality, legal issues or personnel problems.

If you can't answer a question, always explain why. "No comment" is unacceptable. This is where you can talk about process, procedure or say that information is still being gathered or assessed.

On the following page is a helpful table listing some "Do's" and "Don'ts" in working with the media.

Do	Don't
Talk informally as cameras are being set up. Ask again about questions and prime the reporter with your views.	Use jargon, acronyms or technical terms. If a sixth grader wouldn't understand it, don't say it.
Take the initiative. Make your point in every answer.	Speak off the record. Anything you say to a reporter may be used (against you).
Keep answers short and simple.	Become angry or provoked. It's not personal. It's supposed to be an antagonistic relationship.
Talk in sound or ink bites.	Speculate, guess or conjecture.
Say "I don't know" when you don't.	Speak for someone else, or another agency.
Be positive in making your points.	<u>NEVER</u> lie to a reporter. If you've made a mistake, admit it and shift the focus to what is being done to correct the problem or assure it will never happen again.
Stop talking when you've answered a question. Don't feel obligated to fill a void to keep the interview going—that's the reporter's job.	Let a reporter put words in your mouth. Don't repeat inflammatory words or questions, or wrong information.
Be yourself. Be likable and engaging	Assume the reporter has it right. Don't react to new information a reporter gives you. Instead say, "I have not heard that" or "I'll have to check on that before I respond."
Remember that compassion and safety are always your first concern.	Speak disparagingly of anyone, even in jest.
Remain cool no matter how antagonistic the questions.	<u>Do not</u> ask to review articles or interviews before publication. Offer to clarify information if needed as they prepare their piece.
Always behave as though the camera is on.	Raise issues you don't want to see in print or on the news.

DEVELOPING A MESSAGE

THREE KEY POINTS:

1. Always have one positive objective/message with examples to support it.
2. State them in sound bite format, starting with the conclusion.
3. Bridge to your objective/message at every opportunity. Don't wait for good questions.

You should never do an interview without having your own objectives—messages you want to get out for your organization. It's not enough to just answer a reporter's questions. Messages can reflect the success of a program, indicate the need for action or support or oppose legislation or policy.

Good messages are simple, single and succinct.

Repeat your message in every answer you give. Reporters are used to this; not doing means your message can end up on the cutting room floor. (However, do not force it where it won't fit. Bridge to your message if asked a question that doesn't relate—technique discussed below.)

Turn your objective into a sound bite. For the purposes of this example, assume the objective is to alert the public about an epidemic and cause high risk individuals to take appropriate action.

Element	Example
Conclusion: A sound bite always begins with the conclusion.	"We will begin the immunization program immediately."
Evidence: Offer one or two brief points of explanation, elaboration or support.	"If there is a delay, thousands of people could become infected. The very young, older people, and those in poor health are at greatest risk."
Meaning: Explain how it will affect the viewer/reader or what action you want them to take.	"People who are in one of those groups should see their physician or visit a clinic right away."

To get to your objective when a reporter is asking an unrelated question, use the “bridging” or “touch and go” technique. Touch on the answer to the reporter’s question and go on—bridge—to your own objective.

EXAMPLE:

Question: “Why are you just dealing with this epidemic now when authorities predicted it months ago?”

Answer: “Only today were we able to obtain enough vaccine. Now that we have it, we will begin the immunization program immediately...etc.”

DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

THREE KEY POINTS FOR NEWSPAPER INTERVIEWS:

1. Print reporters often want more detail and substantiation. They may ask you to refer them to other authorities or agencies for confirmation.
2. Print reporters for large newspapers are more likely to be specialists in their area or knowledgeable about a specific “beat”.
3. Know before the interview what it is about and be prepared.

THREE KEY POINTS FOR RADIO INTERVIEWS:

1. Radio reporters want very short and simple answers. (Write down your sound bite and read it over the phone. However, don’t sound like you’re reading—be conversational.)
2. Radio wants a quick response. Stories last for only a few hours.
3. Commit to host or call-in shows only after you know the host’s agenda.

THREE KEY POINTS FOR TV INTERVIEWS:

1. How you look on television is more important than what you say. (Maintain eye contact with the reporter, smile naturally, have good posture, dress conservatively, and be aware of your backdrop. If the backdrop can reflect the subject of the story, rather than your office, suggest doing it there.)
2. Steady confidence and a smile convey confidence and believability.
3. Be yourself and shift to your objective whenever possible.

Reference: “*The Media and You: A Basic Survival Guide*” by the National Public Health Information Coalition.