

Module 3

The Art of Being Interviewed by the Media



THE SOUTHERN CENTER FOR

Communication, Health & Poverty

Background

If a reporter is interested in your story, it is likely that he or she will want to interview you. No two interviews will be alike. How they turn out will depend on the rapport you establish with the reporter, on the subject, and on how newsworthy your story is. Here are some tips on what to do -- and what not to do -- during media interviews.

Resources: The following section was adapted primarily from two resources, Community Toolbox (For more information on this topic go to: ctb.ku.edu) and “Introduction to Media Relations” (1992) by Bob Howard, Office of Public Affairs and Carol Robinson, Office of the Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information on how to obtain this resource go to: bookstore.phf.org.

The art of being interviewed

There are three major reasons for agreeing to do an interview: 1) to inform the public, 2) to tell your side of the story; and 3) to give good news about what your agency is doing about an issue. Simply gaining exposure for yourself or for your organization is not a good reason for granting an interview. You must have a well-conceived outcome in mind when agreeing to an interview.

Know what the interview is about

The first thing you have to do is decide whether you will grant the interview. Find out why a reporter is calling, give yourself time to prepare, then call back. To help you decide, answer the following questions:

- What does the reporter want to talk about?
- Are you the appropriate person to answer questions on this topic?
- What medium does the reporter work for?
- What is the format of the interview? Nightly news? Feature story? A blogger’s posting? Will the interview be taped? Will you be on camera live?
- Where will the interview be conducted? How long will it take?
- What is the reporter’s deadline?
- Are there any potential public relations liabilities to such an interview?

Crystalize your message

Once you know the subject and format of the interview, you must prepare yourself. The information you need to have ready includes:

- Any specific statistics you will need to cite
- Relevant dates, times, locations
- Names of the people involved
- Your objective
- Contact information



- Three to five key points you want to make

Prepare for the interview

Figure out what you want to accomplish in with this interview. Do you want to:



- Inform the public?
- Tell your side of a story?
- Give good news about what your organization is doing?

Don't just give interviews to get exposure; you should have an outcome in mind.

Outline your main points

Once you've decided to grant an interview, you should prepare three to five points (three is better) that will get your message across as briefly as possible – preferably in “sound bites” of 20 seconds or less. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the issue?
- What is your involvement in the issue?
- Why is it important?
- What is the historical perspective?



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Office of Communication/Media Relations, encourages CDC staff to prepare for interviews by developing a single overriding health communication objective (SOHCO) statement for communications with the press. A SOHCO usually consists of one sentence that sums up the most important aspect of what is being communicated followed by several statements that support or qualify that sentence. The next time you see the Director of the CDC on the television, see if you can pick out the SOHCO.

Prepare some interesting examples or statistics

It is always good to give concrete examples.

Rehearse

After you make a list of potential questions, go over your answers until you are confident you can handle each and every one. Do not read your answers during the interview.

An interview is not a conversation

The media are your conduit to the public. Speak to the public, not the reporter. Be friendly, but remember that interviews are how reporters conduct business. Do not say something you don't want to see in print.

There's no such thing as off the record

An "off the record" comment may not be attributed to you, but that doesn't mean it won't appear in the paper or be used to confirm information.

Tell the truth

The truth is bound to come out eventually so it is better to be honest from the start.

Be particularly aware of reporters' deadlines

Reporters have a job to do and so do the editors. The deadline may be weeks – or minutes away. You being respectful for other people’s deadlines will go a long way in ensuring positive media relations in the future.

Listen to the question carefully

Some people are really good at listening before talking, others are not and begin engaging before listening to the whole question or processing the question. Do yourself and the reporter a favor by listening to carefully to the question. If you do not understand the question it is alright to ask for clarification.

Keep it simple

Nothing ruins an interview faster than long, complex explanations. If you want your message conveyed, be sure to say it simply. Sometimes a simple metaphor or analogy can help the public comprehend a complex situation.

Be brief

Practice answering questions in 20 seconds or less. Chances are, the reporter will use the first decent 20-second comment and skip much of the rest. It will also help if you have a couple of quotes ready.

Don’t rush yourself.

Thoughtful answers take time. If you need a moment to think, take one.

Speak at a normal pace.

Don’t speak too slowly or too quickly.

It is okay to rephrase the question

However, be clear that you are rephrasing the question to give an accurate answer. It is also okay to ask the reporter to repeat questions.



It is okay to repeat an answer

At times a reporter or information seeker may not like your answer (or find the answer incomplete) and will ask it again. As a result, some people who are trying to be helpful will go off on tangents that seem contradictory. You can always repeat what you said.

Understand that everything you say will not be reported

A reporter may have a different agenda than you, and hence everything you say may not appear in print.

Some of what you say may not be accurately reported

Reporters make mistakes on occasion. That is why it is vital that you are give them lucid answers It is acceptable for you to repeat the main message over in different ways. You can encourage them to contact you for a final “fact check” once they have written their copy.

Class activity 3.1- Creating a single overriding health communication objective

Using CDC’s Office of Communication/Media Relations MMWR Single Overriding Health Communication Objective (SOHCO) Template below, create a SOHCO for a health-related event that is relevant to your interests.

1. In one paragraph, please state YOUR key point or objective in giving this interview. This statement should reflect what you, the interviewee, would like to see as the lead paragraph in a newspaper story or in a broadcast news report about your event or news item.

2. List three facts or statistics you would like the public to remember as a result of reading or hearing about your event or news item.

3. What is the main audience or population segment you would like this report to reach?

4. What is the one message the audience needs to take from this report?

5. Who in your office will serve as the follow-up point-of-contact for media questions?

Primary press contact	Secondary press contact
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6. Name: Degree(s): Phone: Title: Division/Center: Date and time available:

Source: Adapted from Center for Disease Control and Prevention
(www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/CDCynergy_training/Content/activeinformation/resources/SOHCO_Worksheet.pdf)

During the interview

Here are some further pointers for you to keep in mind before and during the interview:

- Prepare yourself for the questions in advance. If possible, ask for a sample of questions.
- Be familiar with the topic of the interview.
- Dress appropriately.
- Don't be afraid of sounding ignorant by asking the reporter to repeat questions.
- Never answer rudeness with rudeness.
- Before wrapping the interview, make sure you made your point clear. Recap with the interviewer if necessary.
- Watch and listen.
- Stay relaxed and be yourself while watching what you say.
- If you cite names, occupations and addresses, get them right.
- Think about ideas for pictures or images they can use and provide them if you can.
- Try not to use jargon; readers understand simple English better.
- Prepare some catchy responses that address things you particularly want to highlight, and look for opportunities to throw them in.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, just admit it and offer to find it out.
- Be sure to steer clear from stereotypes and biases --being offensive is rarely effective.



Be attentive to all the parts of the interview. At times, the most important question for the story may be buried in the interview.

The reporter is probably going to use a tape recorder to enhance the accuracy of the story. Reporters will usually ask for permission to use a tape recorder and once you grant the permission, be extra careful with what you say. Behave as if you are being recorded, whether you are or not. Do not be intimidated or silenced by a tape recorder, though. Speak naturally, and give it a break when it is necessary to change tape sides.

Remember that what you want is to grab the readers' or spectators' attention. To do that, the simplest ways are the best. Keep your sentences short, your introduction brief and to the point, and your approach straightforward.

Here is an easy outline to remember.

- First Sentence-Make a statement that answers the reporter's question as briefly as possible.
- Second Sentence-Support your answer.
- Third Sentence-Transition into your message or SOHCO.
- Fourth Sentence-State your message.

Gather background information for your interviewer

Background materials are helpful to a reporter, particularly if a topic is complex.

Anticipate tough questions and prepare your answers

List the ten most difficult questions you might be asked regarding the interview topic and the ten most difficult questions in general. Think about how you will transition from answering these questions into a key point you want to make.

Resource: CDCynergy (www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc) provides a list of questions that are most likely to be asked during an emergency situation. Use the following questions to develop appropriate answers about a specific event.

- What is your name and title?
- What happened or, what is happening?
- What measures are being taken?
- Has this ever happened before?
- Who is involved?
- Is anyone to blame?
- Is there danger now?
- Do you accept responsibility?
- How much will this cost?
- Was anyone hurt or killed? What are their names?
- How much damage was caused?
- When will we find out more?
- What can private citizens do to help?

A word of caution: Do not say anything you don't want to hear on the news or read in the paper tomorrow morning. Quotes can be taken out of context, jokes can end up in the headline, and a badly placed word can tarnish your organization for a long time. Watch out for any libelous and offensive statements. If you want to be off the record (that is, say something that is not official part of the interview), you have to say so before you start talking, not after. A word of caution, off-the-records statement might still be used, although not attributed to you. You'll be on the safe side if you assume that everything you say is on the record and could be used by the media.

Make sure you speak loudly and clearly

Speak up. Use broad gestures and tone of voice. Smile when it's appropriate. Long after you have appeared on a television or radio show, people will remember you and the impression you made. That impression should be of a confident, thoughtful, caring individual

Personal space

Be prepared for a necessary closeness with a television interviewer, for the camera's sake. You may

be rubbing shoulders or bumping knees with the interviewer, or talking with a microphone in your face. Do not back away.

Gestures

Gestures are a means of using stress energy effectively. It is acceptable to gesture.

Sitting

Sit up straight. Don't swivel or rock.

Cross your legs at the knees or sit with your legs at a 45 degree angle in the chair, legs crossed at ankles or feet together, one in front of the other.

In the television studio, do not jump out of your seat too quickly. The show's credits may be rolling over the scene of you sitting on the set. Consider yourself on camera until the show's director says you are finished.

Do not lean on the arm rest of the chair, you look too casual. Lean forward a little, showing interest, not back, showing fear or indifference.

Standing

Stand up straight. Beware of slouching and tilted shoulders. Don't rock forward and back or sway side to side.

Keep your hands at your sides or bend your elbows slightly at your waist. Do not put your hands in your pockets, do not hold them in front of you and do not cross your arms over your chest. If you are uncomfortable with your hands at your sides, try holding a notebook or other "prop."

Head

Hold your head high. Do not tilt it to one side.

Beware of your image as an "active listener." Nod in apparent agreement to (or at least comprehension of) comments with which you may not agree.

Eyes

TV cameras get much closer to your face than most people, so your eye movement is critical.

Do not look at the camera. Look at the reporter 100 percent of the time. Focus on the bridge of the interviewer's nose if you are uncomfortable looking into her or his eyes continuously. Pay attention to what's happening, or you may be embarrassed when the camera catches your eyes wandering.

Do not look up at the ceiling or down at the floor.

Don't shift your eyes from side to side.

Voice

When asked by a sound engineer to give a voice level, use this opportunity to "set the stage" for the

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interview. The engineer wants to know your voice's normal speaking level so say your name, title and what you would like to talk about.

Beware of leaning toward and away from a stationary microphone while you are talking, as this causes your voice to become louder and softer.

In a radio interview, your voice is all you have, so beware of speaking in a dull monotone. Project, be expressive, and you will come across better.

Voices sound best if they are from the lower register, yet they often get higher when people are nervous. You can lower your voice through awareness and controlled, deep breathing.

Clothing

Wear clothes that are comfortable.

Solid colors or soft shades are best. A burgundy tie or scarf will reflect color onto the face. A light blue shirt or blouse, burgundy tie or scarf and navy jacket is ideal for television.

Make sure your socks are long enough to avoid a gap between your pant leg and the top of your sock.

Button a jacket when standing; unbutton when seated.

Do not wear high contrasts like black and white. Avoid horizontal stripes, hounds-tooth and other distracting patterns. Patterns such as these can look distorted on camera.

Stress

Most people get butterflies in their stomachs at the idea of an interview, especially one before the camera. Be aware of how you show stress and control it. Don't allow nervous gestures, such as pulling at your hair, swinging your foot or smiling too broadly, spoil an otherwise successful interview. Nervousness vanishes with frequency. The more interviews you give, the easier they will be.

Additional hints, tips, and suggestions

Source: The following information was taken from a one-day training session called "Facing the Media". This training was presented at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia in December 2002. This information can be accessed online at: [www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Face The Media Course Materials/](http://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Face%20The%20Media%20Course%20Materials/). See the "Tips, Hints, and Suggestions for Spokespersons" handout.

Telephone Interview Tips

- Know who is on the other end of the line.
- Ask whether you are being recorded.
- Ask when and where the information will be used.
- Spell out difficult names and technical terms and phrases.
- Limit the time available for the interview.
- Be certain to explicitly check with reporters to ensure that they have understood your points.

Radio Interview Tips

- A live interview is very different from a taped interview.
- Watch out for verbal pauses— “Uh,” “Um,” and “You know.”
- Radio will not be as in-depth as print.
- Be careful not to repeat any negatives in a reporter’s question. Even if you are contradicting the negatives supposition (e.g., “I wouldn’t say that the vaccination campaign was a disappointment”), listeners may recall your statement as confirming the negative assessment.

Suggested Transitions

- “What I think you are really asking is...”
- “The overall issue is...”
- “What’s important to remember is...”
- “It’s our policy not to discuss (x), but what I can say is...”

Ten Rules for a Successful Interview

1. Be yourself.
2. Know your message.
3. Stick to your expertise.
4. Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know.”
5. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and statistics.
6. Be brief and to the point.
7. Personalize your answers.
8. Never repeat or introduce a negative.
9. Answer questions with:
 - a) conclusion
 - b) explanation/transition
 - c) your core message
10. Maintain eye contact.”



Coping with sticky situations and trick questions. Or, “what to do when....”

When the interviewer expects you to comment on issues beyond your expertise:

- Inform the interviewer that you are only prepared to answer questions related to your expertise as a spokesperson.
- Transition into key message points.
- If the interviewer persists, say “I’m sorry; I’m unable to answer your question.
- Stick to the substance of your message.

When the interviewer is unprepared and asks irrelevant questions:

- Take control by reaffirming your expertise.
- Stress your key message points, feeding him questions about your topic.
- Involve the interviewer by asking questions about his experiences and concerns.

When the interviewer/guest keeps interrupting you in mid-sentence:

- When it happens again, say “I will be happy to respond to your comment, but first let me finish with mine.”
- Be pleasant, but insist on your right to give complete responses.
- Do not interrupt a questioner!

When the interviewer is particularly antagonistic and asks one hostile question after another:

- Do not become combative. Maintain your enthusiasm.
- Do not repeat a negative question.
- Remember, you are well prepared and rehearsed.
- Answer questions with a brief response, then transition to a key message

When the reporter keeps raising his or her voice higher and higher.

- Don’t respond by raising your voice.
- Each time the reporter raises his voice, lower yours.
- Remain calm, and stick to your message.

When a reporter puts down his microphone and says, “Let’s go off the record”

- Never go off the record with a reporter.
- Assume that anything you say in the presence of a reporter will be quoted.
- Assume that anything you say in the presence of a reporter’s equipment will be quoted.”

Source: The above information was taken from a one-day training session called "Facing the Media". This training was presented at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia in December 2002. This information can be accessed online at:
[www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Face The Media Course Materials/handouts/Coping.pdf](http://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/erc/Face%20The%20Media%20Course%20Materials/handouts/Coping.pdf)

Class activity 3.2 -Critique a press briefing

Students may listen to a simulated press briefing presentation at the Emergency Risk Communication site of the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice. Go to:
www.nwcphp.org/riskcomm/messaging/messaging_exercise. Students can compare their own critiques with one that is available at that web site.

After an Interview

Thank the reporter for his or her time and offer to answer questions that may come up later. Offer to be available so the reporter can double check your quotes with you. If you don't like what a reporter wrote about your organization, keep it to yourself unless you can back up a contrary opinion with fact. If a reporter misrepresents the facts, ask for a correction in print or on the air. Always be professional and courteous with reporters (even when you don't like them).

Regardless of the circumstances of your interview--over the phone, in-person, over the radio, on television--if you can anticipate the questions the media want answered and stick with exactly what you want to tell them, then your interview experience can be exciting and effective.

What should you do if you're misquoted?

Sometimes, reporters will take the liberty of editing your interview. That's quite a usual practice, aimed at making you sound better. However, sometimes this editing can misrepresent an important point you need to make. If your edited quote captures the gist of what you said, let it go. However, if what you read doesn't sound like you, or was flat-out fabricated, you should take action. Treat everyone with respect, apologize for whatever is your fault, but take steps to correct the error right away and restate your initiative's real intentions and ideas. Such steps might include sending a request for a correction on the next issue, writing a letter to the editor, or writing a column explaining that what was attributed to you doesn't reflect your actual views.

Class activity 3.3 – Mock interviews

Arrange for students to practice mock interviews. One student can play the role of the reporter and the other can play the health official being interviewed. For greatest impact on student learning, the interviews should be videotaped so that students can engage in critical self-reflection.

Hint: The interview assignment will be successful only to the degree that interviewer and interviewee are both well briefed about some health event that could plausibly serve as the subject of a public health interview. Having students read well-developed case studies in preparation for the interview will be most helpful. Extensive case studies regarding environmental health issues can be obtained from the ATSDR web-site. Other sources for case studies to use in this interviewing activity include Turning Point Social Marketing National Excellence Collaborative (www.turningpointprogram.org), Health Canada's Tools of Change (www.toolsofchange.com/english/casestudies.asp), and the online journal *Cases in Public Health Communication and Marketing* (www.casesjournal.org).

Alternative activity – Attend a press briefing

Assign your students to attend a press briefing or other health event to which the press have been invited. Information about such events can be solicited from local health agencies or from journalists. Obtain a copy of the press kit prior to attending the event if you can. If possible, students should obtain a copy of the press sign-in sheet. That way, they can contact reporters after the fact to query about whether and how the reporters were able to craft stories about the event.

Students can also collect press clippings resulting from subsequent coverage of the press briefing.