

Print Interview Tips

Preparation

- Prepare your key messages and talking points before the interview. Preparing messages and talking points will help you control the message and prevent a reporter from misquoting you.
- Never “wing it”; if a reporter calls you, never agree to an interview right at that moment. You need to give yourself time to develop your talking points. Ask the reporter the nature of the interview, the other people she will be interviewing for her story, and when her deadline is. Then set up an interview time later in the day, but with plenty of time to make the deadline. If someone else sets up your interviews, they should ask the same questions and give you enough time to prepare.
- Get familiar with the newspaper or magazine with which you’ll be interviewing. What is its political slant? Who is its readership? Do some research and read a couple of articles written by the reporter with whom you’ll be speaking. Is this a column that’s likely to be heavy on opinion or is it a news article, which is likely to be more fact-driven. Is the reporter sympathetic to your cause? Is she liberal? Conservative?
- Role-play with one of your colleagues prior to your interview. The role-play should anticipate the types of question the reporter is likely to ask.
- If you are interviewing over the phone, print out any “cheat sheets” that you need for reference. The beauty of phone interviews is that the reporter can’t see you, so you can use notes to help you make your points.

Your Message

- Speak in sound bites—or short, pithy, attention-grabbing quotes that communicate the gist of your message. If you want to make sure you are quoted accurately, repeat your message a few different times. Print reporters, especially those working for dailies, have no time to transcribe an interview from a tape recorder. They spend most of their time looking for colorful sound bites. It’s your job to make sure you repeat your message throughout the interview, and deliver your message through colorful sound bites.
- Remember that the person you are communicating with isn’t the reporter, but the people who will read her story the next day. Think about the readers while you’re delivering your sound bites and messages.

- If a reporter asks you a detailed, multi-part question, focus on answering the one question that leads you back to your key messages.
- You never have to answer a question directly. Bridge back to your messages with a prefatory statement like, “The single most important thing to remember is....”

Speaking Tips

- If you hear a reporter typing while doing a phone interview and you’re delivering one of your sound bites, slow down to let the reporter catch up. Then repeat the exact quote again.
- Strive to appear more reasonable than your opponents.
- If appropriate, humor can help you score a memorable quote. Use a funny sound bite or wry or glib quote to get across your message.
- Don’t use sarcasm; it doesn’t translate well in the media, especially in print.
- Avoid using jargon, acronyms or insider vocabulary.
- Don’t overwhelm a reporter with too many numbers or statistics. Key findings are good if they help define the story, but to languish in numbers bores anyone who may be reading the story.
- Never say “no comment”. It sounds like you have something to hide. It’s better to tell a reporter that you don’t know the answer or that you’re unclear about the answer based on your current understanding of the information.
- Assume everything you say is on the record unless you have a very specific agreement otherwise. Just because the pencil has been put away doesn’t mean that the reporter might not use something you say on the way to the door.

“A good newspaper quote is like a crouton in a salad. It is there for accent, flavor, and a touch of texture.”

Joel P. Engardio, Reporter