

Mastering a Media Interview (or at best - making it through without imploding!)

- I. When a reporter requests an interview, it is imperative that YOU become the reporter. Exercise due diligence and ask: 'Who? What? When? Where? How and WHY (...me)?
- II. When setting an interview date, unless it is the day of the request, try to give yourself some time to prepare.
- III. Preparation:
 - a. Preview any shows or publications as a way to understand who the audience will be.
 - b. During your presentation, make a list of points you could or would like to make regardless of their importance. Next:
 - i. Distill your message to three (3) core messages.
 - ii. Prepare positive and concise answers, about 20 to 30 seconds in length. If you ramble, you risk being misquoted.
 - iii. The significance of soundbites?
 - iv. Use simple, straight-forward language. You don't want to 'dumb it down' however you don't want to be too complex.
 - v. Practice turning an abstract or complex message into a soundbite.
- IV. The Tape is Rolling - The Interview:
 - a. Before a radio or television interview begins, the reporter, engineer or sound technician will do a 'mic' check to test voice levels and make certain the equipment is working. The reporter will ask dummy questions while the tape or camera is rolling.
 - b. It's okay to have notes however try not to look at them especially for a TV interview.
 - c. Ask questions for clarification.
 - d. Beware of the reporter's body language. He or she may be trying to interrupt if you are giving a gusty or confusing answer.
 - e. How to handle frequent interruptions.
 - f. Flag your 'important' statements. Ex: "That's a good questions.., I'm glad you asked that question..."
 - g. Don't change the subject without warning. Use transitional phrases.
 - h. If you don't have the answer to a question, it is okay to say "I don't know." This however is a prime opportunity to become a reporter's best friend or at very least, develop an on-going relationship by making yourself an invaluable resource.

- i. Correct reporters if they are wrong. Remember, you're the expert. The report is there to learn - ideally.
- j. How to answer positive questions and follow up with another one of your key messages - 'The Bridge' "Another thing your viewers/listeners would like to know is...."
- k. How to answer negative questions. Don't fight fire with fire.
- l. If there's a long pause or silence, keep quiet.
- V. When interviews go bad - Look forward not back.
 - a. Be careful of attacking the reporter. You don't want to get into a grudge match.
 - b. If the reporter went in one direction and you were advocating another, issue an invitation.
 - c. What to do in the instance of a glaring factual error. Write a letter to the editor/producer.
 - d. Don't go it alone. Use resources and network to ask advice and direction.

10 Tips for Handling Inquiries, Interviews

[Excerpt from the August 2010 issue of Principal Investigator Advisor]

Regardless of whether you think talking to the media falls under a PI's job description, at some point in your career a reporter may call or your institution may ask you to speak to the media. Whether the reporter seeks background on an in-depth examination of a science or societal trend, a sound bite for breaking news coverage, or is focusing an unwanted spotlight, it is in your best interest to be prepared.

Here are [10 ways](#) to do that:

1. Know who is calling and why. Get the reporter's name and media outlet. Find out why the reporter asked you for an interview, and try to get a sense of the his or her focus or angle. If you feel you are not the best person to address the subject, say so.
2. Buy time to prepare. Confirm the reporter's deadline. Set a time to speak within that time frame to allow you to gather your thoughts. Resist the temptation to wing it.
3. Know the audience. With the reporter's outlet, angle, and audience in mind, consider both your message and the best way to convey it to that particular audience.
4. Know your message and stay on it. Don't leave yourself open to misinterpretation. Create a headline in advance and make it the lead point. Think of different ways to communicate that point, and be sure to reinforce it in every response.

5. Avoid jargon and technical language. You are not talking to your peers. Overuse of specialized terms will obscure your message and lose the audience. If a term is absolutely essential, use it and then define it in layman's terms.
6. Respect the reporter. Never talk down to or become argumentative. If a reporter is misinformed or cites incorrect facts, remember you are the expert and politely correct him or her. And, be sure to get the reporter's name right in on-air interviews.
7. Avoid "no comment." This classic retort makes you look like you're trying to hide something. If you cannot answer, explain why.
8. Do not speculate. Speculative answers may come back to haunt you. If you can't answer to a question, say so and promise to get back to the reporter with information. Hypothetical questions are notorious minefields. Do not be enticed to respond to what-if scenarios.
9. If it shouldn't be in the news, don't say it. "Off the record" is a myth. Always be aware when microphones, cameras, or tape recorders are present.
10. Appearance matters on camera. Dress simply and conservatively. Sit up straight. Be mindful of your body language. Don't make Richard Nixon's mistake (before his televised interview with John F. Kennedy): always say yes to make-up!