

The Three Pillars of Media Interviews *Preparation, Presentation, Professionalism*

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I conducted a lot of interviews during my time as a news reporter. From the power elite of major corporations to authors, athletes, public and elected officials. All were unique experiences. Some of these interviews were quite brief. The subject was well prepared and provided the information in a way that made it easy for me to understand. They offered clean, concise statements that nicely summed up their view of the issue at hand. More often than not, these comments would end up as a quote in the upcoming news report. I was generally inclined to keep these contacts in my resource file as a source of informed perspective for future news items.

Unfortunately, not all interviews were so simple. Some appeared to be inadequately prepared. A simple question might lead to a lengthy, convoluted response forcing the reporter to seek clarification by asking additional questions. The unexpected follow up questions and longer-than-anticipated interview would often add to the subject's stress level making it more difficult for them to clearly articulate their point of view. I would often walk away from these interviews with copious amounts of written notes and recorded voice on tape with the nagging realization that I still did not fully comprehend the point they wanted to make. The truth is, without a clear sense of what they were trying to say or the point they were trying to make, it was unlikely that they would receive good coverage in the upcoming news item. Worse still, they ran the possible risk of being taken out of context or misquoted.

So, what's the difference between a good interview subject and a bad one? Well, after much consideration and a number of years of experience on both sides of the microphone, I put it down to what I call the three pillars of media interviews; ***Preparation, Presentation and Professionalism.***

Preparation

I remember asking an elected official how many schools there were in the school district we were in. Neither he nor his staff could answer that question, even though I had been asked by that minister's staff to attend the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new elementary school. This lack of preparation became increasingly evident through other questions posed by media during the event that afternoon. Clearly, the official had not been well briefed by his staff, which did not stand him in good stead on the evening news that night. Being prepared is critical to being a good interview subject. If you set yourself up as an expert in your area of expertise, the reporter will expect that you know your subject matter inside and out. Here are some things that you can do to be prepared for your interview:

Fact Sheet

As a public relations consultant, I am often asked to help my clients prepare for an upcoming media interview. One of the first things that I do is help them create a one or two-page fact sheet that covers the five W's of the event (who, what, when, why and where), including key points or messages that they want to deliver about their organization and snappy answers to the most likely asked questions. I encourage them to memorize the facts and to keep the sheet with them at all times. It can also be printed out and form the basis of a media kit or handout for reporters.

Media List

You should follow your media market and the reporters who work in it closely. Make a list of the journalists most likely to cover your area of expertise. Watch or read their news reports and learn how they build their story lines, what questions they tend to ask and what they find interesting. Some media websites will list reporters along with their bios. This can be a good place to start building your media file. Those with bigger budgets may purchase national, regional or local media lists that give the reporters contact information along with their areas of unique interest.

Key Messages

Developing and delivering key messages are critical to a successful interview. You should create no more than three key points or messages that you wish to deliver during your upcoming interview. Each message must be carefully crafted to be short and concise.

The Value Proposition

A good way to approach the development of key messages is to consider the notion of the Value Proposition. A value proposition is a clear statement of the tangible results a customer gets from using your products or services. The more specific your value proposition, the better. For example, if you run a company, your value proposition (key messages) might answer the following questions:

- Who are we?
- What do we do or what is our product or service?
- Why you should hire us, or buy our product or service?

Understand different media formats

You should always tailor your key messages and collateral materials to meet the unique nature of the different forms of media. For example, key message should be no more than fifteen (15) seconds for radio. From fifteen (15) to thirty (30) seconds for television and can be somewhat longer for print media (newspaper, magazine, trade publications).

Your Media “Mantra”

Once you've developed your key messages, you should memorize them and practice delivering them to your co-workers, friends or family. By creating these messages, tailor-made to fit specific media, and memorizing them, you run a far better chance of being quoted accurately.

Presentation

A good presentation will ensure that your statements and key messages are clearly understood. The better you present your story, the greater the chance that you will be quoted accurately. Each medium (Newsprint, radio, television) is unique and your presentation style should reflect this.

Newsprint

Newspaper and other print media journalists usually have a bit more time to spend on their stories. Interviews are regularly conducted over the phone. You can provide longer, more detailed responses and cite more facts and figures because readers control the pace of information they are receiving. Print media will run photographs, charts or other graphics only if they feel it helps to tell the story or clarifies a complex concept or idea. I always advise my clients to create a package of print ready images that can be quickly emailed to a print writer or journalist immediately after an interview.

Radio

Radio is far more relaxed than television and I have found that my clients are relatively comfortable with this format. However, because radio lacks visuals and is often used as a background while listeners are driving or at work or play, it is the worst medium for citing facts and figures. Crisp, fifteen-second sound bites are best suited for radio interviews. One advantage of radio is that the newscasts are regular throughout the day and reporters and news directors are challenged to change their approach to the story from one newscast to the next. Knowing this, you can present a number of concise, key messages that are likely to be used.

Television

Television remains the most daunting media interview for most. This is understandable given its heightened cultural mystique. We have all seen the dramatic images of intended interviewees attempting to make their escape through the parking lot with camera crew and journalist in hot pursuit. There's also a lot of potential distraction during the on-camera interview as well. The camera technician may move around to get additional angles and search for optimum lighting conditions and there are few things that draw a crowd of onlookers faster than a television news crew.

However, because it combines sound and pictures, it is a very powerful medium. If used correctly, it can certainly boost your company brand and increase awareness of your products and services.

Contrary to popular belief, the TV reporter is not there to trick you into making a mistake, or to create undue stress for you. They are simply doing their job, finding perspective on a story that they intend to run in the near future. Always remember that they need you in order to do it. The key is to work with the reporter. Meet with the reporter prior to the interview and get a sense of the questions that they are likely to ask or what additional information they need to finish their story. If you make a mistake when you answer a question or think that your statement was not very clear then stop. Ask the reporter to give you a minute to get your thoughts straight and then get them to ask the question again. In most cases, the reporter will be pleased to get a clear, concise statement on film that can be effectively used to tell the story.

Professionalism

Deadline

If you intend on being interviewed by media, then you owe it to yourself, your organization and the reporter, to be professional. When a reporter calls to request an interview, you should always ask who they are, what news outlet they work for and, most importantly, what their deadline is.

New Angles

Reporters are always looking for new story angles. Don't hesitate to speak up if you have some interesting data or other information you think might be of interest and is related to the subject at hand.

Be Ready

Be ready to do the interview. Reporters are often on tight deadlines and you may be one of many interviews they are conducting that day. If you have prepared well, have memorized your key messages and practiced them, you will be more confident. This will be noted by the reporter and greatly enhance the quality of your interview. This in turn will be reflected in how you are perceived by those who read, hear or see the story.

Ask for feedback

I always find it important to ask the reporter for feedback on the interview. More often or not they will tell you what they thought and might even suggest ways that you can improve. Always ask the reporter if they have all the information they need to finish the story and provide any collateral materials that you think might help. Remember that the reporter is always on deadline and rarely has a lot of extra time to research and read materials.

Media Kit

The secret to a good media kit is to keep it short and concise. I prefer a three-page kit formulated along the lines of the value proposition. One page on who you are, another on what you do, and another that gives the benefits of your products or services. Depending on the situation, you might also add a fourth page that includes brief answers to commonly asked questions about your organization or your services.

Dealing with media can be as simple, or as difficult, as you want to make it. If you are well prepared, have worked hard on your presentation skills and maintain a professional attitude you might even enjoy that next interview.

*Kevin Boothroyd is recognized as an expert on strategic communications planning and stakeholder development, especially in the highly complex and challenging area of public-private partnerships (P3). His public relations career has included senior positions with private and public sector corporations, industry associations, not-for-profit agencies and government. He is a former board member and past-President of the Vancouver chapter of the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), former National Board Member of the CPRS. He is currently POC's Public Relations Consultant.