

Giving successful media interviews

A radio or television interview is a great opportunity to get your message across to a wide audience, but it can sometimes be a daunting prospect. Fear of drying up and being put on the spot can be a deterrent to even the most hardened media performers.

The key to any successful media interview is preparation. There really is no substitute for ensuring you put in a polished, professional performance that will convince viewers and listeners of your case and have broadcasters inviting you back for more.

Deciding whether to go ahead

There are certain questions you should always ask a journalist before agreeing to give an interview:

- **Which programme are they working for?** Which TV channel or radio station is it on? Do you know it? If not, ask what sort of audience it attracts and find out as much as you can about it. Don't be afraid to ask as many questions as you need to.
- **Where and when is the interview to take place?** Remember that journalists are often working to very tight deadlines so you may be asked to do an interview at what seems like very short notice. If it's radio, you could be asked to do the interview over the phone, face-to-face with a reporter and their tape recorder in your agency, or you may be asked to go into a studio. If it's TV, then either the TV crew will come to you, or you will need to go into the studio. In some cases you may be asked to do something 'down the line'. This means you are in a remote studio where you will hear, but not see, your interviewer.
- **Will it be 'live' or pre-recorded?** If it's live, you will be heard exactly as you speak, and everything you say will be used. If it's pre-recorded, what you say will probably be edited down to a 'clip' or sound bite as part of a package. If it's for current affairs or a documentary rather than news, the interview may be used at greater length.
- **What, specifically, are we going to discuss?** You need to find out not only what the issue is that you will be expected to talk about, but also the areas they want you to cover, and the kind of questions they intend to ask you.
- **Where will it be used and when will it be going out?** Who is the broadcaster? Is this a local radio programme, national TV news, a programme made by a regional team for network transmission (i.e. on national radio or TV), a contribution to a one-off documentary or a series? News is usually very immediate, but some documentaries or series are recorded weeks or even months before they are broadcast. Make sure you get the transmission time and date from the programme makers.
- **How long will the interview be?** Standard radio news interviews are often two minutes, sometimes five minutes on local radio. On national TV news, things are often reduced to a 10 second sound bite, but with breakfast and daily current affairs shows, and with regional TV, you may get considerably longer. In a pre-recorded interview you may be required to record for several minutes longer than the final version that will be transmitted on air. If the TV crew is coming to you, allow for setting up and dismantling time. If you are asked to go

into a studio, always ask the broadcaster to arrange transport for you there and back. This is normal practice, and should help relieve you of the anxiety of trying to find your own way.

- **What is the style and context of the interview?** Light-hearted? Hard-hitting? A chatty, conversational discussion or a more formal inquisitorial style interview? Don't be deceived if it's an informal, chatty programme – you still need to be prepared to answer the difficult questions, so make sure you've thought about these!
- **Am I the only person being interviewed on this issue?** If others are involved, who are they, and what, roughly, are they likely to be saying? Will they be challenging what you have to say or presenting an opposing view?
- **Will it be a stand-alone interview or part of a package?** A package is a selection of individual short clips linked by the reporter's narrative: (e.g. the BBC's coverage of the Citizens Advice service's 70th anniversary, which started with an archive clip, followed by a clip from a client who'd been helped by CAB, some visuals from a bureau, and a clip from Citizens Advice Chief Executive, David Harker).

Preparing for the interview

Never go into an interview unprepared. Always know your key messages and what you intend to say. It requires planning to make sure you get what you want from an interview. If you agree to do one, make sure that you find time to prepare beforehand.

In a radio or television interview you do not have much time to put across the main issues. The most you can fit in will be **two or three key points**. This is why you need to be crystal clear beforehand about what you want to say, and say it. With radio and TV remember that less is more: the less you say, the more your audience will remember.

Decide on your key messages

Review all the available information then consider what questions you would ask if you were the interviewer, and how you would answer them. Your answers should be jargon-free, statistic-light, and memorable. Keep your language simple and conversational and if possible illustrate your points with brief but interesting client cases.

Set your own checklist of points you want to make – a two-minute interview gives time for only three main points. Keep these short, simple and interesting. Imagine that you have the chance to make only one point and decide what this would be. If you have no time for anything else, make this your priority.

Try to think of a good 10 second sound bite that expresses the essence of what you want to say very succinctly and in one sentence. This is the sentence that is likely to be used if the interview is for television. Coming up with a sound bite can be very hard, but it will clarify your thoughts.

Imagine the journalist and audience hearing your message for the first time. Ask yourself if it overcomes the 'so what?' barrier. If not, find another way of putting it.

Passion is another essential ingredient for a really good interview. After all, if you don't sound as if you care about the issue and believe in what you're saying, why would you expect people watching and listening to think it matters? Rehearse your answers so that you become fluent without being stilted.

Anticipate questions

Whatever the subject, the structure of an interview will always be similar and questions usually follow a basic pattern.

The first question will always be a general one, for example "What's it all about?" or "What's going on?" This gives you a good opportunity to set out the issue. So get in there with a short, simple and general gist that makes it meaningful to someone who knows nothing about it.

The second question will be more specific and is a good opportunity to get in an example i.e. "So what sort of problems are you coming across?"

The third question will be the difficult one. "But surely..." It is the question that anybody who disagreed with you would ask e.g. "But surely people can't just walk away from their debts?" Don't be defensive or belligerent. Just answer the question in the way you have prepared.

The fourth question will usually be "So what would you like to happen?" or "What is the solution?"

You may also be asked to give some advice to people who find themselves in the situation you've been describing, so have some 'top tips' handy.

Radio interviews – things to consider

Radio is a very intimate medium – for the listener it's as if you are talking just to them. Although you won't be seen, how you sound is as important as what you say in creating the right impression. You want to inspire confidence and leave listeners feeling you know what you're talking about, you are professional but approachable, and you are the sort of person they can trust and confide in. In radio interviews you can refer to bullet point notes of your three main points as a reminder, but never be tempted to read from a script – this will be obvious to listeners and you will sound stilted and unconvincing.

TV interviews – think visual

In television interviews the pictures tell a lot of the story so be conscious of the image you want to project. Remember that we see people before we hear them, and what people think of you tends to be decided before you have even opened your mouth. A lot of viewers may remember more about what you are wearing than what you say. But they can still go away with a positive impression of your agency if you seem like someone authoritative, approachable and engaging who they can trust.

If the cameras are coming to your premises, try to look at its exterior and interior with a dispassionate eye. Are these attractive and interesting? Is the logo up-to-date and well-positioned? Are things bright, tidy and welcoming rather than shabby, disorganised and off-putting?

TV crews love busy backdrops that will make the item more visually appealing, but try to choose a suitable interview space where you will not be bothered with extraneous noise or distracted by other people's activities or ringing phones. Have a logo in camera shot if you can. If you're not sure where to position it ask the camera crew for help.

If you are doing the interview 'down the line' make sure there will be someone there to get you to the right studio, show you how the equipment works and tell you what to look at (remember you won't be able to see the interviewer, and although the camera will be focused on you, all you will see is probably a red light).

What to wear

Clothing should be smart, comfortable and appropriate for the location and subject under discussion. In some interviews you will be seen only from the waist up, but bear in mind that if you are 'on the sofa' on Breakfast TV for example, your legs and footwear will also be very much in evidence!

Avoid jumpers, for example, in TV studios as they can get very hot. Don't allow your clothes or jewellery to distract viewers' attention from what you have to say, so avoid dangly earrings, loud checks and busy patterns.

During the interview

Once you are in front of the camera remember you are always performing. Never let the camera catch you unawares. Assume that a shot will cut to you before the interviewer starts to introduce you and take your cue to leave the set from the interviewer.

Your body language is important, so try to relax. Don't fidget with your hair or your hands, tap your fingers, or swivel in your chair. Sit with your bottom well back in the chair, lean forward, and use your hands occasionally to communicate. Avoid looking directly at the camera. Instead look the interviewer in the eye. If you find this difficult, try looking at their forehead – it gives the impression you are looking them straight in the eye, creates a feeling of intimacy with your audience and stops you having a shifty-looking roving eye.

Take charge of the interview and stick to what you planned to say. If it is pre-recorded, you can ask to stop and start your answer again if you feel your first attempt went wrong.

Use a clear, conversational style – no jargon or acronyms. Speak with passion, enthusiasm and conviction. Use the whole range of your voice – seriousness sounds dull so talk as you would to a close friend.

Listen to the questions but don't be thrown by them. Remember you do not have to answer the question directly, especially if it is taking you away from the main points. A good ploy is to say "Well the main issue here is..." or "Our main concern is..." and say precisely what is important to you.

Top tips to ensure your TV interview works for you:

- Have in mind your three point checklist and use your first answer to move to it.
- Never answer simply "yes" or "no" – use any question as a cue to resume talking.
- Be descriptive with your answers, especially on radio, where you can 'paint a picture' for the listener. A good example is worth a thousand words.
- Make sure you mention your agency's name in full in at least one answer. If you can, also mention that it is a charity. And don't forget to give your website address and/ or contact details.

Finally, get someone to tape you and/ or give you honest feedback! Watch your performance afterwards so you can learn from experience and build on your skills.

