

Talking to the Media: An Interview Tip Sheet

Before the Interview: Questions You Should Ask

Ask the following questions before you agree to an interview whether you initiate contact with a reporter or a reporter approaches you:

- ✓ **Who is the reporter?**
 - What is the reporter's "beat," i.e., topics s/he typically covers?
- ✓ **What news organization does the reporter represent?**
 - Sometimes a reporter will call but not identify where the story will appear, or s/he may be a "freelancer" who writes for multiple news organizations. Always ask what news outlet the reporter is writing for.
- ✓ **What kind of story is the reporter working on?**
 - Is the reporter developing a feature story, i.e., an in-depth human interest piece, about one topic (such as your practice or your patient), or will your expertise and comment be part of a larger story?
- ✓ **What is the reporter's deadline?**
 - When does the reporter need to have the piece completed by and when will the story appear?
- ✓ **Who else is being interviewed for the story?**
 - Can you review your quotes prior to publication of the story? (NOTE: Some reporters may share parts of their story in advance, but they are not obligated to.)

Preparing for the Interview

Preparation is key to having a successful media interview. Before you participate in the interview, review these tips to help you prepare:

- ✓ **Develop one theme or story angle that is supported by 3-4 key messages**
 - These key messages should be the primary ideas that you want to get across during the interview.
 - Use examples to support these messages.
- ✓ **Know the facts**
 - It is helpful to review any statistics or background information prior to the interview, as well as have it with you as a reference.
- ✓ **Remember the audience**
 - Tailor your remarks to the audience. For example, if the reporter writes for: 1) a consumer media outlet (e.g., your local newspaper or TV station), you would want to answer the questions in simplified, consumer-friendly language; 2) a medical or science publication (e.g., a trade journal such as *Practical Neurology*), you would want to respond in a more clinical manner.

- ✓ **Visualize the headline**
 - If you think about what you want the headline and first paragraph of the article to say, you can more easily determine your responses.
- ✓ **Anticipate tough questions and develop answers that allow you to respond positively**
 - Assess and prepare for any vulnerabilities or sensitive topics that may come up during the interview and practice on how to “bridge” back to your key messages (see “Stay on message” below for bridging techniques).
- ✓ **Don’t hesitate to refer the reporter to other information resources (such as a relevant third-party organization that can provide further context or information on the topic; see enclosed Contact List: Professional/Medical Organizations and Patient Groups)**
- ✓ **Rehearse out loud**

During the Interview

While you are being interviewed, there are a number of things you can do to help control the interview so you can get your key messages across. These include:

- ✓ **Tell your story**

Speak in terms that are appropriate to the audience. For example, as noted above, if you are speaking with a consumer or general interest publication keep your language as consumer-friendly and jargon-free as possible, as you would if you were explaining something to a patient.

 - Use relevant facts and figures.
 - Provide specific examples and anecdotes from your own practice and patients.
 - Present your information with confidence.
- ✓ **Stay on message**
 - Focus on the main theme or story angle and the supporting messages you have developed while preparing for the interview.
 - “Bridge” back to your key messages if the reporter deviates from your main theme.
 - Bridging helps to bring the reporter back on track to your prepared messages.
 - Bridging phrases include:
 - ✓ *“That’s a good point, but the main consideration is...”*
 - ✓ *“What’s important to remember, however...”*
 - ✓ *“Before we get off the subject, let me add...”*
 - ✓ *“While ___ is certainly important, don’t forget that...”*
 - “Flag” important points to the reporter to increase the chances that the information will make it into the story.
 - Flagging is like putting a Post-it note on your message to emphasize it to the reporters.
 - Flagging phrases include:
 - ✓ *“The important point here is...”*
 - ✓ *“The best part about...”*
 - ✓ *“Let’s take a closer look at...”*
 - ✓ *“What that means is...”*

- If it is a phone interview, write down the supporting messages and have them available as a reference.
- ✓ **Control the Interview**
 - Know the reporter.
 - Assess their prior knowledge of the subject (e.g., do a Google search to see what stories the reporter has covered in the past).
 - Know the style of the reporter (e.g., are the interviews favorable or are they contentious or controversial).
 - Be concise.
 - The shorter your responses, the better you will come across. Winding gradually to your conclusion invites misunderstanding.
 - Avoid any of the following during an interview:
 - Repeating a negative question or negative language.
 - Using professional jargon (particularly with consumer publications); be sure to explain abbreviations and necessary technical terms.
 - Responding “*No comment*” – it only raises more questions. Instead, it is best to respond with “*I don’t have the answer.*”
 - If you “don’t have the answer”:
 - Give the reporter confidence that you are not simply trying to avoid the question. In such situations, it is best to respond with phrases such as:
 - ✓ “*I don’t have the information for you, but I can put you in touch with someone who does.*”
 - ✓ “*That’s not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is...*”

Remember there is no such thing as “off the record.”

TV Interview Tips

Television news is presented in “soundbites” (i.e., fragments of your interviews). Therefore, speak briefly and to-the-point to ensure your soundbites are concise and on message. Tips for conducting a TV interview include:

- ✓ Assess the interviewer (personality, tone, interview style, etc.)
- ✓ Know the style of the program (e.g., is it a talk show, an entertainment program, or the morning or evening news)
- ✓ Focus on your key messages
- ✓ Sit straight; don't rock/swivel in the chair or while standing
- ✓ Smile when appropriate
- ✓ Keep your arms relaxed and your hands clasped
- ✓ Look directly at the interviewer, NOT the camera
- ✓ Avoid repeating negative questions
- ✓ Do not allow hand gestures to be distracting to your message
- ✓ Show interest and listen to the interviewer, and any others if it is a panel interview
- ✓ Use visuals only if pre-arranged
- ✓ Do not interrupt the interviewer
- ✓ Keep in mind that they can edit your soundbites, possibly distorting the meaning of your message which is why it is best to speak briefly and to-the-point

What to Wear on TV: Tips for Men

- ✓ Wear a medium-tone gray or blue suit with an off-white or pastel shirt
- ✓ Avoid checks, plaids, stripes or busy patterns
- ✓ Be sure the socks are over-the-calf, matched to the color of the suit
- ✓ Do not get a haircut immediately before a television appearance

What to Wear on TV: Tips for Women

- ✓ Wear a conservative, plain-colored dress or suit (not white); if you wear a skirt, be sure it is a comfortable length
- ✓ Keep your make-up light or modest
- ✓ Jewelry and accessories should be small; nothing that is bright, distracting and/or makes noise

Radio Interview Tips

Radio news also is presented in “soundbites.” To disseminate messages effectively in a radio interview, utilize the following tips:

- ✓ Know the style of the program
- ✓ Know the audience (age and gender of listeners)
- ✓ Speak briefly and to-the-point
- ✓ If it is a “live” call-in program where listeners dial into the station, convey genuine concern and interest in the callers' issues
- ✓ Do not repeat negative language or questions
- ✓ Summarize and repeat your messages after commercial breaks in order to bring new listeners up-to-date

Print Interviews Tips

Similar to television and radio interviews, being concise and to-the-point is the most effective way to ensure your message will make it into a print article. Tips for conducting a print interview include:

- ✓ Assess the reporter's knowledge of the subject
- ✓ Provide an overview statement and a summary of your messages to the reporter
- ✓ Use statistics and anecdotes to emphasize your message, have background material to support it
- ✓ It is especially helpful to use flagging techniques in print interviews as a reporter will take many notes and often file the story long after the interview has been conducted

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