

# Relax and Enjoy the Spotlight

*Make the Most of Your Live Interview*

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*Whitepaper*



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## **Make the Most of Your Live Interview**

All managers would benefit from having a short course in media communications training to prepare for the inevitable interview that will occur, either under unexpected and possibly stressful circumstances, or for the occasional sound bite that is carefully crafted for community goodwill. Ideally, there should be a game plan to position someone in your company as the official spokesperson for your company for local or regional news.

The goal is to not only become the official spokesperson for your company, but ultimately a spokesperson for your industry. Repetitive exposure to the media interview process is also the absolute best way to learn how to ace an interview. Practice makes perfect. However, for the purpose of this article, the goal is to offer techniques that will help you be persuasive, comfortable and confident during a media interview – whether the interview is expected or unexpected.

The media interview (print or digital) is either dreaded or embraced depending in large part on the experience and/or training of the person involved. Often, the result is shaped by how often a manager has been exposed to interviews and public speaking over the course of their career.

Without the benefit of either a professional PR person representing the company, top managers often neglect public communications training, and find out too late that a short course on media communications can pay huge dividends during an interview. Instead, busy managers are often forced into an interview without the benefit of being forewarned or prepared, and those few moments in the spotlight can be excruciatingly painful on a personal and professional basis.

Here are key learning points on *How to Ace an Interview* that will help your company prepare for a live interview with the media.

### **The Official Spokesperson**

In lieu of a professional and experienced communications manager, the official spokesperson is typically a general manager, owner, president, CEO or other executive or manager. It is prudent to consider a training session for all managers to ensure that each manager feels comfortable with delivering a message about the company that has been pre-determined and scripted.

Most interviews do not occur under crisis circumstances, and all top echelon management need to be empowered to be able to represent the company to the public.

Select within your organization a primary spokesperson for the media and then develop the hierarchy of spokespersons to provide support in the event the primary spokesperson is not available to participate in the interview.

### **Set the Stage**

In preparing for an interview it is important to first determine the name and position of the interviewer, and to inquire of their goals for the interview, the amount of time they would require (and best clothes to wear – if there is time). Try to engage the interviewer in small talk in advance to find out their experience about your company or industry and ask for a list of questions that they would like to cover, or if not a prepared list, the topics that they are interested in covering during the interview.

It also helps to ask if they could arrive 10 or 15 minutes prior to the interview to meet top management and/or get a fast tour of the facility. This off-camera portion of the interview will greatly raise your comfort level and will provide insight into the demeanor and intent of the interviewer. Don't assume that the interviewer understands your company and its products or services, or your contribution to the local economy or community. Make sure you can easily pronounce the name of the interviewer and know the official name of the company -- including a station's call letters (if it is broadcast) and its affiliate (such as KTLA/CBS or msn.com).

### **The Professional Approach and Greeting**

The initial contact with the interviewer and their accompanying staff (videographer, grip, assistant) should begin as with any initial meeting with your favorite customer - smile, be enthused, confident and relaxed. Approach the interview with a sense of curiosity and humor, maintain eye contact and be mindful of the timeline for the interview. The live interview is definitely based on a strict deadline. Begin with a simple handshake, be prepared to hand the interviewer your business card, so they clearly understand your name, title and contact information.

While speaking with the interviewer, practice active listening. Observe your body language during the interview (whether you are standing or sitting) so that you show a sense of openness to the person who is interviewing you. If there is a situation at the company that could have serious public relations fallout, such as a union strike, environmental lapse, or other crisis, it is most important to show a sincere interest in resolving the issue quickly.

Sincerity can be conveyed by one's tone of voice, body language, as well as what is said. If a company spokesperson is obviously distrustful of the

media off camera, the chances are that that same distrust will be conveyed on camera and will appear as though the person has something to hide. Even when asked a difficult question, take the time to think about, and answer truthfully to the best of your ability (and legal situation) – and don't forget to smile and retain eye contact.

### **The Sound Bite**

With advance preparation, it is important to use this opportunity (and that is how each interview needs to be viewed) to share your company's mission, purpose and goodwill. Whether the interviewer's intent is investigative in nature, or more of a company spotlight designed to show your company in a good light, the company spokesperson(s) should always make sure that the interview brings to light your company's position in the community – including the historical benefit the company has delivered over time for the community.

For example, "In the twelve years that XYZ has been in Topeka manufacturing widgets, we have been extremely proud of our involvement in the local community with United Way, and our contribution of employing 222 people in both administrative and manufacturing jobs..."

While it is important to always answer the interviewer's questions truthfully, and to not evade answers, it is also necessary and important to ***remember you have the right to tell your company story.*** Don't forget who holds all the cards in the interview. Make sure that, at the end of the day, the Company Sound Bite" is included early in the interview and possibly reiterated at the end of the interview too.

In the end, remember to thank the interviewer for the opportunity to share news about your company and make sure that the reporter/interviewer leaves with your business card - and you also have their card. Request the opportunity to follow-up with an editorial contact sheet and ask if there will be an opportunity to view the video (if not recorded live) prior to it being shown on-air.

Ask how you can get a copy of the interview and seek permission to place the interview on the company website. Always offer to be available for a follow-up interview by person or by phone. Provide a company media kit that includes your bio, FAQ's on the company and an editorial contact sheet.

In the end, every interview becomes a learning experience. Don't be too hard on yourself. It can be fun and may be the beginning of a fruitful relationship that will serve your company well into the future.

## **How to Manage a Stressful Investigative Interview – “No Comment” is Just One Tool in Your Arsenal**

Investigative type interviews can be stressful, depending on the intent of the reporter/journalist. If the interview is scheduled, rather than impromptu, begin by asking the reporter what they know or do not know about the topic at hand. Try to schedule the interview at your office (home court advantage), and ask for specific questions that are to be covered in advance.

In the event a question is asked that is totally unexpected and could be difficult to answer, do not feel pressured by a video camera or microphone to immediately answer. Take the time to pause, think about the question before blurting out the first response that comes to mind. If you do not know the answer, express a sincere interest in discovering the answer and offer to get back to the interviewer with more information.

People are not judged harshly because they do not know the answer as much as not showing compassion, authenticity or sincere interest in the situation. Former FEMA Director, Michael Brown, failed on all accounts – compassion, sincerity and knowledge when asked about the support that was forthcoming for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. If you don't know the answer, don't fudge on the answer – simply say that you are in the process of determining the answer (if indeed you are), or you do not know, but will have the answer soon.

Investigative reporters will always have an angle. Early in a crisis, they are less likely to take sides and report the facts. As time and public opinion develops, too often reporters will side with public opinion to some degree. It is the nature of the beast of live interviews – viewer opinion influences coverage.

In situations where a question is asked that has the potential in the answer to sound damaging to your company, it is fine to answer that you are not at liberty to answer the question at this time. Follow-up however with a positive statement either about what you are doing about the situation or your company's position on the matter.

For example, “We've been advised to not comment at this time on the specific details of the incident, as the investigation is still incomplete. I assure you however, that our company has had a longstanding record of hiring only qualified employees for the job. We are conducting an internal investigation and participating with all local authorities to determine if the person was indeed qualified to operate the equipment.”

## No Comment

Rarely does it serve your purpose to only say “No Comment” without a qualifier. To do so only invites suspicion on the part of the reporter/journalist and ultimately the audience.

In the event that a reporter approaches you for an interview with an obvious agenda to surprise and create havoc, if the cameras are rolling it is best to smile, shake their hand, take the time to speak briefly, and suggest that they call the office to schedule an interview. Keep it simple, to the point and even friendly. Nothing is more disarming than a smile and a handshake. Even if there truly is a problem that is troublesome, it is best to find a way to speak to the reporter OFF RECORD before you proceed with the interview. Before the interview begins, ask the reporter if you can have an “off the camera” aside that will allow you to better understand the information they are looking for.

Questions that are confusing or designed to trap should be anticipated, especially in certain crisis situations. This is why having relations with your local media prior to a crisis occurring is so important. If they have had a chance to relate with you or others in your company on a more friendly or social basis, they are less likely to have negative demeanor when the camera is rolling.

If need be – do not answer the question at all. If it is definitely designed to make sure that your company is seen in an unflattering light begin with, “These are the facts.” And then proceed with the actual facts of the matter or incident. State what you know to be true. Express interest in finding a solution. Explain what your company is doing to research what happened, work with authorities, or cooperate in every way with the involved parties for a resolution. It is typically better to be forthcoming and answer, even if it is not a direct answer to their question. Blocking is employed most effectively by politicians. Watch any presidential debate and it is easy to see this ploy at its finest.

Remember, you are in control, and should have the appearance that your company is in control of the situation to the best of its ability. This can be difficult in a true crisis situation such as a union strike, accident, natural disaster or other event. In these situations, the first call will be to the company's attorney at which time messages should be developed for the media that keeps the concepts here in mind while incorporating the advice of your attorney.

The general guide is to say only what you feel would shed a positive light on your company, always be truthful and say it with sincerity.

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