



Tips to Being a Media Spokesperson

Role of a media spokesperson

The spokesperson brings the organization to life. He or she literally embodies the organization and gives it a human identity. A spokesperson takes the organization from an “it” to a “we,” and is the conduit to various audiences so the organization does not have to rely entirely on the written word.

What makes a good spokesperson?

To be effective, a spokesperson must be trustworthy and credible. Research shows that viewers or listeners are more receptive to your message if you come across as caring. For that reason, make it a practice to express empathy or caring within the first 30 seconds of an interview. Other attributes that enhance your credibility include competence, expertise, honesty, and commitment.

General recommendations

Do not answer questions that are outside your expertise or knowledge or the organization's. • Be direct and tell the truth. • Illustrate a point through examples, stories, and analogies. Ensure that they help you make your point and do not minimize or exaggerate your message

Ensuring a positive interview

Jargon confuses communication and implies arrogance. If you have to use a technical term or acronym, define it. If you can't define it, do you need to use it? Jargon and euphemisms are security blankets, try to give yours up.

Use humor cautiously. Humor is a minefield. Think of how often an attempted joke has gotten someone in trouble.

Refute negative allegations without repeating them. Don't own the negative by repeating the accusation.

Use positive or neutral terms when possible.

Discuss what you know, not what you think.

Engage in active listening. Concentrate on what the person is saying. It is hard to do when you are also attempting to form your answer. It is not a race; take the time to listen and frame your response.

Use open body language. Sit or stand with your arms relaxed by your sides. Do not cross your arms or put your hands on your hips. Make eye contact when possible.



Interview pitfalls

Don't let a reporter put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotionally laden words. Do not repeat them.

If the question contains leading or loaded language, reframe the question to eliminate the language and then answer the questions.

If a reporter leaves a microphone in your face after you have answered the question, stop. Do not answer the question again or add to your answer.

Do not say anything before, during, or at the conclusion of an interview that you are not prepared to see in print, on the air, or on the Internet.

Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even in jest. Stick to what you know and what the organization is doing.

Don't raise issues you do not want to see in print or on the news.

Rules of Engagement: On the Record, Off the Record, and On Background

It is important to know the difference of speaking "on the record," "off the record," or "on background." While the definition of "on the record" is universally accepted among journalists, the meaning of "off the record" and "on background" tends to differ from reporter to reporter. It is always best to clarify what those terms mean to a reporter the first time you speak with him or her. Also, you should avoid switching frequently among speaking conditions during an interview, as it will confuse the reporter. Unless otherwise stipulated, always assume you are speaking on the record. Here are the standard definitions for each term:

On the record – Everything you say can be quoted, attributed to you, and used in a story.

Off the record – What you say cannot be quoted or used at all in any story.

On background – What you say can be used in a story but not attributed to you.

Using Transitions to Steer the Interview

This technique allows you to deflect any attempts to derail your message. "Bridging" creates a transition so that you can move from one subject to the message you want to communicate. Knowing bridging techniques helps you retain control of an interview to keep it focused on your key messages.

Bridging phrases to come back to your key messages:

- What's most important is...
- The real issue here is...
- That's not my area of expertise, but I think your audience would be interested in knowing that...



- Let me just add that...
- Let me answer you by saying that...
- That's an important point because...
- What that means is...
- Another thing to remember is...
- If you look at it closely, you'll find...
- The bottom line is...
- It's critical that...
- Here are the facts...

Common phrases to steer the interview back to your territory:

- We may be overlooking the fact that...
- Another important point is...
- Let's put this into perspective...
- By the way...

Common phrases to bridge to the next point:

- That's not the issue; the real issue is...
- I don't know the answer to that question, but I do know this...
- That's a good point. Now here's another one...
- Yes, and let me add...

Using Radio Effectively

Radio provides a convenient and powerful tool for quickly delivering information to diverse populations. Distractions keep people from focusing on the radio. This is why you must tell compelling stories to literally stop someone from what they are doing and actually listen.

Theater of the mind or background noise?

- **Use a landline** versus a cellular phone to ensure you can be heard clearly. If possible, turn off your call waiting.
- **Statistics are difficult to visualize**, so avoid them on the air unless asked directly. Put numbers into a visual context (i.e. instead of "80% of Americans" say "eight out of ten Americans." It is more difficult to imagine 80 percent than it is to imagine eight people.)
- Use appropriate vocal variation. To **avoid sounding monotone**, try punching or emphasizing one word or phrase in each sentence.
- On the radio, you are there to **inform, entertain, inspire, persuade and connect** through your voice.
- **Speak as if you were "off-the-air,"** as if talking with family and friends.
- **Try to include anecdotes and examples.** As part of preparing for your interview, think of real-life examples because these are essential elements to a good story. Similarly, try to use vivid metaphors and analogies.
- **Don't talk too fast.** Try to beware of "ums" and other verbal ticks. For taped interviews, some of these can be edited out, but it is better to present yourself as you want to be heard.



- **Keep your cool.** If you disagree with a point of view take the opportunity to give strong positive evidence that supports your facts or opinion on an issue. When you get angry, get sarcastic or become insulting it just detracts from you as a credible guest.

One-on-One Television Interview Tips

- **Stand-up.** It strengthens your voice and makes you more alert. When standing, do not sway, keep your body in one spot. If you do sit, do not move around in your chair. Ask for a chair that does not swivel.
- **Slow down.** Microphones tend to make people talk faster. Slow down and deliberately pause between sentences to appear in control.
- **Drive out monotone.** Practice raising and lowering the pitch of your voice, not the volume. Natural animation helps increase credibility.
- **Look at the reporter,** not the camera, unless directed to do otherwise.
- **In a taped interview, ask to repeat your response** if you believe the first attempt was not your best. **In a live interview, correct misstatements** as quickly as possible.
- **Do not use the journalist's name.** Segments of your interview might be used in other broadcasts where the reporter is not present. It makes the segment difficult to edit if you use the reporter's name.
- **Listen to the question, but be sure you are not inadvertently agreeing.** When engaging in active listening, most people tend to nod their head to show their participation in the conversation. On television, this comes across as agreeing with what the reporter is asking. Be sure not to nod your head when a reporter is talking.

Effective Nonverbal Communication

- **Maintain eye contact.** When a person avoids eye contact while conversing viewer tend to evaluate him or her negatively. Avoiding eye contact is considered as a sign of dishonesty, lack of self-confidence and boredom. A person who maintains high degree of eye contact is considered warm and friendly.
- **Do not retreat behind physical barriers** such as podiums or tables.
- **Maintain an open posture.**