The Ins and Outs of Interviews

Remember your media Miranda rights: You have the right to remain silent. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say may end up in print or on the air.

You don't have to talk to reporters, and they don't have to talk to you. But you need one another, so you'll probably want to say yes most of the times a reporter wants to talk to you.

Once you agree to talk, reporters will expect you to answer any question they ask. When is it okay not to answer a reporter's question? Here are some guidelines:

Answer every question, unless you have a specific reason not to.

If you don't know the answer, don't guess. You can offer to get the information later. If you guess wrong and the mistake gets into a story, both you and the reporter will be embarrassed. "I don't know" can be three of the most important words in the vocabulary of anyone who talks to reporters. Don't be afraid to use them -- when appropriate.

Don't answer hypothetical questions. When you hear a reporter ask a question that begins with "what if" or some similar phrase, alarm bells should go off in your head. Offer an answer that states the facts as you know them. Or simply decline to speculate on a hypothetical situation, even if a reporter presses you to do so.

Despite what reporters will tell you, the public doesn't always have a right to know. Some information is proprietary or financially material and subject to SEC disclosure requirements. Some information is private -- personnel records, for example. If a reporter asks for information you're not willing or able to share, don't share it, but offer a reason rather than simply saying "no comment." Most of the time reporters will understand and accept your reason. It's okay if they don't -- the reporter's in charge of the questions; you're in charge of your answers.

When a reporter calls

Preparation is key to becoming comfortable with media calls and interviews. These tips should help you prepare to work effectively with reporters.

• Tell the truth. Never lie. Always tell the truth. If you don’t know or aren’t sure, say so and don't guess. Your credibility is at stake. Being truthful does not mean telling all you know. Use good judgment.

• For the record. Anything you say to a reporter is fair game for a story. If you don’t want it reported, don’t say it. Asking a reporter to go “off the record” is not appropriate. Don’t ask reporters not to print something after you say it.
• **The media’s role.** Objectively telling all sides of a story is the media’s job, even if views are unpopular. Don’t expect reporters to present only your perspective and never tell a reporter how to report a story. Don’t expect a reporter to make you look good; make yourself look good by providing clear, concise information.

• **Be prepared.** Doing your homework makes you a better source and less nervous. Before an interview, anticipate possible questions and think through answers. Ask yourself: Is this a controversial or sensitive topic? How will my answers be perceived? How can I best explain this? Gather background materials for the reporter that help reinforce details.

• **Key points.** Before interviews, identify the three main points you want to make. For each point, develop three responses that support or help communicate that point. Work on making key points in 20 seconds or less. Come up with a couple of 10-second or under responses.

• **Respect deadlines.** Reporters live by unbending deadlines. If a reporter calls for immediate comment, try to help or point them to someone who can. But beware of giving a “quickie” response if you have inadequate information.

• **Know who’s calling.** When a reporter calls, ask some questions to determine who you’re talking to and what they need. If you don’t know a reporter, get his/her name, employer and phone number. Clarify what information she/he is seeking from you.

• **Respond promptly.** Return media calls promptly. If a reporter catches you unprepared, find out what he/she is looking for and offer to call back in a few minutes. Gather your thoughts, anticipate questions, plan your response and call back quickly. If you have an appointment for an interview, be there. Dodging a reporter won’t make the story disappear; it just will be reported without your perspective.

• **Lead with the bottom line.** Remember to provide key facts or points first. Add details if time allows. Your key message can get lost in too much detail and technical information.

• **Talk slowly.** The reporter will write furiously as you talk. Some will use tape recorders. Talk slowly and be clear. Leave nothing to chance.

• **Short, sweet, stop.** Keep your answers brief. Your main message gets lost unless you discipline yourself to provide concise answers. Radio or TV reporters often must tell an entire story in 20 seconds to a minute. Answer the question and stop talking. Don’t keep talking to fill the silence.

• **Don’t babble:** Listen to questions and think about your answers before you start talking. Don’t ramble. It’s OK to pause briefly to gather your thoughts before answering.

• **Avoid no comment:** “No comment” sounds suspicious. If you really can’t comment, explain why. “We’re gathering that information and will provide it when it’s finalized.” Or “Our policy
doesn’t allow us to comment on personnel matters.” It’s OK to say you don’t know and offer to find out.

• **Dump the jargon.** Technical terms and acronyms are confusing or meaningless to the public. Be a translator by using everyday language and examples. Relate your information in ways everyday folks can appreciate — why is this important and what does it mean to their lives, community, families or livelihoods?

• **Be proactive.** Answer reporters’ questions and volunteer information to make key points. Reporters may welcome another angle or idea, but offer ideas as suggestions, not directives. Reporters aren’t likely to let you see a story before it appears, but always invite them to call back for help or clarification.

• **Summarize thoughts.** After discussing the subject, consisely summarize key points in everyday language. “My major points are: 1. ... 2. ... 3. ...” This may plant the idea of a story outline in the reporter’s mind.

• **Potential pitfalls.** Always have the facts before commenting. Stick to what you know even if this disappoints a reporter. If you are unprepared or unqualified to answer, refer reporters to someone who can help. Avoid personal views or speculation. Don’t let reporters put words in your mouth. Reporter: “So you’re saying ...” You: “No, let me clarify ...” Do not repeat inaccuracies, even to correct them.

• **Identify yourself.** Don’t assume a reporter knows who you are or what you do just because they’ve called. Provide your name, title, company or agency name and names of other people or programs you’re discussing.

• **Feedback.** It’s OK to tell reporters when they do a good job. If they make a mistake, weigh what’s at stake. If it’s a major error in fact, tell the reporter or editor, but don’t quibble over minor misunderstandings. Remember, you’re building long-term relationships.

• **Don’t assume reporter knowledge:** Don’t assume that a reporter is knowledgeable just because he/she is covering the story. Most reporters are generalists who cover diverse topics and have little time to background themselves on breaking stories before reporting them. Provide simple information to help out.

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**Media Interview Strategies**

Great media interviews don’t just happen. The most successful, confident news sources do their homework before the cameras roll or the phone rings. Here are some tips:

**Before interviews**

* **Plan key points:** Identify the three main points or messages you must communicate in interviews. For each one, write three sentences or “sound bites” supporting the main point. Next,
develop three different questions the media might ask about each main point and three answers for each question. If you don’t know the answers, get help from someone who does.

*Gather information:* Know the facts before talking to reporters – don’t “wing it.” You can’t be all-knowing, but gather as much information as possible.

*Prepare for the worst:* Identify the worst possible questions you could be asked and answer them. What questions do you most fear? What would really knock you off your game? What would be disastrous? Make a list and develop responses. Chances are questions won’t be this tough. If they are, you’re prepared.

*Practice:* Practice making your main points. Work on short, clear answers. Even if you only have a few minutes, run through a quick mental rehearsal. Practice should make you comfortable, confident and generally familiar with key points. Never just memorize; You want to sound interested, sincer, honest and spontaneous.

**During interviews**

*Your job:* Media interviews are hard work. Be proactive, listen, and answer. Your role is to answer questions and be sure to communicate your key points and message.

*Expect tough questions:* It’s a reporter’s job to gather as much information as possible. They’re going to ask difficult questions. Be prepared for tough questions; don’t let them frustrate or anger you. Keep your cool and focus on communicating key information.

*Bridging/redirection:* You may need to redirect questions to get your points across or to steer the interview back on track. Bridging is a communications technique that helps redirect questions. The bridge is a quick, smooth transition to the points you need to make. “Yes, but meanwhile we’re ...,” “We’re still gathering that information but the key point is ...” ”No and that's because ..." or “The situation is changing rapidly but our top priority remains ...”

*Refocusing/reframing:* Instead of answering a question that’s misleading, off base or potentially damaging, rephrase or reframe it to make it more objective and comfortable before answering. “The larger question is ...,” “Our first concern is ...” “The real issue is what are we doing to solve this? We have a plan to...,” or “It’s really important to point out ...”

**Potential pitfalls**

*Loaded questions:* Don’t get frustrated if a reporter launches into a rapid series of accusations mixed with several questions. Interrupt the reporter and say that you’d like to respond. Or reply: “Let’s go through this point by point,” if that’s in your best interest. Or pick one of the questions to answer: “In answer to your question, we recognize this is a problem and have taken several steps to correct it.”

*Correcting inaccuracies:* Don’t repeat an inaccurate statement, even to correct it. If reporters misstate information during an interview, say, “That’s incorrect, it’s ...,” or “No, the correct number is ...” If a reporter says: “So you’re saying the sky is red.” You reply: “No, I said the sky is blue.” Never say: “I didn’t say the sky was red.”
**The accusation:** Don’t let a reporter rile or anger you with accusatory questions. Stay calm and focus on your message. Redirect if possible. Never debate a reporter.

**Avoid “what ifs:”** Never speculate and avoid answering hypothetical questions whenever possible. When you must respond, just restate already known facts. “We’re already following our plan and we’ll continue to take the necessary steps to protect the public.” Or “I’m not going to speculate. Here’s the real situation and here’s how we’re addressing the real issues ...”

**Acknowledge and move on:** If reporters raise a specific problem, acknowledge it and state what you’re doing to remedy it. “We share that concern. That’s why we’re ....” Or “That did happen in the past and now we’re taking the lead ...”

**Words in your mouth:** Reporters may ask a question or make a statement such as: “So you’re saying ...” If that’s not what you said or mean, say so. “No. That’s incorrect. Let me clarify ...” Beware of off-handed nods during interviews. Casual, polite agreement can become a statement of fact in a news story. While it may overstate your position, it would accurately reflect your unintentional response.

**Body language**

**How you say it:** Studies show that how you say something and how you look while saying it are more important to the success of your communication that the words you use. Be aware of body language during interviews. It’s especially important for TV but your body language conveys a message to print and radio reporters, too.

**Those pesky hands:** Put your arms at your side and let your hands gesture naturally as you talk, just not right in front of your face. Don’t hold your hands in front of you or in your pockets and don't cross your arms. Don't grip a podium as though it’s a life raft – white knuckles indicate fear.

**Eye contact:** During interviews, look at the reporter asking the question, not the camera. At a news conference, look at the person who asked the question as you answer, then make eye contact with the next questioner.