

4.5.5: Media Interviews

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the purpose of the media interview.
2. Understand ways to prepare for the media interview.

At some point in your business career it's likely that you will be interviewed by a representative of the media. It may be a camera and microphone in your face as you leave a building, or a scheduled interview where you have an opportunity to prepare. A press interview is both a challenge and an opportunity. Like a speech, it may make you nervous, but you have the advantage of being the center of attention and having the opportunity to have your say. This chapter addresses the basics for preparing and participating in a press interview.

A media interview is a discussion involving questions and answers for the purpose of broadcast. It is distinct from an informational interview (McLean, S., 2005), where you might be asked questions to learn background on a story, but you will still need to observe the three hallmark rules of interviews:

1. Anything you say can and often will be used against you.
2. Never say anything you would not feel comfortable hearing quoted out of context on the evening news.
3. Be prepared for the unexpected as well as the expected.

At first, those rules may sound extreme, but let's examine them in the context of today's media realities. In a press interview setting you will be recorded in some fashion, whether audio, video, or handwritten notes on a reporter's notepad. With all the probability for errors and misinterpretation, you want your words and gestures to project the best possible image to the press. There was a time when news programs didn't have to justify themselves with advertising dollars, but today all news is news entertainment and has to pay its own way. That means your interview will be used to attract viewers. You also have to consider the possibility that the person interviewing you is not a trained professional journalist, but rather an aspiring actor or writer who happened to land a job with the media. From their perspective, your quote in an audio, video, or print content package is dinner. It may also serve the public good, and inform, or highlight an important cause, but news has a bottom line just like business.

Because of these factors, you need to be proactive in seeing the press interview as part of the overall spectacle that is media, devoted to revenue. The six-second quote that is taken from the interview may not represent the tone, range, or even substance of your comments, but it will have been chosen to grab attention. It will also go viral if it catches on. Your interviewer may ask you a question that is off-the-wall, inappropriate, outside the scope of the interview, or unusual just to catch you off guard and get that attention-worthy quote. Independent journalism with a nonprofit, inform-the-public orientation still exists in some forms, but even those media outlets have to support themselves with an audience. So consider your role in the interview: to provide information and represent your business or organization with honor and respect. In sports, business, and press interviews, a good defense is required.

That said, a press interview is a positive opportunity, whether it is planned in advance or catches you off guard in public. You are the focus of the interview, and many people believe that if you are on television, for example, that you have something to say, that you have special insight, or that you are different from the viewing audience. That can give you an edge of credibility that can serve your business or company as you share your knowledge and experience.

When asked to give an interview, before you agree, learn as much as you can about the topic, the timing, the format, and the background. Table 4.5.5.1 summarizes how to approach these factors.

Table 4.5.5.1 Interview Preparation Factors

Topic	What will be the range or scope of the interview? How can you prepare yourself so you are better able to address specific questions? Ask for the list of questions in advance, and anticipate that you will be asked questions that are not listed. Prepare for the unexpected and you won't be caught off guard.
Time	What's the time frame or limit? A 15-minute interview may not require as much depth as one that lasts an hour or more.

Format	How will you be interviewed? Will it be through audio or video, over the Internet, over the telephone, or in person?
Background	What's the backstory on the interview? Is there a specific issue or incident? Is there a known agenda? Why is the interview now and not earlier or not at all? Why is it important?

These four areas will serve you well as you begin to define the range and content of the interview for yourself. You will also need to pay attention to the setting and scene, how you want to present yourself (dress or suit?), and how well you answer anticipated questions. Mock interviews with colleagues can help, and a comprehensive knowledge of your talking points is essential.

You want to be well rested, if at all possible, on the day of the interview. With a clear mind you will be agile and responsive, and you will be able to present yourself well. You'll be calm in the knowledge of your preparation, and not be thrown if an unexpected question comes your way. You'll be ready on time, understanding that most journalists have to package the story as quickly as possible, demonstrating respect for the interviewer. You'll also know that it is not just about what you say but how you say it. Audiences respond to emotional cues, and you want to project an image of credibility and integrity. You'll anticipate the question-and-answer pattern and limit your responses to ones that are clear and concise. You'll have visual aids ready if needed to make a point.

Naturally, however, you may not have the luxury of time to prepare. Press interviews are often requested at the last minute, and you may not be the first person this reporter asked for an interview that day. They have a story in mind, and they are looking for you to be part of that story. If the opportunity to be interviewed arises on the spur of the moment, you will need to make a quick judgment on whether to agree or decline. Your decision will rest on a multitude of factors, such as how much you know about the topic, whether someone else in your organization is better qualified to answer, whether your employer would appreciate your agreeing to speak to the media, and so on. If something newsworthy occurs at your workplace, start thinking about how you would make this decision before you are put on the spot. Finally, if the topic of the media inquiry is not time urgent, remember that you can always ask to postpone the interview to allow time to prepare.

Key Takeaway

A press interview is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Exercises

1. How does the press interview serve the business or organization? List two ways and provide examples. Discuss your ideas with classmates.
2. Consider the following scenario. Your large company is opening a new office in a new town and you have been designated to be part of the team that will be on the front lines. You want to establish goodwill, but also recognize that, being an outsider, you and your company may not be welcomed with open arms by the local business community. Your company produces a product and provides a service (feel free to choose; a coffee shop for example) that is currently offered in the town, but your organization perceives room for market growth as well as market share. Describe how you would handle relations with the local media. Compare your ideas with those of a classmate.
3. Form a team in class of interviewee and interviewer. Take ten-minute turns, having one person play the role of interviewee and the other the interviewer. Record your exchange and post as a file attachment in your class (if applicable), or post to YouTube or a similar Web hosting site and post the link. Write a report of your experience in no less than two hundred words.

Exercises (cont.)

4. Observe a press interview. How do they take turns? Does the interviewee ever look nervous? What could he or she have done to improve their performance? Write a brief suggestion and provide the link to the interview.
5. Find a sample press interview on a video Web site such as YouTube and evaluate it based on the guidelines in this chapter. Was it effective? Why or why not? Present your findings to the class.
6. Find at least one example of an interview gone bad. It may involve a misquotation, expressions of frustration or anger, or even an interview cut short. What happened? Provide a brief summary and provide the link to the interview.

References

McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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