

Media Interview Guide

Our media relations experts at Hill+Knowlton Strategies have prepared this guide to help you prepare for and maximize media interviews.

Before the Interview

KNOW THE GROUND RULES

Confirm in advance how the interview will be handled.

- **As a spokesperson, assume everything is on-the-record.** After “hello,” you are on the record (whether in an elevator, bathroom, walking to the interview location, etc.) and the interview is not over until you have physically left the meeting with the reporter.
- **On background** means that everything you say can be used as a statement of fact, but they cannot attribute a quote to you without your consent or without an agreement on how the comment will be attributed or how the source will be described.
- You can request something to be **off-the-record but the reporter must first agree to do so.** Ensure that the reporter understands that off-the-record means the reporter cannot use anything you say in the story, or attribute it to you.
- Off-the-record conversations are intended to provide education and guidance, or information that can be used if a reporter confirms it through another source. As a best practice, have experienced public relations counselors handle any off-the-record negotiations or other interview ground rules.



BE PREPARED

Do your homework, practice in advance and always have a game plan and purpose for the interview

- Know the journalist, the media outlet and your audience.
- Update your social media profiles and privacy settings, especially LinkedIn and Facebook.
- Determine the **single most important message** you want to get across.
- Prepare to handle tough or dreaded question(s).
- Be aware of current events, as you could be asked about breaking news.

During the Interview

SET THE TEMPO

Think **Q+O**, not **Q+A**.

- Treat every question as an **opportunity** to take the interview where you want it to go. Some reporters have been assigned at the last minute, meaning you know far more about the subject than they do.
- Use your time effectively and seize the moment from the very first question – often a ‘soft ball’ lead-in type of inquiry.
- At the end of the interview, you will often be asked: “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” So use the final question to repeat/emphasize your main message.
- Keep your answers brief – with even shorter answers for TV and radio.
- **Lead with your main point, then bring it to life with an anecdote and/or support it with a compelling statistic.**

USE “FLAGGING” AND “BRIDGING”

Emphasize your key points and keep the interview on track with these techniques.

Flag to capture the attention of a reporter and reinforce your main point(s):

- “So the key point is...”
- “The most important thing to know is...”
- “The bottom line is...”

Bridge to briefly address the question but pivot to the message you want to get across:

- “Yes, that’s true, but the real issue is...”
- “Not at all. The way we see the situation...”
- “I can’t speak to that, but what I can tell you is...”

USE SIMPLE, EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

Be conversational and paint pictures with words.

- Regardless of the topic, the best sound bites come from speaking in ways that your neighbor could understand.
- Analogies and metaphors work particularly well, as they create mental images that help make your remarks memorable and relatable.
- **Repeat the question in your answer** to form a clean sound bite (unless it’s a negative question).

BODY LANGUAGE MATTERS – A LOT!

It’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it.

- The overall impression reporters and audiences (especially TV viewers) have of you will come from a number of **non-verbal cues**, including facial expressions, posture and hand gestures.
- Project energy, sit up straight, speak up and maintain eye contact with the reporter.
- Avoid rocking back and forth or swiveling in your chair.
- Remember to smile (appropriately)! It does wonders for your on-camera presence and likeability.

AVOID PITFALLS

Most journalists are not biased or out to get you; they are just trying to do their job. Common pitfalls to be aware of:

- Avoid guessing, speculating, or answering questions outside your area of expertise.
- Avoid speaking for others or trashing your competitors.
- Avoid losing your temper or displaying annoyance.
- Avoid saying “no comment” or repeating inflammatory or negative language.
- **Avoid jargon, acronyms or buzzwords.**
- **Never lie, under any circumstances.**

After the Interview

FOLLOW UP

Stand out and become a valued resource through professional diligence and common courtesy.

- Provide additional information if you told a journalist you would do so.
- Ensure that the reporter has visuals, such as photos, graphics or B-roll. Current newspaper guidelines require online stories to have a visual.
- Send a thank you note. It’s surprisingly rare.
- **Give feedback on coverage. Reporters will work with you to correct factual inaccuracies, not opinions.**
- Follow and engage with journalists on social media. They appreciate when you read, watch and share their stories.