

Media Relations Handbook

A Guide for Responding to and Generating Media

MESSAGE BASICS

Messages are the heart of the story you are trying to tell. They are simple ideas that appeal to the values that are important to the audience you are trying to reach and the decision-makers who hold the key to helping you achieve your objectives.

You should be able to explain your message in a sentence or two. If it requires a paragraph or more, keep working. Remember, though, messages are not necessarily soundbites; they are ideas you want to get across. They can be reinforced by soundbites, phrases, statistics and anecdotes.

Good messages start with carefully defining your goals. Be as detailed as possible about what you want to achieve and who can help make that happen. Effective messages should include the following elements:

- **A problem or threat**
- **The core values that are at stake**
- **A solution**

Depending on the issues you are working on, it may seem that there are many messages that could be relevant to your work. Not all of them are equal, however, so you should make sure to focus only on the ones most likely to move your target audience to make the decision you want. Ideally, you should have only one core message, but certainly no more than three. More than that is confusing and will dilute the strength of your strongest messages.

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JUDGE YOUR MESSAGE



- Define your goal (What are you trying to achieve?)
- Identify your target (Who do you have to convince?)
- Are the core values clear?
- Is the problem or threat convincing?
- Is the solution simple and “common sense?”
- Is the language “plain English?”
- Is the language compelling, without being shrill?
- Is the message about results? (Rather than process.)
- Are you diluting your strongest most effective message by sending more than one?
- Are you ready for the Big Four counter-arguments?
 1. *“It costs too much.”*
 2. *“You are messing with our way of life.”*
 3. *“You are exaggerating.”*
 4. *“We’ve taken care of the problem. It’s fixed.”*

A MEDIA PRIMER: WHAT DO REPORTERS WANT?

Reporters need a “news hook” to draw their audience in. A good story includes:

- **Something new:** An issue or development that hasn’t been reported on before, or a new twist to something that has.
- **Something emotional and moving:** A reporter’s job is to make a connection with readers, listeners and viewers. Make your story personal, and let your passion show.
- **Something relatively easy to digest:** This does not mean “dumb down” your material. Just point out the most interesting, newsworthy pieces of your 50-page report or lengthy testimony.
- **Something timely:** Issues connected to deadlines, anniversaries or milestones are natural hooks.
- **Something visual:** With more people consuming news online than in the newspaper or other traditional media, imagery is increasingly important. Think about the photos or graphics that help tell your story, and include them in your pitch.
- **Something unexpected:** An element of surprise will set your story apart from the sea of pitches the average reporter receives every day.
- **Continuity of coverage:** Chances are good that if a media outlet has covered an issue in any depth previously, they will continue to report on new developments.



If you can tailor your story to include these characteristics, chances improve that you can persuade a reporter to cover it or that you can convince an opinion page editor to give your issue space, whether through an editorial or an op-ed.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

When a reporter calls, you should feel free to ask some questions of your own, and then schedule a time to talk later, after you have had a chance to prepare. Here are four key questions to ask:

- What is the story about?
- What outlet is it for? (Once you know this, consider whether the media outlet is one that reaches one of your target audiences, and check past coverage on your issue).
- Who else are they interviewing? What is your organization's role in the piece?
- What is the deadline and when is the interview likely to be published or broadcast?

If you are comfortable with the answers to all of these questions and feel an interview gives you a good opportunity to get out your organization's messages, go for it. If you don't feel you are the right messenger, consider suggesting someone else from your list of spokespeople or partner groups who might be more appropriate or could make a stronger statement. If the story just isn't on the right topic or won't give you the forum to discuss what you want to discuss, consider turning it down. Spend your time on something that will let you get your message out clearly.

Be Prepared!

Repeat your messages again and again. Know the three key points you want to make; have simple facts and figures ready to support those points. Try to identify stories and anecdotes that will help an uninformed viewer or reader understand your issue. To avoid mistakes, practice interviewing using your messages. All spokespeople for your organization should be familiar and proficient in delivering these key messages.

The upside to interviews are that they are a vehicle that lets you tell your story to the world and frame the issues you're working on in helpful way. And it's free. The downside is that media you're turning the reins over to someone else to control. Remember that journalists, whether they're from newspaper, TV, radio, or whether they're blogging or tweeting – are conduits, not your ultimate audience. They are neither friend nor foe. They are a tool. Address your points to your key audience among their readers. Use every opportunity to answer a question and bridge back to one of your main messages.

TAKE CONTROL OF THE INTERVIEW

Know what you're answering

Make sure you understand the question. If you're asked a question that is confusing or unclear, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify it. But don't repeat the question—it could end up being printed as a quote!

Make yourself quotable

Provide the reporter with positive, appealing words and images that will make them want to put your message in their story. Typically, your comments will be edited to about 5 to 15 seconds or a short sentence, so focus on getting your point across efficiently. Direct quotes are almost never more than two sentences.

Listen as much as you talk.

A reporters' trick is to ask light-weight questions, get you talking and sit back to let you "babble on," saying things you wish you hadn't. Be economical with your words. Don't be afraid of silence. If there is a pause or lapse in the interview, it is the reporter's job to fill it, not yours. Some reporters also will use extended silence as a technique to get an interview subject talking. Don't take the bait and fill the void with unsolicited information.

Take it from the top; make sure to correct misconceptions

Even though you may have sent advance materials, do not expect that a reporter has read them thoroughly or really knows what your issue/campaign is about. Be able to summarize your issue with a quick overview that will set the stage for your main message. Correct misinformation with facts and references whenever possible.

Don't make things up

Never make things up or spin the facts. If you don't know, tell them that you don't know. If you can find out, let them know and call back or email with the information later.

Use analogies or descriptive terms rather than statistics

Create an image by saying that a new runway is 30 football fields long rather than citing the statistic that says the runway is several thousand feet long.

Never use jargon or acronyms

Remember, most people don't have insider knowledge of your issue. Speak in simple, non-technical terms, not insider jargon or acronyms that only professionals will understand.

Know your opponents' viewpoints and have counterpoints ready

It is rare for the media to only report one side of the story. Assume the other side will get called as well, and dismantle their arguments in your talking points.

Don't say "No comment"

Think about how you react when you hear someone on the news say, "No comment." Most often, they leave the impression of hiding information from the public. On the other hand, bluffing your way through a question will damage your credibility. Answer the question honestly and repeat your message.

You're always "on the record"

Nothing you say is EVER off the record. If you prefer to talk to a reporter to provide information on background and don't wish to be quoted, make sure you have that understanding **BEFORE** you begin your conversation. Even then, be aware that your words still are not "off the record" and may be used in a story. The "juicier" the details, the more likely it will make the news.

In your own words.

Don't let the reporter put words in your mouth. If a reporter asks, "Do you mean to say ...," state your message again, but in your own words. Similarly, don't fall for the "Isn't it true that" line of questioning, which aims to put you on the defensive. Don't start with "no" or act flustered. Merely correct the record and transition (or bridge, see below) to one of your main messages.

Stay positive and solutions-oriented

Reporters are inclined to highlight conflict, and they want you to help them reach that objective.

TECHNIQUES FOR STAYING ON MESSAGE

When you find yourself in a sticky spot or perhaps straying off the subject, bring the focus back to your key points. Here are some friendly, subtle methods:

The Bridge – Answer the reporter's question in a very brief and concise manner but then use the opportunity to bridge or segue to your key points. Some popular bridges include:

- "I don't have all the facts to answer that question accurately, but I can tell you that..."
- "That used to be important. What's important now is..."
- "I agree we have a problem and I'd like to go directly to our solution..."
- "Your question points out a common misconception we hear all the time. The real problem is..."

The Hook – Entice the reporter or producer to ask a desired follow-up question. Some easy hooks are studies or research. For example, "You'd be surprised what our research indicates..." or "A recent study revealed that..."

The Flag – Help the reporter or producer remember what you want them to by pointing it out to them. Some common flagging phrases include:

- "The key point to remember is..."
- "If I could only say one thing about this, it would be..."

- “Finally...”
- “The most important thing to take away from this is...”

CONTROL YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

Your physical presence can say as much as your words, so use it to your advantage. Sometimes body language or appearance can conflict with your message, making what you say appear to be suspect.

Especially if you’re doing an on-camera interview, remember these tips:

- Look your interviewer in the eye to convey genuine interest.
- Smile whenever appropriate.
- In television interviews, if you must look away from the interviewer, don’t just shift your eyes, move your entire head. Focus the conversation on the interviewer and let the camera find you.
- Avoid sudden body movements. Some gesturing is appropriate to convey your enthusiasm, but avoid extreme waving or pointing.
- Keep your feet planted firmly on the floor and your knees together. Don’t cross your legs.
- If you perspire, be prepared. Wipe your brow during the interview if necessary.
- Be aware of, and avoid, any unconscious mannerisms like scratching your ear, playing with your tie, tapping your pen or rocking in your chair.

CREATE A POSITIVE VISUAL IMAGE

Humans are hard wired to respond to visuals—they catch our eyes, tap into emotions, and increase social sharing. Use imagery and graphics to help communicate your message.

- Illustrate your key points with pictures, charts or props. Simple, interesting visuals help reporters understand your issue.
- Be aware of the surroundings for your interview. If you have a choice about interview location, suggest a place that brings your issue to life, whether that’s the inner city or a wilderness area. If they are coming to your office, remove all confidential or objectionable materials.

HANDLING HOSTILE REPORTERS

If a reporter is unfriendly towards you or writes a story you don’t agree with, stay calm and formulate a reasonable and constructive response. Do not antagonize or pick a fight with a reporter; they control the medium and the final message that makes it into print or onto the airwaves, not you.

If you are dealing directly with a reporter, take a deep breath and use one of the techniques described above to avoid conflict and try to transition to one of your key messages. Answer the question and quickly get back to your main point and facts that back up your message. If you are responding to a negative story, consider using one of the following tactics:

- Pitch the story to another reporter or editor
- Write a letter to the editor
- Write an op-ed

IF THE STORY IS INACCURATE OR UNFAIR

If a story comes out with factual mistakes or misquotes, do not call up and yell at a reporter. Rather, point out the mistake calmly and ask for a correction. Contact the reporter first, and engage the editor only if a major mistake has been made and the reporter refuses to acknowledge his/her responsibility for the miscommunication. Remember that even if you have a cordial relationship with a reporter, his or her job is to report the news and it may not always turn out the way you like it.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

The best way to improve your interviewing skills is to review your performance and then make a list of what you'll do better or differently next time. Read the coverage or view and listen to the broadcast to see how your impression of the interview matches with what the public reads, sees or hears.

Ask yourself:

- Were you on message?
- Did you get your main points across in a concise and easy to understand way?
- Did your opponents have any compelling arguments to which you need to construct a good counterpoint in the future?