

Working with the media

Crafting your message

- Before the interview or appearance, study the key messages you want to leave with the audience.
- Identify areas of your work that could be newsworthy
- Make sure you get these messages across, regardless of the reporter's objectives.
- Your goal is not to "bully" the interviewer, but to lead or control the interview as much as possible to get your messages across.

Media Interview Tips

- Talk in lay terms, using as little professional or technical jargon as possible. Tell stories and anecdotes that illustrate your point and give examples.
- Keep the answers short.
- Think about what you want to say before you speak. Define two to three main points you would like to make about your subject. Gather facts, figures, and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready.
- Speak in complete thoughts. The reporter's question may be edited out and your response should stand on its own. This is especially important for television interviews.
- Never say anything you do not want to read in print, hear on the radio, or see on television or the Internet.
- **Be confident. You are the expert.**

Before the Interview

- Prepare a single communication objective and two or three secondary points you want to make.
- Anticipate the reporter's questions, especially the hard ones. What are your key messages? Answer difficult questions as briefly as possible, then bridge to your message.
- If you can provide the reporter with a written summary of information, main points or statistics, do so. Reporters always need perspective (i.e., How many people are affected? When did the issue arise? Is this part of a national trend?). Don't hesitate to put the issue into perspective, even if the reporter doesn't ask.

During the Interview

- State the most important information first – then provide the background.
- Keep responses brief, but long enough to help the reporter get quotes.
- Stick to your main points and do not allow yourself to get drawn too far off on tangents. Many people make the mistake of talking too much. Repeat your points if necessary to get back on track.
- Mention your subject by name during the interview, rather than saying "it" or "they."
- Make eye contact with the reporter.
- Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. If a reporter bases questions on information you believe is incorrect, do not hesitate to set the record straight. Offer background information where necessary.
- Identify anything you say as either fact or opinion. Your opinions are your own, but fact is fact.
- If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification rather than talking around it. If you do not have the answer, say so. Tell the reporter where to find the information, if possible.

- If you feel unprepared to answer a certain question, tell the reporter you will get back to him/her with an answer. Avoid discussing hypothetical situations.
- Never say, “No comment.” Instead, if you cannot or do not choose to answer, explain briefly. For example, “I can’t answer that because I haven’t seen the research paper you are referring to.”
- Avoid saying things “off the record.” Reporters may or may not honor this, and it annoys them.
- Be honest. Don’t try to conceal negative information; rather, let your interviewer know what you are doing to solve a problem.
- Don’t joke. Be friendly, but not complacent. Assume everything you say, even in a social situation, may appear in print or on the air.
- Reporters can use silence to make you feel uncomfortable and talk or say things you may not want to say. It is best to stay quiet between questions. Don’t fill in with chatter or become hyperbolic (sometimes called “nervous talk”).
- Make your final comment clear and concise, reemphasizing your main point. If you feel that you failed to get the message out, force it in at the end. (“I think we’ve missed the real, critical issue here, which is....”)

Keep it simple

- Keep your answers short and to the point -- make them quotable. Think of “headlines.”
- You are talking to a whole audience through the reporter
- What do you want the audience to know about your research and findings?
- Don’t use acronyms or jargon.
- Remember that the average reading level is 8th grade.
- It’s OK to brag about VCU, your department, division.

Effective Communications

- Speak in personal terms whenever possible.
- If you do not want a statement quoted, do not make it.
- Don’t argue with the reporter or lose your cool.
- Do not repeat a reporter’s negative words.
- A reporter’s direct question deserves a direct answer -- then bridge to a message.
- If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so.
- If you can’t answer a question, don’t say “no comment.”
- Listen carefully to the question.
- Always answer questions honestly.
- Provide good, solid information, but don’t overwhelm reporters.
- If there is more than one spokesperson, communicate the same messages.
- Expect the media to get things wrong, but correct misinformation quickly.

Points to Remember

- Be prepared -- anticipate questions and rehearse messages.
- Pause before you answer.
- Always answer the question -- don’t over-answer.
- Add bonus information -- “Gee Whiz” facts and anecdotes that support your selling points.
- **Never ask to read the reporter’s copy or request changes.**