How to Handle a Media Interview

Working with the media is key to good communication and promotion of programs, initiatives, issues and events. Always keep in mind that the media – more than anything else – shapes the public image of your agency. Newspapers, radio, magazines, blogs, news Web sites and television stations provide powerful – and far reaching – tools to deliver information on the local, state, national and international levels. Some anxiety over speaking with reporters is understandable, but the best way to avoid communication pitfalls is by training to become an interview ace.

Some things to consider before you even get the first call:

Within every organization, there is at least one, maybe two (or 10) media hams. Seek them out! Dealing with the media can be a fun and rewarding experience for employees. Identify staff who can serve as spokespeople for your agency and don't hesitate to use them. Important traits of a good spokesperson:

- Excellent speaking skills.
- Enjoys conducting interviews.
- At ease when dealing with reporters/interest in or background in media.
- Comes across as knowledgeable, but not a know-it-all.
- Can master large volumes of information in relatively short period of time (prior knowledge of subject area definitely a bonus!)
- Flexible with schedule (reporters have tight deadlines and you should work to meet them!).
- Comfortable speaking with print reporters as well as conducting on camera or live radio interviews.
- Professionally attired.
- Can be assertive/authoritative when pressed with difficult questions, but not defensive.

Preparation:

Make sure you understand the nature of the media inquiry and clarify what you intend to communicate. Spend some time thinking about the reporter's request. If a reporter calls asking about a program to screen for breast cancer, don't plan on discussing the dangers of cervical cancer, heart disease or diabetes. Keep in mind that reporters have limited copy space and even more limited broadcast time. Their missions are specific and that should be respected. That being said, here are a few points to aid you in making sure your message comes across loud and clear:

- Determine how the interview might offer you the chance to make positive points or provide helpful information about your topic/issue/organization.
- Write down and practice key message points in brief statements or bullet points.
- **Remove jargon or long explanations**.
- **Be brief, but don't leave out pertinent details**.
- Be mindful of your audience. Unless you are dealing with a trade publication, keep in mind your audience only has basic, if any, knowledge of the subject you are discussing.
- Have back up data to support your points if appropriate. Reporters love data. Review facts and figure so you are comfortable discussing them. Offer to share data with

reporter. Often, media organizations will turn data into graphics and visual aids for stories.
- Anticipate questions (easy, hard and terrible) and your responses. Practice with a colleague or in front of the mirror (yes, it looks silly, but heck, it is worth it!).
- Get to know the media outlet -- what type of publication or program is it? Who is their target audience? What other media outlet is covering the story?
- What is the interview format? Length? Live? Taped? Solo or multi-guests?
- If you are part of a group, make sure everyone has the same message.
- If you are meeting with more than one media outlet, make sure your message is consistent with each reporter.

Interview Confirmation

- The day before your interview confirm date, time, place and anticipated length of interview.

Arrival, Location and Pre-Interview

- Allow plenty of time for the unexpected.
- Arrive at the media outlet 5-10 minutes early.
- If interview is at your office, be prepared early and have all calls and interruptions held.
- If the interview is in your office, tidy up. Put away piles of papers and clutter.
- Try not to be interviewed behind your desk as it creates a barrier between you and the reporter.
- Pre-interviews - some reporters spend up to 30 minutes prior to an interview warming up the subject. Some spend 5 seconds! Take the opportunity to find out what the reporter is looking for and set the tone for the interview.
- Do ask when a story or article is going to be run.
- Don't ask to pre-approve a story. Reporters, by and large, hate this and view it as an attempt to “control” the content of their story. Occasionally, media outlets will offer a review prior to publication/broadcast, but it isn’t the norm or even an accepted practice within the field of journalism.

General Tools, Techniques and Tips

- Be as likeable as possible. The goal of an interview is to communicate your key message to a public via the report and his/her media outlet. It is not to educate the reporter or show how much you know. The key then is to focus on your key message and utilize techniques to keep the interview on those messages.
- The reporter’s list of questions might not cover everything you’d planned to discuss. When possible, answer the reporter’s question directly and look for a segue way to one of the points you’d planned to discuss.
- Always, remember that it’s OK to say, “It’s not our policy to discuss that,” or “I’ll have to do some research and get back to you on that,” or “I’ll have to defer that question to communications for review.” When in doubt, punt to communications who can follow up with the reporter to get additional information or to explain why we can’t comment on a particular topic.
- **I**f you can't answer a question, explain why. No comment never works and gives the impression we are withholding information from the public.

- Keep it short – and make sure you get your point across early on. When trying to make your key messages clear quickly in an interview, you start with the conclusions and end with the explanations. This is especially important for broadcast interviews.
- When you have a complicated message in a broadcast interview, you can carefully extend the sound byte by enumerating your points, making it difficult for the media outlet to separate them. For example:

"There are three things every person planning a pregnancy should know: 1) take folic acid prior to trying to conceive, 2) abstain from drugs and alcohol and 3) talk to your doctor."

- Don't continue talking after you make your point.
- Use single, clear sentences to make your point.
- Reporters often leave a space of silence to try and draw unintended remarks out of guests trying to "fill the space." You don't have to! They also like to ask, “Do you have anything else to add?” at the end of interviews. Politely say no thank you.

How to Avoid Pitfalls

- Remain calm.
- Don't repeat wrong information -- even if offered by the reporter. It could be the sound bite that is used. Instead offer the correction framed not as a denial, but as a statement about the facts you want to present.
- If a reporter keeps asking the same question over and over again politely say you already answered that and ask to move on to the next topic.
- If a reporter provides incorrect information, it is ok to correct them with "That is not true… the facts are that…."
- If you don't have or know the information requested, don't pretend you do. Offer to get back to the reporter with the information, or punt to communications or, if need be, another agency. Keep in mind, CHFS does a lot but we aren’t in charge of everything. Reporters, from time to time, assume we are in charge – or should be taking on – issues that aren’t a part of Health and Family Services. Politely explain when a topic doesn’t pertain to CHFS, and the question would best be direct to XYZ agency.
- Never say something you don't want to appear in print or be aired.
- Don't go "off the record" unless you have good reason to trust the reporter and have clarified what the phrase means to you and to the reporter. It’s a phrase that means different things to different people.
- If you make an error, correct yourself as soon as possible.
- Don’t draw the interview out longer than the reporter intended. Again, journalists have tight deadlines and keeping them past the time they’ve allotted for a story, gives them less time to spend on putting it together.

Body Language During Interviews

- Make eye contact with the reporter, maintain good posture, speak slowly and calmly, and make sure any materials you might be using are professional looking. If on camera, don't stare at the camera.
- If you are being interviewed at a remote location and the interviewer is in the studio or somewhere else, DO look straight into the camera.
- Don't be distracted by activity around you.

Print Tips

- Some print reporters record their interviews. Be prepared to have your exact phrase transcribed.
- If the reporter is taking notes, be sure to give them time to record what you're saying.
- Don't assume deadlines. Morning newspapers generally have afternoon deadlines, and afternoon papers generally have morning deadlines – but you have to double-check to know for sure.
- Expect print reporters to ask more questions than broadcast reporters.

Broadcast Tips in General

- Raise your voice slightly for key points and emphasis.
- Watch getting high pitched and "screechy" if you are the excitable type!
- Ask reporter what they like to be called and call them by that name. First name basis can be helpful.

Radio/Podcasting Tips

- Use your voice to create variety and interest -- no monotones.
- Feel free to have notes of key points, facts, etc.
- Paint a word picture. Remember that old adage, "see it on the radio." Use examples and stories to "illustrate" your point.
- Call-Ins: don't let angry or hostile callers fluster you. Always take the high road.
- Avoid ums, ahs and "verbal nodding" -- it sounds silly on radio

TV Tips

- Dress appropriately. Mostly that means dress conservatively, but there are exceptions. Avoid short skirts, white shirts or loud ties if you are trying to come across as credible. Solid, dark colors work well.
- Men button coats if standing, unbutton if sitting.
- Studios are cold with the lights off -- ovens with the lights are on. Dress in mid-weight clothing.
- Avoid shiny or dangly jewelry. Watch for jewelry banging against lavaliere mikes.
- If you have the choice, choose contacts over glasses.
- If offered makeup, accept it. Men, 5 o'clock shadows show. Women, makeup should be only slightly heavier than normally worn.
- Keep an extra blazer, tie, blouse, sweater, etc. on hand at the office for days when unexpected interviews pop up.

Phone Tips

- When called without prior notice, find out if the reporter is on deadline. If they are not, ask if you can call them back. Set an acceptable time to allow yourself to prepare. Even 5 minutes can help improve your delivery.
- Try and call from a quiet place or in a room where you can close the door. Outside noises can disturb the interview and are especially problematic when the interview is being recorded.
- Use your notes -- no one is watching!!
- As the reporter for feedback to ensure they understand you. With no eye contact or body language, this can prevent misunderstanding.

General

- Don't reference other media during interviews – especially competitors. For example, when doing an interview with *The State Journal*, don't say, "I just read a really great article in *The Herald-Leader*."
- Don't show favoritism. If reporters are competing for a story, call-backs should take place in the order in which they were received unless someone has indicated a longer deadline.
- Don't give stories to one or two reporters and call it a day. Everyone else will just call you back the next day. Besides, you will have made one good relationship with the media, while damaging countless others.
- Don't assume reporters have significant background information on the topic you are discussing. Most don't have time for such things, especially broadcast reporters who juggle multiple stories in a day.
- Understand the media is different from your communications office. Communications exists to help you – not to feed stories to the media.
- If you have questions or concerns about dealing with the media, call communications. We are here to help!
- Make sure you review the story after it runs. Is it accurate? Were your comments portrayed fairly and in proper context? If not, talk to communications about possible ways to remedy.
- Maintain a list of reporters with whom you've worked and keep them abreast of news pertaining to your program (see communications for reporter follow-up).
- Don't vilify reporters. They, like you, have a job to do and it's not glorifying government agencies and programs. They exist to be a public watchdog and must cover critical, probing stories that don't always paint government in the best light. Their work isn't personal and your feelings about them shouldn't be either.
- Being honest, well-prepared and knowledgeable goes a long way in establishing a positive public image.