

California Commission on Improving Life through Service

MEDIA TRAINING Interviews

Nelson and ID.

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Successful Interviewing Tips:

A successful media interview can turn a challenge into an opportunity worth thousands of dollars of free advertising for AmeriCorps and national service. Being properly prepared will make all the difference.

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PREPARATION

Establish your objectives. Determine the single most important message you want to communicate. Then reduce it to a 15 second sound bite. No need to memorize but be sure to understand the details. Write your full answer down in simple statements. Then do the same for any secondary objective. During the interview take your notes with you, so that you don't forget what your message is. i.e. "AmeriCorps is the nation's new domestic Peace Corps initiative. Members receive an education award after one or two years of direct service to their communities."

Anticipate negative questions. Put yourself in the reporter's shoes and develop a few tough follow-up questions. Again write down the answers (keep them brief), and practice reciting them. In this way you will feel more confident in responding and less likely to say something you don't mean.

GENERAL INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Make your key points first with your 15 second sound bites. Then stop talking so that the reporter can ask the follow up questions. For television reporters the first answer is generally what the reporter will use. It is the easiest segment to locate when it comes time to do the editing.

Be sure not to ramble. A lengthy answer can be edited and may not convey your entire message. Short declarative sentences are best.

Avoid "No Comment." It implies that you have something to hide. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so and promise to find out and get back to the reporter. Don't lie. It will always come back. Most reporters will not stop with your interview and will continue to research a story to get as many angles as possible. Inevitably with adequate research, your lie will be uncovered, further embarrassing you and the organization you represent.

Don't use jargon or technical language. Chances are no one will understand it and you will be asked to explain or be edited out all together.

Don't pick a fight even if the reporter is hostile. Sometimes reporters will ask hard questions, so that it doesn't look like they are not being tough enough. No matter what don't lose your cool. Nothing looks worse to the viewer or sounds worse to a listener. However, if a reporter asks a question based on incorrect facts, you have every right to correct it.

When you get a hostile question be compassionate and concerned, validate the reporter's concern and then quickly bridge to your key message.

Reporters are professionals. Don't lower your guard just because a reporter is being friendly.

Don't fall for the silent treatment. Answer the question as you prepared to do. If there is a pause wait for the reporter to ask another question. Often the pause is designed to get you to say more than you originally planned.

The most quotable interviews are those with colorful and descriptive words. Analogies and metaphors are good if they help to get your point across. A 15 second sound bite that is both colorful and descriptive will be run over and over again in the papers and evening newscasts.

Never do an interview after having cocktails.

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Nothing is ever "off the record." Expect that anything you say might be used in the story. Don't relax just because the reporter has put his/her notebook away or the cameraperson has turned off the videocamera.

Don't attempt to limit a reporter's questions. If you hold a press conference or agree to do an interview on a specific subject most reporters will limit their questions to that topic. But there are no guarantees. If you are asked the same question more than once, respond with the same answer. The reporter may not be satisfied with your answer, however, remember -- you are trying to get your message out. Don't fall into the trap of saying more than you should.

If you are doing a phone interview, have your notes and 15 second sound bites in front of you. This is especially important if you have statistics to quote.

Don't get cute in an interview. Subtle humor can be lost on a reporter or the audience. A sarcastic remark can easily be taken out of context or misunderstood. In print interviews it is the written word that will be noted, remembered and reported.

Brevity is important. You could be one of a dozen interviews for a story. Your comments will be heavily edited, it's best be brief and to the point. However, if the reporter is taking notes and not using a recorder -- don't talk faster than he/she can take notes.

Break down compound questions to single ones. Then answer them one at a time. Make sure that the reporter knows which question you are responding to. A misplaced “yes” or “no” can be damaging.

When a reporter comes to your office, clean and clear your desk of sensitive material. Most reporters can read upside-down. Don't take phone calls during the interview. They are distracting to you and may provide unintended information to the reporter.

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PHONE INTERVIEWS

When a reporter calls return his/her call as soon as possible. Train your staff to ask if the reporter has a deadline and how quickly a response is required. If you can't do the interview explain why and try to find an appropriate person. An insufficient explanation or none at all makes it appear that you have something to hide and could lead to a one-sided story that doesn't flatter your organization.

Ask questions before the interview starts. What is the story about? Why were you picked for the interview? Try to find out what the reporter wants. Is the reporter knowledgeable about AmeriCorps or national service? If not, this is the perfect time to give him/her an overview.

Provide the reporter with background materials. All Commissioners should have a press kit. The Commission Fact Sheet is a good one pager for reporters and is easily faxed. In most cases your media interviewer will have already received an information packet from the Commission's Public Information Unit.

TV TIPS

Be on your guard at all times. Even though the interview is over, photographers often get “cut-away” shots to assist in editing. Almost always the microphone is still on.

Don't fidget. This is distracting to the viewers and makes you look insecure. Men should avoid doing interviews with their hands in their pockets. They tend to jingle loose change.

Establish eye contact with the interviewer. Don't let your eyes wander. If the reporter is reading notes or giving hand signals to the cameraperson, don't get distracted. The camera will pick up your eye movements, which will make you look uneasy, defensive and insecure. Don't look at the camera.

If, however, you are doing a “talk back” interview, establish eye contact with the camera. A “talk back” interview is one where there is no reporter present and you are being interviewed by a news anchor in a studio located in another place. Typically, this is a live interview, but it may be edited into clips for later use. Don't get distracted by moving figures or objects behind the camera. Ignore the distractions and continue to talk.

IFB - Internal Feedback. This is an earphone that enables you to hear the reporter's questions back in the studio. It is used in "talk back" interviews. Occasionally, you may hear interference or noise on the IFB. Ignore it and keep talking. You don't want to be caught on camera making odd facial expressions, inappropriate comments or gestures.

Don't rush. Talk at your own pace. Use a conversational tone. No notes here, prepare and practice. You are expected to be an expert.

Body language and tone of voice are especially important on TV. Don't slouch. Sit on the edge of your chair and lean slightly forward. This will make you look more authoritative and involved. Smile -- you want to be likable. Don't fold your arms -- that's negative body language.

Wardrobe - wear basic colors, medium to dark shades are best. Houndstooth/checked suits; brightly colored ties or sharply contrasting patterns should be avoided. Keep all jewelry to a minimum.

Don't assume that a reporter's off camera demeanor will carry over to the interview. You may still be in for a good grilling.

RADIO TIPS

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Before the interview, find out how long you will be on the air. Is this for a news story or a talk show? This will tell you how many key messages you will be able to deliver.

News stories for radio are very short, about 40 seconds. The average TV story is about 1 & 1/2 minutes long. Therefore it is even more important that your key messages or sound bites be brief, clear and impactful if possible. Practice your sound bites -- with practice you can deliver your message well in 15 seconds.

Don't forget your notes. There is nothing wrong with using them as a reference. Make sure you have them unclipped and laid out, so you are not shuffling papers on the air. These should be notes, not a script.

Don't be distracted while on the air. Frequently the host or others may be moving around in the studio. Stay focused on the interview and your responses. Over the air pauses and hesitations will sound like you don't know your own subject.

Don't be afraid to suggest a topic for discussion with your host. If an important topic has not been mentioned, you may want to ask the host to give you a particular question during the commercial break. Explain that this is an important aspect the audience should be aware of. If the subject is still not raised, try bridging into it during a response to another related subject.

If it is a call-in show, where listeners can call you for questions -- keep your cool. Hopefully, your moderator/host will control the callers and not let it get out of hand. If you sense that you are getting angry or frustrated, suggest to the moderator that you have already answered the caller's question and it is time to move on to the next caller. Don't rely on the moderator to bail you out without your assistance. He/she may want a lively and controversial show. Remember, radio stations have time delays so that a live interview can be edited for obnoxious and inappropriate language.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Follow up promptly with your promises for more information or referrals. Ask for the reporter's deadline.

Don't ask to see the story or interview before it is published or aired. Most reporters will not do this under any circumstances.

If you don't like the finished product, first call the reporter. If a significant mistake was made contact the editor or news director. If the mistake is minor you might bring it to the reporter's attention in case a follow-up story is done.

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