

Communication Handbook - Factsheet 13

Version 1 – April 2012

13 Being interviewed

- ⇒ Different points you need to think of before media interviews:
- ⇒ Why and how to prepare for the interview
- ⇒ DOs & DON'Ts of interview
- ⇒ How to answer difficult questions. Using difficult questions as a platform for your message.
- ⇒ TV interview practicalities (eye contact, pose, gesture, appearance, clothing and etc.)
- ⇒ Radio interview practicalities.



The stakes are high when you talk to the media. Get it right, and they will transmit your message to the heart of your target audience, in a format that your audience will trust. Get it wrong, and at best you've wasted your time; at worst you will fuel bad publicity, in which that same trust will work against you.

Proper preparation and training make a remarkable difference to the outcome of media interviews. They can help you get the right message across every time in confident and effective media interviews – even at the height of a crisis.

Make the news

Your interview must make news

You need to give your interviewer a story that he or she wants to pass on to readers, viewers and listeners. Experienced print reporters are all too familiar with the frustration of coming away from a long political or business interview in which the interviewee would not deviate from a personal agenda that was just not newsworthy. In a broadcast setting, this same frustration is very likely to direct increasingly negative and aggressive questioning, which in turn will set the tone for a negative story. Even when you are already under the spotlight, such as during a crisis or rolling news event, the number one rule is to say something newsworthy. Otherwise your interview will produce a story that you don't like, or no story at all.

Know your media

In order to generate good news in an interview, you need to think like a journalist, see stories in the way that journalists see stories, and speak in language that journalists can use in their stories. A journalist will always try to **find an angle** on the news – that is, a way to interpret or explain events that will appeal particularly to his or her readers, viewers or listeners. (An ambitious journalist will also look for a unique angle that will mark his story out from his competitors.) The best way to control the agenda of an interview is to give the journalist a ready-made news angle that makes great news for his particular audiences – an angle, of course, that suits your agenda too.

Know your media and know your reporter

Read, watch and listen to your target media regularly. This will help you to identify what they consider to be newsworthy and what angles they take on events. You can take this to a personal level by searching for previous stories written by a particular journalist – identify themes in his or her interests and attitudes. Apart from the practical benefits to your preparation, getting to know your interviewer can be a great confidence boost going into the interview itself.

At this stage you will also be able to identify any likely preconceptions and negative news angles that journalists may be likely to bring to the interview: you can

prepare the arguments and evidence that you will need to disprove such views and substitute a positive news angle.

Get the angle right

A journalist uses the news angle to tell readers why they should care, and different readers of different media care about different things. For instance, journalists from regional media will tend to look at events from a local angle because their audiences care most about what the local impact will be. International journalists may be more interested in the big picture. Trade press want an angle that reflects how developments affect their industry. Newswires want exclusive real-time information. Don't just push your agenda: adapt it to give each journalist what they want.

A very good way to prepare your agenda for an interview is to imagine the best possible headline that you would like a journalist to write afterwards, and that you can realistically imagine appearing in a publication. That's your news angle. Remember: Put yourself in the place of the publication's reader, what are they interested in? It must be interesting and newsworthy for the journalist and the audience.

The number one thing that every journalist wants is a good story that will interest his or her editor and the media's target audience. If you provide this for them, everyone is happy.

Get the message right

A news story typically revolves around a small number of themes – rarely more than three fundamental ideas, because otherwise the story would be too complex to be easily understood. There is room for remarkably little information in a typical newspaper story or broadcast news item. Likewise, it is unlikely you will be able to convey more than three fundamental ideas in an interview, particularly for broadcast media.

⇒ Strong and consistent messages can influence the focus of a news story and help control what angle the journalist takes.

Prepare and memorise your key messages.

Prove it

Reporters respond to facts but they are sceptical about pure talk and ideas. Facts help persuade them that they are not being spun an agenda, and facts give them the foundations that they need to generate a credible story. Your messages are propositions or arguments; to persuade anyone to believe them you will need

proof – particularly when defending yourself against a negative preconception or promoting a contentious proposition.

Memorise or have to hand “proof points” that validate, illustrate, explain, bring to life and lend authority to your messages. Proof points can be hard information like statistics, or soft information like anecdotes and personal stories. They should be colourful and memorable.

Preparation

Messages and proof points are the foundations of interview preparation. Messages should be consistent through time, but their details should be reviewed and customised to the needs of each particular news situation and each particular interview. Particular interviews will require particular proof points to support the arguments you are likely to want to make.

A question-and-answer (Q&A) document is often used to crystallise this process by anticipating all questions that are likely to be asked and preparing responses that incorporate key messages and proof points to back them up. It is especially important to prepare for areas of weakness. The list of questions should include all of the questions that you would least like to be asked, along with the best possible answers to them. Now is the time to prepare those answers – not off the top of your head when the journalist asks your nightmare question. Preparing for and covering your weaknesses in this way is not only practically effective, it is another great way to boost your confidence for the interview.

A Q&A document is not a script to be memorised. It is obvious to the interviewer when an interviewee is reading back verbatim prepared answers; this undermines credibility. To be trusted and believed, you need to be relaxed and spontaneous. Therefore, a Q&A should be used as a broad guide for the ideas that you need to communicate, not parroted word-for-word.

Practise, but don't rehearse. It is very useful to practise for interviews by giving your list of questions to a colleague and asking them to role-play a probing journalist. For the same reasons though, this should be viewed as practice and not rehearsal – you are not preparing precise lines to roll out again later, rather the goal should be to build confidence, experience, and familiarity with the situation and the material.

General advice for interviews

Interviews are strange, contrived situations that are unfamiliar to most people who don't take part in them regularly or professionally. They can have a similar dynamic to normal meetings with colleagues at work, or normal conversations or debates with friends, but don't be fooled. An interview is a game, an intellectual

challenge, and ultimately a contest between the interviewer and the interviewee for control of the story.

At the beginning it can feel as if the interviewer holds all the cards. He or she gets to choose what questions to ask and what answers to use in print and broadcast (unless it is live). By journalistic custom, you have very few rights. You should be able to ask to see your own quotes and to know when, whether and in what form and when it will be broadcast or published; but you have no right to see the whole piece before it is aired. You can ask beforehand what themes and subjects the interview will cover, but you have no guarantee that the journalist will stick to those topics on the day. You can ask for a list of questions, but almost always the answer will be no.

This is where issues of control come into play. You have power to the extent that the journalist needs access to you and your information. These are your bargaining tools in setting the terms for the interview.

However they may seem, journalists are not your friends, and they are ultimately loyal only to the story. Nevertheless, treat them with respect, because whether consciously or otherwise their feelings towards you will colour their treatment of you during the interview and subsequently their treatment of your interests in the story itself.

Treat all journalists equally well, regardless of how lowly their publication. Obscure local or trade publication articles might have little immediate impact, but can easily come to the attention of bigger media. When major reporters are preparing to cover you and your organisation, they will search through previous coverage for their background, and what they will find will be exactly these little and obscure stories. Finally, major journalists were all minor journalists once – with long memories.

Most interviews bring together conflicting interests: yours and those of the journalist and any other players in the story of which you are a part. Expect to be asked aggressive, melodramatic, or ignorant questions: the journalist wants to improve the story with drama, conflict and (over)simplification. These are not usually in your interests, so don't rise to them. Remain calm, confident, and measured. The bottom line is that you cannot control the reporter and should not seek to do so. All you can control is yourself and your own behaviour.

⇒ **Above all: Use your messages. Use the facts.**

DO

Push your messages. Your messages should be a thread running through your contribution to the entire interview. Consistency and repetition are your way to ensure as much as possible that the journalist takes away the right information and the right angle, and puts these into print or broadcast. Make a point of trying to include one of your positive messages in every answer you give. It can be an intellectual challenge to turn questions and conversation around in this way without sounding strained, but it is an invaluable skill to master. But beware the perception of spin.

Use facts, examples and anecdotes to illustrate, substantiate and bring to life each of your messages. Use examples that are appropriate to the media that will publish or broadcast your interview.

Give good quotes and sound-bites. Besides information, what a journalist is really looking for in an interview is a set of strong quotes to illustrate the story. The same goes for text as for broadcast: quotes add colour, authority, immediacy, personality, humanity. Give good quotes. If you come up with a good phrase while practicing for the interview, remember it. Use strong and lively language and short sentences so that your words can be edited easily. Your quotes are your only opportunity to appear verbatim in the finished product – so make them shine. You will probably only get a few sentences of your own direct speech in a print article, or 15 seconds in a news broadcast. The reporter will choose the quote that best illustrates their story – so make sure it is one that helps your agenda.

Be humble, open, friendly, non-defensive, accessible, normal, calm, and human. You want the journalist and viewers or readers to warm to you and empathise with you: this will translate into attention and trust for your messages

Be honest. Giving a little ground where you can do so without causing damage makes you seem reasonable and inspires trust in whatever else you say. Honesty is a very powerful positive signal.

Body language is particularly important for television interviews, but also plays a role in any face-to-face interview. If you sit up straight, make eye contact and speak naturally, you will more readily inspire trust. If you cross your arms, avoid eye contact and swivel in your chair, your lack of comfort will be apparent and this will hurt your credibility.

Start and finish well. Go in strong and don't let up at the end. How you start sets the agenda for the whole interview; the interviewer will be taking notes for ideas to return to. Your final comments will be the ones people remember most readily, so no matter what mistakes have been made during the interview, you may be able to rescue it with a good positive finish.

Don't raise issues that you don't want to talk about. It might sound obvious but it is surprising how many people, having prepared to cover their weaknesses, voluntarily start talking about them when they might not have come up at all.

Keep it simple. Don't get bogged down in unnecessary detail.

Use basic universal language and no jargon. Technical terms and abbreviations that are everyday to you will often be meaningless to outsiders. Pitch your language for the level of expertise of the lowest common denominator, the reader or viewer of the media in question with the least specialist knowledge. A useful mental discipline is to picture your grandmother or grandfather and imagine explaining it to them in a clear and engaging way. It is almost always possible to break down jargon into clear language without "dumbing down" or patronising too much. If you succeed, the result is much more clear and accessible.

Be succinct. Make your point quickly and directly; then stop talking. Watch for signals from the journalist that they want to move to a new topic. Time is limited, especially for broadcast, and succinct language makes the best quotes.

Forget process, talk action. Internally, communication about process is very important. For anyone on the outside, process is very boring and usually irrelevant. Don't talk about institutions, procedures or bureaucracy – talk about action, people and results.

Bring a press kit where appropriate to give the journalist all necessary background information.

Participate actively. Do more than just answer the questions – raise questions. While answering, think about the next question and drop suggestions or dangle information that will invite a new line of enquiry and guide the conversation towards topics that suit your messages.

Correct yourself immediately if you make a mistake. It is easy to forget and find it has become a matter of public record.

Use your brand. Wherever possible (and without seeming contrived), use your brand name – project, programme, or Europe in a broad sense. Don't say "I feel strongly that ...", say "[BRAND] feels strongly that ...". Get your name out there. Too many spokespeople get the message right but forget to say who they are. When that happens, audiences do not register your brand and therefore don't change their views or behaviours towards it.

Object to loaded questions. If a question is based on incorrect information or a biased proposition, say so. Otherwise you may seem to accept this view implicitly.

DON'T

Don't digress. Politicians, for instance, have a maddening habit of making party political points in interviews on non-partisan topics. The same goes for any kind of agenda you may have beyond the scope of the story that the journalist is working on. Unless you think they will be genuinely interested, you can be confident that changing the subject will annoy the journalist and not make it into print anyway. If it's a live broadcast, it will annoy the listeners or viewers too, because they are in the middle of being told a story about something else.

Don't rise to it. Journalists can be aggressive or even obnoxious in their questioning, and you may not be used to being spoken to in this way. Don't take it personally; don't get angry or defensive or emotional. They may be trying to make the story appear more dramatic, or trying to make themselves appear more probing, or trying to intimidate or unsettle you, or perhaps they really are just ignorant. The obnoxious question may even be edited out so all anyone hears is your indignant or defensive answer. Likewise in a broadcast panel debate, do not engage in personal animosity with other panel members – this is also a digression.

Don't be unsettled by rapid interruptions. Some journalists try to unsettle their interviewee by asking many questions very quickly one after the other, without allowing the time to respond fully. Keep your cool and set your own pace. Take your time answering each question, or use a phrase such as: "You have asked a lot of questions. Let me go through them one at a time". If you really have to get a point across without being interrupted, don't draw breath between sentences – roll straight into a linking phrases such as, "... and what that also means is this:..."

Don't be intimidated by repetitive questioning: the reporter may be trying to trick you into discrepancies, but equally may be giving you a chance to say the same thing in a better quote or sound-bite. In any case, stay cool and respond with using messages as normal, trying different examples and tactics each time.

Don't be afraid to give an honest answer even to a negative question. It can be as simple as saying, "Yes, but..."

Never say "no comment". It makes you sound defensive, evasive, and as if you have something to hide. There is always a better way to say nothing, such as "I can't confirm or deny that for the moment. What I can say is..." If you can't comment on an issue for reasons such as the law, confidentiality or commercial sensitivity – or if you just don't have the information – then say so.

Don't be intimidated by a tape recorder. It can feel like having evidence taken down against you in a police interview – but it is there to protect you. Good journalists will usually use one to check quotes and information.

Don't be taken by surprise. Journalists will sometimes call unexpectedly or ask for an interview without warning. If you don't feel prepared, ask to meet or speak by telephone later – even if it's only a few minutes to give you a chance to collect your thoughts. Note down the journalist's name, publication, deadline, and ask them what kind of story they are working on. That will help you prepare for the news angle. And do call them back.

Don't speak "off the record". If you don't want to see something in print, don't say it. Some journalists are more scrupulous than others, but to be safe you should assume that everything you say, whether on or off the record, might be published. You need a very good reason to speak off the record, and a journalist you trust utterly.

Never say "to be honest" or "to tell the truth". It implies that you weren't before or that you aren't always.

Don't use negative vocabulary. Single words like "unfortunately" are powerful in setting the tone for your entire position. Be positive.

Don't repeat negative material from questions. For instance, following riots recently a police chief was asked: "Have you lost control of law and order?" He answered "No, we have not lost control of law and order". This set a negative and defensive tone, so the focus of the story became: Police chief denies losing control of law and order. If he had answered "No, we acted decisively to make sure law and order was never even in question," the angle is positive. A negative quote easily becomes a damaging sound-bite, as Bill Clinton found out after pledging "I did not have sexual relations with that woman."

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know", if you couldn't be expected to know. It is better than rambling or digressing – and it is honest. You can always offer to get back in touch with the journalist with more information if necessary.

Don't overdo it. While it is important to push your messages and remain positive, do not exaggerate or engage in hyperbole. Remember, journalists are suspicious of hype, and they respond to facts rather than hot air. Use your proof points. Do not be perceived to spin.

Don't be defensive or engage in argument with the journalist. The journalist controls the terms, so you will probably not win the argument. Even if you do, you will lose in the court of public opinion. Instead, be positive, open, humble and honest.

Don't speculate. You don't know what will happen in the future, so avoid responding to questions that ask you for a prediction. Your words may be used against you if things don't turn out as expected.

Don't over-answer. For some people a natural response to the anxiety of being

interviewed is to talk more than they usually would. Saying too much can dilute your message, or take you into unintended territory. Make a conscious choice to stick to your messages, then stop talking. When you hear yourself say something good, that is a signal to stop while you are ahead. If there is silence after you have finished speaking, don't feel obliged to fill it by rambling on – wait for the journalist, or say, "what else would you like to know"?

Don't let your guard down – particularly after a good answer.

Don't criticise third parties. Conflict and controversy make great news so journalists may try to encourage you to criticise or disagree with views attributed to a third party. This will rarely serve your purposes.

Don't be forced into a false dichotomy. Some journalists will try to make you choose between two blank options when in fact the situation is more complex. If you don't like the options, don't choose: explain.

Don't assume the journalist knows anything. Journalists sometimes pretend they know more than they really do, in order to get you to confirm sensitive information. It's a classic investigative journalism technique known as "fishing". Never assume a journalist knows anything that isn't in the public domain unless they have clear evidence.

Don't assume a journalist is really that ignorant or clever – mock-ignorance can be an act to get you to drop your guard; purported expertise can be bluster.

Don't joke unless you're really sure it would be funny in any context.

Never, ever lie. In an interview, you are creating a public record, and untruths have a habit of coming to light and returning to haunt you.

Difficult questions

Media training used to be simple. In the early days, spokespeople would be told: **“don’t answer the question”** or even (literally), “don’t even listen to the question” – just speak your rehearsed lines. Nowadays, that would be seriously counterproductive. Failing even to address the question is guaranteed to antagonise an interviewer and make an audience suspicious.

The techniques became slightly more sophisticated with the **“blocking and bridging”** philosophy of the 1990s, in which spokespeople were encouraged to evade questions by answering them briefly in a non-specific way with a generic get-out phrase, and then quickly try to make a smooth transition to a topic that suited their agenda.

Nowadays, audiences are much more sophisticated and media-savvy, and they recognise when spokespeople are being slippery. Journalists are likewise becoming increasingly unlikely to let them get away phrases like “What I think you mean by the question is...”

Here are some more common blocking and bridging phrases, of varying effectiveness:

- ⇒ “The underlying question is...”
- ⇒ “That’s an interesting question, and to put it in perspective...”
- ⇒ “I’m glad you’ve asked me this because it brings me to a point that I’ve been wanting to make...”
- ⇒ “I don’t have precise details, but what I do know is...”
- ⇒ “What I think you mean by the question is...”
- ⇒ “Let’s not lose sight of the key issue here, which is...”
- ⇒ “This is indeed important, but what’s even more important is...”
- ⇒ “What’s important to remember is...”
- ⇒ “I can’t say that, but what I can say is...”
- ⇒ “Before we move on to another subject I want to add...”
- ⇒ “Even more importantly...”
- ⇒ “You should also remember...”
- ⇒ “There is more to the story, specifically...”
- ⇒ “What I want to explain here is...”
- ⇒ “You make a good point there, but our main consideration was...”
- ⇒ “That reminds me...”

In the current media environment, spokespeople need to **make every effort to actually answer** the question, whenever possible – and are left with the challenge of finding a way to do so while also serving their own agenda, on potentially negative ground. It is hard work, but it has its advantages because the interview becomes a much more exciting and interesting media event, thereby engaging the audience, and thereby improving your capacity to get your message across.

Victory is no longer measured in terms of rhetorical point-scoring like a political debate, or according to technical rules like in a court of law. To win over the opinion of your target audiences in the public is more of an art than a science. You need to make them trust you, believe you, and preferably like you. You need to explain, argue, enthuse and inspire.

This raises some paradoxes. For instance, some negative material in a story can be an asset. If you concede a few points but still end up on top overall, your victory is worth more because it is credible – the debate is perceived to have been balanced, the reporting rigorous. Furthermore, it reaches more people more deeply, because drama and tension make good news. Many reporters see their job as shining a light into dark places, seeking the truth, probing, investigating on behalf of the public to expose wrongs. Be prepared for hard questions, and see them as an opportunity when they come up.

Answer the question – but don't only answer the question

Run with it and make of it what you can. Answer it and say more. Consider the question as a springboard for your answer. Identify a keyword that will let you bridge smoothly to a positive message, rather than using a clumsy generic and evasive bridging phrase. There can be a positive theme hidden in many negative questions; use it to bridge seamlessly to positive ground.

When in doubt, always fall back on the facts. They are safe, and effective.

This version of the **ABCD** technique most fully sums up the modern approach to handling difficult questions:

- ⇒ **A**nswer the question if it is at all possible to do so. (At the very least **A**cknowledge it).
- ⇒ **B**ridge, in a smooth and non-evasive way, to a message. If possible, use a keyword from the question.
- ⇒ **C**onclude. Back it up by laying out your facts and proof points; make sense of them, explain them, wrap it up into a conclusion. Useful phrases include “That is why we believe...” or “What that means is...”
- ⇒ **D**angle. Get ready for the next question by raising your own question – leave an issue open or unanswered, “dangle” an interesting idea that the journalist may seize on for the next question instead of moving into negative territory.

Acknowledge and action

Sometimes, it's best not to try to deny a negative question, but instead to acknowledge the problem quickly and openly and immediately focus on what practical action is being taken to resolve the problem. Honesty and pragmatism are powerful positive signals, even in a negative situation.

“Yes, we made mistakes in the past. The important thing is that we learned from them very rapidly and worked hard to fix the problems, and that effort is now paying off as we can see...”

Practicalities for TV interviews

- ⇒ Ignore the camera and speak naturally to the interviewer. Don't stare down the camera lens at the viewer.
- ⇒ Make eye contact and make a special effort to keep looking at the interviewer; if your eyes flit around the room you will look suspicious and uncertain.
- ⇒ Try to relax and speak naturally.
- ⇒ Gesture normally to project a relaxed image: stillness looks stiff and wooden on screen. But movements can look exaggerated too, so don't wave your hands around too wildly.
- ⇒ Sit up straight: if you slouch then you are not projecting your voice and neither are you projecting enthusiasm.
- ⇒ Don't use a reclining or swivel chair, because its movements will look exaggerated and distracting on screen.
- ⇒ Don't sit back or cross your arms: it looks defensive.
- ⇒ Smile! It transforms your image. Look alert and interested.
- ⇒ Stay calm if subjected to hostile or aggressive questioning.
- ⇒ Don't use written notes because you won't be able to resist the temptation to look at them, and that makes you look unsure of yourself.
- ⇒ Don't have anything in your hands, even a pen, because nervous energy will make you fiddle, and that is distracting on camera as well as making you look even more nervous.
- ⇒ Arrive early. It can take a long time to set up equipment for a broadcast interview. Give yourself time to relax and gather your thoughts.
- ⇒ Ask for a glass of water. Studio lights are hot.
- ⇒ Stay where you are when the interview ends until the TV crew take your microphone off and ask you to move.
- ⇒ Never assume that you are off camera or microphone even when the interview is apparently over.

Clothing and appearance:

- ⇒ Dress professionally (or appropriately for the occasion)
- ⇒ You can get away with brighter and bolder colours on television than in real life, but don't overdo it or viewers will remember your outfit, not your message.
- ⇒ Blue, grey, beige and black suits look good on television. A navy blue suit is safe. Contrasting colours are good. White is often not flattering to skin tone

and can make eyes and teeth look yellow so use with care. Be aware of how your clothing will contrast with or blend into the background behind you.

- ⇒ Avoid fine patterns like stripes and checks, particularly herringbone: they create a distracting interference effect on screen.
- ⇒ Wear a jacket, shirt or top with a lapel or seam that a microphone can clip to.
- ⇒ Jewellery should be minimal and simple for women. None for men.
- ⇒ Women should wear slightly more make-up than normal. If offered professional makeup, accept it (both men & women)
- ⇒ Glasses should be non-reflective and non-photosensitive if you will be interviewed in bright light. Nobody trusts you if they can't see your eyes.

Practicalities for radio interviews

Radio is the "theatre of the mind". Peculiarities of the voice are particularly obvious and used to form a general impression of the speaker's personality and credibility. A faint voice paints a picture of a timid person; a loud voice can sound aggressive or arrogant.

- ⇒ Try to sound confident, yet cooperative and calm.
- ⇒ Microphones can be sensitive to direction and distance. Keep a constant distance from the microphone and speak directly towards it.
- ⇒ Just as for a camera, try to forget that the microphone is there. Look at the interviewer and speak naturally to them.
- ⇒ Don't speak too close to the microphone: your voice will take on an unusual intimate quality.
- ⇒ Don't lean away: your voice will sound weak and distant.
- ⇒ Have a glass of water and drink if your mouth is dry.