

# Being Interviewed By The Media



**An interview by a professional from the media need not be a nerve-racking experience.**

**Being interviewed can become a useful element of your overall practice and an enjoyable part of your professional life.**

## **General Guidelines**

There are some simple hints, tips and rules which can help you make the most of the opportunities presented by media interviews and help make the journalists happy that they've got a good piece of tape or copy.

The basics are:

- ***Know the purpose of the interview***
- ***Anticipate the questions***
- ***Know your subject***
- ***Stay within your area of expertise***
- ***Relax***

### ***Know the purpose of the interview***

The first thing to ascertain is who is doing the interview and what angle or aspect of the subject they are interested in. Often your subject area will be linked to other issues in the news and it is always worth thinking about the possible links to what else is going on in the world.

### ***Anticipate the questions***

Whilst no one has a crystal ball you can often think through the likely areas you might be asked about.

When doing this it is advisable to think of the most basic issues. Unless you are being interviewed for the specialist media you should go right back to basics.

- Why is the subject important?
- What relevance does it have?
- How might it apply to everyday life?
- Is it new?
- Why is it different?

Broadcast media questions in particular are likely to be broad and not too detailed, so be prepared for what may seem like quite shallow questioning at times.

### ***Know Your Subject***

You know the subject, that is why the media have chosen to interview you. Draw on this for your confidence, but don't hide behind it. Your aim in an interview is to share your knowledge, to open up the understanding you have gained from years of experience to people who may know nothing of your subject.

### ***Stay Within Your Area Of Expertise***

The journalists who interview you will never have as much knowledge about your subject as you do. Sometimes this means they make assumptions about it or think you have even more information than you do. Never be afraid to say you don't know the answer, especially if it lies outside your direct knowledge.

We are all human beings with free will and the capacity to hold views about topics we know little or nothing about - being interviewed does not affect your position as an individual. However, you do need to be clear about the boundaries.

You will be seen as a representative of your organisation. This means that you may have to temper your personal views in interviews or at least qualify what you say to ensure that readers, listeners or viewers are never mistaken about whether what they take from you is fact or personal opinion.

### ***Relax***

Nothing affects an interview as much as nerves. Take a little time before talking to the journalist to gather your thoughts. Get yourself organised, take a few good deep breaths and make a conscious effort to untense your body and speak clearly and slowly.

### **Tips For The Press Interview**

Journalists, and especially those on newspapers, may not know anything about your area of knowledge but they are very skilled at asking pertinent questions and extracting information. The printed press usually has 'an angle' – an editorial point it wishes to make. Always ask what the angle is; if you

don't like it, either attempt a renegotiation or simply say no thanks.

Print journalists tend to collect their stories and comments over the phone, and it is very easy to be more forthcoming than intended down a phone line.

A useful technique is to avoid answering there and then. Ask for all the questions, then promise to call back in 10 minutes – but you *must* phone back. Buying time like this gives you the chance to sort out your thoughts, to work out the most important points, and write down a few phrases which might make good direct quotes for the journalist. It helps of course to know what the journalist's deadline is – if they go to press in five minutes time you might have to decide to answer there and then or decline to comment at all.

Of course, there will always be subsidiary questions and points of clarification. But, if you have done your homework, these shouldn't be difficult or embarrassing. If you are asked a question you really don't want to answer the safest course is to give as fair and open explanation why you can't answer.

Whilst journalists will try to be as straightforward with their questions as possible you should be aware of saying 'yes' or 'uh-huh' in response to rhetorical questions or statements they might use in the course of the interview. This can lead to confusion and your views being misreported.

Before they leave you or end the call it is worth making sure they have the basic facts such as your name and title and that they feel they have the whole story clear in their minds. A brief summing up to check back the interview on your part can avert most misunderstandings.

A final point. Off-the-record is a means for you to provide information without being quoted. You can be 95 per cent sure that a journalist will not break this convention.

But if they do break it, you will never speak to them again, and as journalists live by their

sources this is a serious repercussion. The safest course of action is to never say anything to a journalist you would not be happy to see in print.

### **Tips For Radio And TV Interviews**

Radio is a medium you may well encounter as it can respond quickly to events and possible stories and, because it does not have the costs of television, tends to cover a great deal more individual stories overall.

Radio interviews can be live or recorded. They can take place in a radio studio or at any other location and can even be done over the phone.

Because it is not a visual medium you can use simple notes, but make sure you don't just end up reading them.

If the radio interview is being done down the phone, make sure you are in a quiet room without distractions and with a sign on the door to stop noisy people barging in when you are in full flow.

Many people seem to find telephone interviews difficult as you are totally separated from the interviewer. If you feel this may be problematic try to get to a studio, or get the reporter to come to you to tape the interview face-to-face.

For a phone-in, a pad and pen are essential. (First write down the callers' names and then the pertinent point(s) of their questions, but try not to rustle.)

The BBC also has a network of local, remote studios dotted around the country in places such as town halls and police headquarters. In many places these are not staffed, and the interviewee is expected to turn up at a specified time when the studio will be open, and then get on with it.

This can be a daunting task. It may be difficult to find, you may well have to let yourself in, the interviewee will almost certainly feel even more nervous about the interview if they have to follow the instructions on operating the studio alone.

A further possibility is to do an interview via an ISDN line – this is a studio-quality phone line to which a special microphone has been attached. This is very convenient, as it means you don't have to travel to a studio.

TV interviews come in three types – the live studio interview, filmed studio interview and the location (usually your place of work) interview.

Find out beforehand the purpose of the interview – in other words, why you are there (this may sound obvious but many interviewees are thrown by questions because they haven't checked on the ground rules).

Also find out at least the first question you will be asked – more if possible. If you can, chat to the journalist or presenter who will be interviewing you. Not only does this give you an idea of the questions they want to ask, but it also helps you build up a rapport with them and can even help you steer them in the right direction with their questions.

Don't be afraid to tell them that a really interesting aspect of the research was such and such and how this has significant implications for their viewers before they start the interview.

Before you start be clear about what you want to say.

Ideally you should have **three key points** clear in your head. Take time beforehand to write these down as an *aide memoir*.

You shouldn't need to refer to them, but the process of writing them down helps lodge them in your mind for the interview itself. Make sure they are logical, easy to understand and short. Each should be capable of standing alone as a concept, you may not get time to cover all three or the journalists might have to edit one or more out because of time.

If you have time beforehand, prepare by trying your three key messages out on someone else.

This way you can test out the language and make sure you can get your tongue around what it is you want to say.

Other things you should ask and do:

- Is the interview live or recorded? If it is recorded will the tape be edited? If it will be, you know you can apologise and ask to do your answer again if you get something wrong.
- How long is the interview to last, and if recorded, how long will the finished piece be? This will give you a good guide as to whether you must be succinct or whether you can be slightly more leisurely. As with radio, it is always worth having a simple punchy "sound bite" already in mind as this might be all they can use.
- Are you to be interviewed alone or is there another guest? If there is someone else, get a breakdown of their position so you know if the interview is going to be mutually supportive or confrontational.
- Get to the studio a good hour in advance. This gives you the chance to calm down, have a coffee (avoid alcohol under any circumstance!), check about questions and become familiar with the surroundings.
- How are you going to be introduced? Clarification saves them getting your name, title and place of work wrong.

If you have followed the pre-interview rules, the event itself should be painless. A few tips may help further during the interview:

- Don't attempt to pack your answers with a welter of information. Try to work out in advance the three or four most important points you wish to get across and say them in the simplest way you can. It really doesn't matter whether you directly answer the question; the object of the exercise is to get your points over.
- Your language is vital: your audience will not understand your line of work's jargon, so find simple alternatives.
- Although your audience could be sev-

eral million, the best interviews are those where interviewer and interviewee are in conversation. So chat to them as an individual, and remember not to declaim, patronise, or lecture this is a sure-fire way of losing an audience.

- On TV don't look straight at camera unless the situation dictates – your eye contact should be with the interviewer.
- For television try to dress "quietly". Busy patterns are accentuated by TV and the audience may remember your check shirt, striped tie or floral blouse rather than what you said.
- Tinted spectacles will make you look like the mafia and in a TV studio with its bright lights photo-chromic glasses will darken significantly.
- Don't take notes into the TV studio – You will be forever looking down or sideways to check if you have made all your points. If you have only got three points to make you should be able to remember them.
- Try not to jump about or wave your arms on TV too much as in close shots a small movement can mean you disappear out of shot. However you don't want to become a tailor's dummy either. Relax and just keep your natural body movements moderate and in proportion. Watch plenty of TV interviews and see how much people's movement adds to or detracts from what they are saying.

### **Remember**

Broadcast interviews offer you a chance to get your message across to the people you want to influence. Set the agenda and take control and it is your for the taking.