

SIX WAYS TO ENSURE YOUR ON-SCREEN MOMENT GOES SMOOTHLY

In crisis situations, people are likely to turn to television to get their information. That's why it's crucial for your city to select a spokesperson who can handle the pressures of being interrogated by reporters holding microphones and cameras recording their every word.

But it's not always the spokesperson's words that can make a difference in an on-camera interview: How the person appears, stands (or sits) and maintains eye contact can influence how he or she is judged by others. This can directly influence how much the public trusts the information your spokesperson is providing to them.

In addition to finding a trustworthy person to handle the duties of spokesperson – being authoritative and knowledgeable, yet calm and compassionate – you must select someone who is aware of other factors that can convey a message to the public. They might be subtle points but they can leave a big impact with viewers sitting at home.

Here are some tips on how you should deal with television interviews:

1. PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The word is a powerful tool. But adding the element of video can easily distract from the word. Getting your word across to the public is the most important part of dealing with the media in a crisis situation, so you want to be sure nothing distracts from your message. The slightest thing can shift a person's attention away from what's being said and toward something that has no part of the story – it could be something as simple as a bright tie or flashy piece of jewelry your spokesperson is wearing.

Remember to dress appropriately. If the interview or news conference you're about to do is being held at the scene of a construction accident, roll-up your sleeves, take off your jacket, loosen or remove your tie. Look as though you are involved at the scene. If it's an event at City Hall, appear more professional and authoritative. The key is, don't look "wrong" for the setting.

Ask to do the interview standing up rather than sitting down. It gives you the appearance of being actively involved in dealing with the crisis, as opposed to someone who has time to sit down for a more passive activity. Maintain eye contact with the reporter. Show respect – be polite and don't talk down to the reporter. Stay calm, and smile when appropriate to help put people at ease.

Be conscious of the style of clothing you wear. Dress more conservatively so that your clothes don't distract from the message you are trying to communicate to your audience. Stay away from clothes that might be too bright, and avoid patterns and prints that could look "busy" on camera.

2. SPEAK IN SOUND BITES

Broadcast reporters love a good sound bite. What is a sound bite? It's the short audio or video clip reporters choose to take from a longer interview or other news event for use in a news report.

What makes a good sound bite? It should be concise, easy to follow and brief – no more than a sentence or two that lasts no longer than 10 seconds. A well-crafted, targeted sound bite will help to ensure that your message finds its way to its intended audience, which is the public. It should convey no more than three points. Try to state what happened, indicate what's being done about it and assure the public that you are on top of the matter.

- “We are aware of the grand jury report and our city attorneys are busy reviewing the findings. We want to assure the public we are on top of the matter.”
- “Our officers are currently at the scene of the shootings. We know there are deaths, we can’t confirm numbers at this point, but we can say the shooter has been taken into custody.”
- “The power outage involves 30,000 homes across the eastern half of the city. We don’t know why the outage occurred but we have deployed all available crews to help restore power as quickly as possible.”

Don’t try to put too much information into a sound bite. Keep it simple, again, usually no more than three points – your main three points. Anything beyond that will require more time and will be less likely to get used by broadcasters.

Well-crafted sound bites are a crucial part of any media relations plan, and are even more important during times of crisis. If written and delivered well, a good sound bite will be played repeatedly in the media and will ensure that your messages make their way to the public.

3. BRIDGING TECHNIQUE

Initially, reporters will set the tone when conducting an interview. It’s their job to ask the questions. Their line of questioning could take the interview or news conference away from the key messages the city is trying to communicate to the public during a crisis. It’s the job of your city’s spokesperson to ensure that the focus of the interview is brought back to your main message points.

The best way to do that is by using an interview technique known as “bridging.” It involves just what the word implies: building a bridge back to your messaging. When a reporter starts to lead your spokesperson in a different direction than what the city intends, it’s the spokesperson’s job to direct or “bridge” the interview back to your message. How do you do that? You build a “bridge” between the topics.

Bridging is an important tool that allows you to take control of an interview and turn the focus back to the issues you want to emphasize. You start by briefly discussing the subject of the reporter’s question, but you soon use a transition line to talk about the message you wish to discuss. Some examples of bridging techniques:

1. “The real issue here is ...”
2. “Yes, but that speaks to a bigger issue ...”
3. “I’d like to go back to an important point I made a little earlier ...”

Used effectively, bridging can immediately redirect the reporter’s line of questioning to the message you want to convey to the public. Sometimes a reporter will go back to his or her original line of questioning. If that happens, your spokesperson should keep using the bridging technique to bring the questioning back to the city’s message.

4. FLAGGING TECHNIQUE

Another key interview technique is known as “flagging.” It involves making your main point first during an interview or news conference. You “flag” or draw attention to the issue, then you explain it to the viewers. This works well in broadcast interviews. It allows you to get your main point across early on. Your opening comments can include phrases that help emphasize the point:

- “What we are trying to emphasize is ...”
- “It’s important that we keep in mind ...”

Flagging helps draw attention early on to important points that you are trying to make. Be careful not to overuse the technique, or else it can lose its effectiveness.

5. HOW TO HANDLE AN AMBUSH INTERVIEW

There will be times when reporters will break from the routine of the scheduled news conference and try to score an interview by waiting for an opportune moment when you aren’t expecting to take questions from a reporter. This is what is known as an “ambush” interview. Reporters will use the ambush technique when they think they might have an exclusive or a new angle on the story, or they might have just missed the news conference.

It’s important that if a television crew shows up unexpectedly, don’t act surprised. Don’t let yourself be portrayed as a culprit who refuses to answer questions. Act in a polite and kind manner. Don’t be defensive or curt. Look at the reporter and explain that you’re not prepared to talk at that time, and inform him or her when the next media availability will occur. Refer the reporter to your media relations personnel for assistance. Continue walking and find the closest office to step into and politely excuse yourself.

It’s important that you stay calm and not appear combative or confrontational, because the wrong response could generate a separate story of its own. The way you conduct yourself could be more important in an ambush situation than any words you could speak. Remember to remain calm.

Maintaining good relations with the media will help reduce the chances of ambush interviews. Check to see if reporters got what they needed during a news conference or if there is anything else they might need.

6. MAINTAIN CALM

Perception is reality. If at any time during a crisis your city staff appears anything but calm, the media will pick up on the change in mood. Stay calm, especially when you are in a public area and the media might be observing. If staff members have critical information that could be sensitive in nature, they should discuss that information in a private area. It’s important that you foster a perception that everything is under control, even if that might not be the case behind the scenes.

Remain composed and never give the impression of being in a panicked state.