

# Guidebook for Communicators

Techniques to help you excel in media interviews and presentations



“A media interview is a bad time  
for original thought.”

- Andrew Bowen, APR  
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DISCLAIMER: The media interview and presentation tips in this guidebook are excerpts from Clearview’s executive training curriculum. They represent only a fraction of the knowledge you will need to be effective in either situation. Complete preparation for a media interview or presentation requires much more work and study, with guidance from a communications professional at Clearview Communications/The Message Masters, [www.clearviewcom.com](http://www.clearviewcom.com)

For your confidential consultation, please call Clearview Communications/The Message Masters at 813-258-9123 or e-mail [michelle@clearviewcom.com](mailto:michelle@clearviewcom.com).

## The Value of an Effective Interview/Presentation



1. Done well (the only way!), an effective presentation, media or blogger interview increases the positive visibility of you and your brand.
2. It is a valuable opportunity to reach a much larger audience with your key messages when you post your excellent interview or presentation online on social media platforms.
3. Even though an interview or presentation is in your words, when a reporter or blogger writes or broadcasts those words, they are perceived to have earned a powerful, third-party endorsement.
4. Once published or broadcast, you can link your interview or presentation online to your website or another site, and repurpose the event as appropriate for other marketing opportunities.
5. The more often people hear and see you and your organization in a positive light, the more likely they are to use your product or service.
6. People who know how to interview well are also good presenters. They have learned how to deliver their message in a concise and memorable way that resonates with their target audience.

## Results of an Ineffective Interview or Presentation

1. The reporter or blogger will write the story and misquote you.
2. People who read the story or experience your presentation will not be moved to take action, nor will they remember you or the point of the interview/presentation or story.
3. Someone spent time and effort getting you positioned in front of the media or that audience. All of those hours, work and good will are lost.
4. There is no story, nothing to link to your website, post on social media or email to clients.
5. You said something you should not have said, that becomes the story and brings unwanted negative attention to you and your company or organization.



## Interview Ground Rules; Also Applicable in Presentations

- You are never off the record, ever; if you don't want it quoted, don't say it.
- Stay on message or risk being misquoted, having the story spiral out of control, or losing your audience.
- Reporters are usually not out to 'trip you up', however, they will let you rattle on until you trip up yourself.
- The camera is always on (you).
- The microphone is always live.
- Never lie; stick with the facts (in this Internet age, it all will come out anyway).
- Never speculate. Guesswork is not acceptable in a presentation or interview.
- If you argue with a reporter, you will lose.
- No comment means we are guilty in the court of public opinion.
- You have the right to accuracy but not fairness (sometimes the facts are not fair).
- You are under no obligation to interview, but it is usually in your best interest to do so, or others will frame the story for you.
- Always look at the reporter, not the camera; talk to the person.
- Correct inaccurate statements immediately.
- Never get comfortable with a reporter or blogger; they are not your friends.
- It is your interview, not the reporter's; you own this interview, have prepared for it, and have taken the time to make it successful; own it.

## Why Preparation is Important

If you have ever experienced a discussion or presentation for which you were unprepared, it should be easy to relate to the following reasons to prepare for any contact with the media or bloggers. Throughout this handbook, we will build on the basics below.

Think of a social media or a traditional media interview as a presentation that is occasionally interrupted by questions. It is your interview or presentation. You own it. Preparation will help you build the confidence you need to succeed.

- It will build your confidence.
- You need to mentally adopt the expert spokesperson's role.
- You must know and refine your key messages.
- You need to understand your relationship with the reporter in advance, and the audiences.
- You must research your audience in order to craft effective key messages.
- You must understand your goals and the reporter's goals.
- You must have an agenda because the reporter/blogger has one (or more).
- You must role play to practice your presentation.
- You will ask the reporter, blogger or panel coordinator ahead of time to provide their questions or the basic subject/direction of the story/event.



## Message Development Basics

- Get the facts and use them; conduct extensive research into the subject matter and audience, venue, reporter or moderator.
- Know the important points to make to achieve your objectives with the audience.
- Know your audience and the reaction/outcome you desire.
- Know what tone is required to create the reaction; is this tone natural for you, or will you have to modify your style?



## Spokesperson Skills

**Preparation is mandatory, essential and required for success**

Sometimes you may be aware in advance that you will be acting as a spokesperson. Other times you will be acting on the spur of the moment. In either case, you should prepare mentally and physically before speaking.

- With advance notice, prepare fully and thoroughly.
- Without advance notice, take whatever time you can carve out to prepare as much as you can ("I can't speak to you now because I am headed into a meeting. What is your deadline and I'll get back to you as soon as possible").
- Accept all realistic opportunities to discuss your organization with the media or as a guest speaker; these are important communication channels to the public and your stakeholders.
- Get advance intelligence on the journalists or bloggers with whom you will be interacting. Know their past story interests, biases, reputation, professional

- Determine the general thrust of the discussion; ask what questions will be asked before the interview so you can research and prepare. This applies to being a guest on an expert panel.
- Who is the audience for the journalist, blogger, expert panel or guest speaker opportunity? Ultimately, this is the target audience for your key messages; what do you want them to do, think or feel?
- Anticipate tough questions and role play the interview/presentation with a colleague. Get them to ask you the toughest questions they can think of.
- Determine an objective in advance; what do you want your key audiences to know, to do, to feel; what action do you want the end user of the information to take?
- Develop key points that you want to communicate; three key messages are best, certainly no more than four.

## **During the interview/presentation**

### **What to do**

- Own the interview; it is your interview; you are the expert and an interview can be a career breaker or enhancer.
- Relax and be yourself; breathe deeply because oxygen is your friend.
- Speak informally and avoid jargon.
- Give attention to the person to whom you are speaking; keep strong eye contact; do not look at the camera.
- Answer questions openly, honestly and candidly.
- Keep answers short, no more than 10-15 seconds.
- When you finish answering, stop talking. Don't trip yourself up by adding more information; stay on message or risk the consequences of having the story/presentation spiral out of control.
- Seek openings to make your key points; do not feel compelled to fill dead air with words, unless you bring up another key message.
- Use concrete examples, anecdotes, personal experiences, and numbers.
- If asked a complicated multi-part question, listen to the whole question, think and then reply to the part of the question that best suits your messaging.
- In interviews, don't accept a person's facts and figures, you are the expert; do not let anyone put words in your mouth.
- Listen carefully to the interviewer and challenge an incorrect statement.

## How to avoid being misquoted

- Slow down your delivery; speak to the reporter's note taking speed.
- Ask if they are getting it all down ("am I going too fast?").
- In a phone interview, listen to their keystrokes, and sloooow down.
- Repeat your key messages at least three times for each key message.
- Reporter/blogger math:

$$6 \times 1 = 0$$

$$3 \times 3 = 1$$

- That is, six messages provided randomly will result in no retention. However, three key messages stated succinctly three times may result in the retention of one (which could be the headline or lead element in a story/blog, or evening news teaser).
- Have handouts and written documents the reporter/blogger can take away or receive by e-mail.
- Respond to reporter questions in writing by e-mail
- Rehearse and role play before the interview.
- Speak in sound bites of no more than 10-15 seconds, pause, and provide another key message.
- Never repeat the negative; you will be the one saying it.
- You are never off the record. If asked, reply that what you have to say is too important to go off the record.
- Avoid corporate speak and jargon; use plain language your mother would understand.
- Ask to say it again; if you bloop or make a mistake in a statement, acknowledge it and ask to restate the point.
- Don't ramble, get long-winded or wander off message; pause; dead air is your friend, do not try to fill it.
- Articulate clearly and don't mumble.
- You may be dealing with a "citizen journalist", that is, a blogger or someone else with a website and no formal journalism training; everyone fancies themselves to be a journalist these days; slow down, repeat yourself and make sure you stay on message and provide written comments.

## What not to do in a media interview

- Don't read from prepared statements unless it is for effect or for the record.
- Don't state personal opinions – you are the company spokesperson.
- Do not evade or lie.
- Don't ramble or bury key points in long-winded comments.
- Do not ask if your response answered the question (the answer will be 'no').
- Don't try to be an expert outside your field; if you don't know, say so
- and offer to find out or have another expert contact them
- Don't be argumentative, arrogant or defensive.

## Strategy for Message Delivery

When you have developed your key messages, you need to prepare to deliver them. Here is a strategy to do this effectively:

- Fact organization – Get the most important issue out first, then the next, and so on. Determining what's important is subjective and up to you and your team.
- Anticipate questions and concerns – List the tough questions or concerns that might come up and practice addressing them.
- Know what you want to say. Know your key message for each issue area, question or concern.
- Know what you don't want to say. That is, are some data and information proprietary or litigation-sensitive?

## Using Key Messages

Prepare for the tough questions. Your best defense against negative comments and attacks is preparation of key messages. Stick to them by bridging. Remember the words of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger when addressing the U.S. Capitol Press Corps. He asked, "Does anyone have any questions for my answers?" Remain in control of the message.

Key messages are generally:

- The core of your interview/presentation strategy
- Developed for your target audiences
- Help you meet your communications objectives
- A few key, concise points that will
- Reveal facts
- Engender trust
- Showcase your honesty and integrity
- Set expectations for future actions
- "Make your case"
- Persuade or motivate key audiences

## Repetition

Repetition is an effective way of having your messages heard and retained by your audience. Plan several different ways to get your messages across during a discussion, and take every opportunity to communicate them. Be sure to make your main key points several times. Remember reporter math.

## Control the Message

Although direct questions will not usually allow you to respond with your key point, the blocking and bridging control techniques below will help you first answer the question that is being asked, and then successfully communicate your messages. At the same time you will impact what kind of questions are asked as follow-up.

## Blocking and Bridging

Use blocking and bridging to move from a question to a key message by briefly answering the question asked, then continuing with your key message. Blocking implies blocking a train of thought or general direction in the interview, and then bridging to a key message.

Some simple examples of bridging phrases are:

"Yes..." (brief answer), "in addition..." (your message)

"No..." (brief answer), "what really happened is..." (your message) "I don't know.

What I do know is..." (your message)

"The important thing to remember is ..."

"Opinions vary. What I do know is this ... "The facts show ..."

"That is an interesting take on this, but what I know is ..."

"I would describe it differently ..." "The critical issue is ..."

"The fact is ..."

"It may interest you to know ..." "As I said earlier ..."

"Actually, this is the case ..."

"What concerns us even more is ..."

With practice and planning, ANY question can be answered with a bridging phrase followed by one of your key points. Think of your key messages as your life raft -- without them, you may drown.



## Diffusing Negatives and Attacks

### Never

- Evade tough issues by lying or making up an answer
- Get angry or emotional
- Make it personal
- Answer hypothetical questions (speculate); “I cannot speculate, but what I do know is ...”
- Replace difficult company positions with personal opinions to avoid conflict
- End the discussion without an obvious close (be positive)
- Criticize anyone or anything

## Working With Legal Counsel

In key message development and in interview preparation in general, CEOs should listen to both your legal counsel and public relations counsel with equal interest and weight.

Attorneys present their cases in a court of law, a disciplined environment governed by strict judicial and legal standards. Public relations counselors practice in the wholly unruly court of public opinion, an unregulated environment in which the rules of evidence are suspended and guilt or innocence can be decided in a sound bite. Often, silence is not an option.



## Using “I don’t know.”

“I don’t know” is a good answer if it’s the truth. If you do not know an answer, offer to refer the questioner to someone who does, or to forward the information to the journalist later.

### Answering “Yes” or “No”

Avoid answering with the single words “yes” or “no.” Instead, immediately apply a key message to explain your position.

Example:

Q: “Isn’t it true that you broke the law with the actions you took, and that you were not in compliance with OSHA standards?”

A: “We fully complied with the letter and spirit of the law.” Pause. “As I said earlier, we are dedicated to the safety and wellbeing of our employees, and the record shows we are in total compliance with all OSHA regulations” (key message).



## Buying Time

You may need more time to mentally develop your answer or the question may be long or confusing. If you need more time or don't understand, ask the person to repeat the question. You may also paraphrase the question, leading off with a phrase such as, "Let me make sure I understand the question..." (But do not repeat any negatives!)

## Multiple part questions

A negative multiple-part question may have a benign question contained in it. Select it and answer just the benign part. When many media members are asking multiple questions at the same time in a press conference or scrum, a powerful control technique is to simply ask the group, "Ladies and gentlemen, which question should I answer first?"



Notes

