

A GUIDE TO INTERVIEW CONTROL

WORKING WITH JOURNALISTS

Controlling an Interview



The basic dynamic of any interview or Q&A session – in person, live on the air, by phone, at a news conference – is *who is in control of the discussion*. The following 10 points are the keys to maintaining interview control. The first five need to be done in advance – whether that means lengthy preparation with colleagues, or the five minutes you take after asking the reporter the general areas he or she wants to ask about and telling the reporter you’ll call right back (to give yourself time to prepare). The last five points are what you need to do on your feet.



1. Focus on three key messages – no more.
2. State your most important message first – put the lead in the lead.
3. Sum up your messages in 30 seconds.
4. After you determine your one to three messages, assemble the facts and examples that back that message up. Remember – your job is to deliver your message. It is not to provide all the facts and all the answers to every question you’re asked.
5. Rehearse possible questions you may be asked and prepare responses. Be prepared with possible questions from the opposing viewpoint. Be prepared to respond to any opposing studies or research that may be out.
6. Deliver your message point – then fill it in with the facts and examples that support it.
7. As much as possible, answer all questions by referring back to your main message(s). If a question has no relationship to your message, or veers the conversation off into a different area, briefly acknowledge the question, then bridge back to your message(s). Do not dodge a question. Redirect it to your message(s).
8. Always rely on facts. Never try to wing a response to a question when you do not really know the answer. If you don’t know, just say so. Don’t let reporters convince you to speculate or hypothesize on an issue.
9. Nothing is ever off the record, unless you have specific prior agreement with the reporter to be off the record. The comments you make as you walk the reporter to the door after the pad and pencil have been put away are often the comments that wind up in print. Don’t say anything to a journalist, even casually, that you wouldn’t want to see printed in the papers or hear on the air.
10. Be conversational – do not use sarcasm – be positive, not defensive – do not be argumentative — a smile or a laugh can deflect barbs.

REMEMBER...

You have zero percent control over the questions you are asked. You have 100 percent control over the answers you give. Finally, if you do all of these points well and you see a reporter writing or hear the clack of the keyboard on the phone – *slow down to be sure they get it right and get it the way you want to deliver it.*

