

The complete guide to preparing your spokespeople for media interviews



The key to any successful media interview is preparation. Your spokesperson may be an expert on their subject, but if they're not adequately prepared, they're unlikely to do themselves justice.

In this guide, we want to show you everything you need to do in order to properly prepare your spokespeople.

While not all of this information will be new to you, it will serve as a useful tool and checklist when you have media interviews approaching.

The goal with any media interview should be to communicate your messages with real impact, while strengthening the reputation of your organisation.

This guide will give you the best chance to make that happen.

We will look at seven areas you'll need to address in order to properly prepare your spokespeople:

1. Key messages
2. Supporting information
3. Simple language
4. Bridging
5. Difficult questions
6. Defining limits
7. Practice

We hope you find it useful.

Key messages



Key messages are absolutely vital when preparing for a media interview. Without them, your spokesperson will be going into the interview with very little focus. The resulting interview will range from a lacklustre performance to a valuable opportunity squandered to serious reputational damage.

So what exactly are key messages, and how do you decide what they should be?

Key messages are simply the points you want to communicate to your audience in a media interview. You don't need too many – two or three are usually enough.

There are three things to remember when formulating key messages:

1. They should be simple and brief. Your spokesperson must be able to recall them in an instant, and your audience must be able to easily understand them.
2. They should be relevant to the audience. There's no point in communicating some obscure company message if it means nothing to those listening, watching or reading about you.
3. They should be positive. If your spokesperson offers up negative thoughts, the interviewer will simply seize on them, and they may become the story.

Often, a key message will be something so obvious that it's easily overlooked. But remember that what's obvious to you may not be obvious to your audience.

If you're struggling, simply ask yourself a few straightforward questions. What do I want to say about me or my organisation? Why do the media want to talk to us? And what are our views on the issue or issues they want to discuss?

Once you've taken the time to prepare your key messages, you must ensure that your spokesperson is prepared to get them across.

Too often, spokespeople make the mistake of waiting for the interviewer to ask the "right" question before introducing their key messages. But the interviewer may never ask the questions that naturally invite the points they want to make. And suddenly the interview is over, before they've had a chance to say what they really want to say.

The key technique is for your spokespeople to hit their key messages in their very first answer.

In their first answer they should aim to give a very brief summary of the two or three key points they want to make. This way, from the very start your audience is left in no doubt as to your spokesperson's position

And there's no harm in repeating themselves as the interview goes on. Having stated their key messages in the first answer, they can always revisit them later on, possibly amplifying them. Repetition equals emphasis.

Key messages also provide an escape route if the interview turns negative or confrontational. They are the most effective tool for your spokesperson to turn an interview in a positive direction. More on that below...

Supporting information



Key messages are of vital importance but, on their own, they will not be sufficient. Your spokesperson needs supporting information which will add strength and substance to your key messages.

The supporting information you'll need comes in two forms – facts and examples.

Facts will be any kind of figures, statistics or research to back up your key messages. It's important that your spokesperson has these at their disposal in case the interviewer asks for evidence.

Your spokesperson must have a thorough understanding of these facts and where they came from, in case the interviewer interrogates them. They must stand up to scrutiny. This is why, for example, you should favour studies undertaken by independent bodies.

However, facts and figures must be used with caution – they can easily turn an audience off. This is why examples are essential.

Examples help to bring the subject matter alive, to illustrate key messages and add life to dry statistics.

And the best examples are those with a “human interest” angle.

So, for example, if you are a pharmaceutical company with a new life-changing drug on the market, your spokesperson should come prepared with real examples of people who have benefited from the drug. Explaining how that person's life has been turned around will really bring home the full impact that the treatment can have.

This is because the audience will identify with the person your spokesperson is talking about, far more than they will engage with medical facts and figures.

Or let's say your organisation is running an aid project in Africa, aimed at improving schooling for thousands of children. Instead of speaking about "thousands of schoolchildren", your spokesperson should tell a story about one schoolchild, painting a vivid picture for your audience that brings home the importance of what you are doing.

Ensuring your spokesperson is armed with supporting facts and human examples will really help to get your key messages across.

Simple language



Your spokesperson has to talk to your audience in language they understand. It's an obvious rule, but one which so many people find difficult to follow.

Too often, in-house language and jargon creeps in. Spokespeople talk about “Q1 results”, “multi-agency approaches”, “holistic solutions” or “leveraging opportunities”.

The audience may perceive such verbiage as arrogant and out-of-touch, and turn off. They may find the language boring and unengaging, and stop paying attention. Or they may simply be unable to understand.

There are two reasons why spokespersons tend to use complex language.

The first is not done consciously, but is an instinctive tendency to fall back on the language they use in their professional environment. They forget that they're not speaking to colleagues and peers who share the same language, but to the general public who need the details spelt out to them.

This phenomenon is known as the “curse of knowledge”, where a knowledgeable person assumes that the person they're speaking to is in the same position of knowledge.

The second reason is that spokespersons often think that speaking in complex language will make them appear more intelligent, or to have more expertise.

In fact, the opposite is true.

The amusingly titled study [“Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly”](#) by the psychologist

Daniel Oppenheimer demonstrated that the use of longer words instead of shorter ones actually has a negative impact on perceptions of intelligence.

But there is an easy way for your spokesperson to avoid all of the above and make a real success of the interview.

Very simply, they should imagine explaining their message to a friend in the pub.

Preparing key messages in this way and applying this technique in interviews will ensure they stick to plain and simple language.

Ensuring your spokesperson remembers this rule will mean that the audience is both engaged and informed. This is not dumbing down – it's common sense.

Bridging



You and your spokesperson have prepared your key messages. You've put together supporting information, including statistics and examples. And you've ensured your spokesperson is able to communicate all of this in simple language.

But the interview ends, and your spokesperson has failed to get any of it across.

As you try to work out what happened, your spokesperson explains, "the interviewer didn't ask me the right questions."

The danger with any interview is that it ends up being dictated and controlled by the interviewer. Their aims are not the same as yours. They are looking for a news story. They don't care if your spokesperson gets their message across.

Instead of waiting for the interviewer to ask the "right" questions, your spokesperson should take steps to ensure they come up with the right answers. These steps form what's known as the "bridging technique". Being ready to use this technique is a vital part of the preparation for any media interview.

The bridging technique is based on A, B and C:

- **A**cknowledge the question with a direct answer
- **B**ridge with a phrase that starts taking the answer back to where you want to be
- **C**ommunicate your key messages

When your spokesperson has acknowledged the question and given a direct answer, they should use bridging phrases to introduce their key messages, such as "...but the real issue is...", "...don't forget that...", "...what's really important is..."

An alternative technique is to use a bridging phrase to suggest a key message, prompting the “right” question from the interviewer. Examples of this technique include:

“...but what’s really interesting is what our customers told us when we surveyed them.”

“...but the key issue for users of this product is not what you might think.”

“...what’s really important is how our work has been helping a wider group of people.”

The interviewer is unlikely to leave the topic hanging, and will ask for more detail, allowing your spokesperson to get their message across.

With the interviewer asking all the questions, it’s all too easy for your spokesperson simply to follow their lead. The bridging technique is the most effective way to take back some control.

Difficult questions



Your spokesperson may be prepared with key messages and the techniques to get them across, but it's essential that they are also prepared to handle the interviewer's difficult questions.

Difficult questions are likely to come in three broad varieties.

First, there are the obvious and easily anticipated difficult questions. These are the central big issues for your organisation, possibly regarding an ongoing industry problem or a recent crisis. You know that the interview will focus on these issues and your spokesperson should be fully expecting to deal with these questions.

Fortunately, your key messages will have been formulated precisely to deal with these questions. They will address the issue head-on, accepting responsibility where appropriate and explaining what you are doing to fix the problem. These questions provide the perfect opportunity to communicate your key messages.

Second, there are questions which are not related to the topic your spokesperson is expecting to talk about, but which they should still be able to answer. For example, there might be a developing news story which will affect your organisation in some way, and the interviewer will want your spokesperson's view. Or a competitor might be involved in a scandal, and the interviewer asks for a comment.

Part of preparing your spokesperson, therefore, should involve scanning the media for any relevant stories right up until the interview takes place, and ensuring your spokesperson is up to speed. They will then be able to acknowledge the question, give a direct answer and, where appropriate, bridge back to communicating their key messages.

Third, there are the off-the-wall, irrelevant questions where the interviewer is either trying to catch your spokesperson out or simply doesn't understand the issue. These are questions where your spokesperson can reasonably explain why they can't give an answer. Much of this comes down to having prepared clear limits (see next section). Once again, however, these questions should be acknowledged before bridging to key messages.

If a question is inflammatory or accusatory, it's vital that your spokesperson uses emphatic language to ensure the audience is left in no doubt about their position. Rather than a gentle response like "I'm not sure I would agree with that" or "That's not entirely the case", they should be assertive and unequivocal: "I totally disagree with that" or "Absolutely not".

The interviewer may push difficult questions with continuous interruptions. Halfway through communicating an important message, however, your spokesperson can't afford not to finish. Once again, they must be firm: "This is an important question and I'd like to finish my reply..." The audience will understand this and it will put your spokesperson back in control.

Finally, your spokesperson must stay calm and composed – there is nothing to be gained in losing their temper. Preparing them to expect and deal with difficult questions will go a long way to helping with this.

Defining limits



As well as preparing what your spokesperson is going to say in an interview, you should always prepare what they are not going to say, or how far they are prepared to go.

A hard interviewer will push your spokesperson on subjects that may not be appropriate for them to comment on. You need to decide where these limits lie, and how your spokesperson should respond when the limits are reached.

“No comment” is never an acceptable response – it just looks like they have something to hide. If the interviewer strays into dangerous territory, your spokesperson should be able to confidently say that they can’t answer the question – and then explain why not.

This may be because of client confidentiality, not wanting to give away information to competitors, or not being able to disclose key figures before an annual report. As long as your spokesperson has a solid reason for not giving an answer, the audience will understand. If the interviewer keeps pushing, your spokesperson should simply repeat themselves until the interviewer moves on.

As well as asking questions that can’t be answered, interviewers love to ask for guarantees. They know it puts your spokesperson under pressure, and it can lead to a great headline. But it’s often impossible and downright dangerous to give a guarantee – there are certain things that can’t be controlled.

So unless your spokesperson can be absolutely certain, they shouldn’t issue a guarantee. Instead, they should explain why they can’t. They can certainly guarantee that they’ll do their best, but they mustn’t be drawn into making promises they can’t keep.

Finally, it's absolutely vital that your spokesperson has the confidence to stick to their limits at all times in an interview. This is perhaps hardest, but most important, when the interviewer falls silent.

When your spokesperson has given the answer they want to give, the interviewer will often try to get more out of them by holding their gaze and saying nothing, as if asking "And? What else do you have to say?". It's tempting for the interviewee to start speaking again to fill the silence. However, this is often when they'll say something they later regret.

When your spokesperson has said what they want to say, they must be prepared to stop, even if the interviewer doesn't come back immediately with another question. They've done their bit. It's the interviewer's job to keep the interview going, not theirs.

Practice



The final stage of preparing your spokesperson for media interviews is practice.

In order to prepare for any performance, effective practice is essential, and media interviews are no different.

You've prepared key messages, supporting information and simple explanations, but getting all this across while being interrogated by a professional journalist is no easy task. It's all too common for a spokesperson to fall apart when trying to handle a fast-moving media interview.

Effective practice involves real interviews in a realistic setting with a professional media trainer. This should be someone who has been there and done it, who knows exactly the questions journalists will ask, and has a teacher's ability to analyse the results.

Don't be tempted to take shortcuts by doing this yourself or using your PR agency. You need a real journalist with no ties to your organisation, in order to create a truly realistic and challenging interview environment.

The best media trainers are those with years of experience both as top-level journalists and as trainers, who will ensure your spokesperson gains the skills and confidence to communicate their key messages while handling difficult questions.

The result of all this preparation will be a spokesperson who comes across as an expert, able to share their knowledge in a way that is interesting, relevant and above all clear.