

What Your Expert May Not Know: Preparing for a Quotable Interview

By Melva B. Robertson

The key to poignant and impactful media interviews involves thoroughly equipping experts with solid key messages, best practices specifically targeted for various media outlets, and strategies for redirecting interviews. As the media relations pro, the C-suite and other key spokespeople trust you to secure relevant media attention that increases visibility to the target audience and helps create trust and credibility for their organizations.

Though your experts are highly knowledgeable of the subject matter, translating that information to a lay audience and condensing it in a way that is appropriate for an effective sound bite is extremely difficult without the proper training by a media relations representative. This essay provides best practices and helpful tips for preparing experts for media interviews.

Know the Media Outlet and Reporter

Before sharing media requests with your expert, it is necessary to research the proposed media outlet prior to securing the interview. Research includes:

- **Gathering information about the media outlet and reporter.** This information is important for learning the potential tone of the interview. Your expert needs to know whether the media outlet and the reporter support or reject his or her views. Interviews that face opposition from the interviewer require a different level of

preparation (if the expert decides to participate). Your goal as the media pro is to filter through requests before confirming the interviews to ensure that your expert is comfortable with the outlet and subject matter.

- **What was the tone of past stories covered on your topic?** A great way to determine the views of the media outlet or reporter is to review past stories and similar coverage of your topic. Doing so will help your expert understand the reporter's interviewing style. This also is helpful when researching journalists for pitching purposes.
- **Learn the adversity.** Depending on the subject matter, there may be a need to address controversy or opposition. It is important to understand all sides of the issues concerning your topic so that your expert can address these issues or attempt to avoid them. Your job is to protect the member of your organization and make sure he or she will not face a blind attack.
- **What time and on which channels will the interview run?** Inquiring about the time slot of the interview helps to provide a better understanding of the audience. Depending on the time of day and outlet, the audience may be younger, older, or otherwise demographic-specific. Gathering this information helps to prepare relevant content for the specific audience based on its views or stance on the particular topic. This research enables your expert to pinpoint the types of information that will be

most beneficial for that audience.

- **Will the interview be a panel discussion or one-on-one?** A panel discussion brings various opinions and personalities to the interview that your expert should be aware of. Your expert should be aware of co-interviewees and their stance on the topic being discussed.
- **Will the interview be live or taped?** Both the expert and the media outlet will appreciate the preparation put into an interview, particularly if it is a live interview. Since there is no opportunity to edit responses, it is important that the expert is well prepared.
- **Will there be audience or call-in questions?** Similar to live interviews, viewer and audience questions can be unpredictable. Your expert should be aware of this possibility because he or she may not be comfortable with the idea of this portion of the interview. Some callers may be in support of your expert while others may not.

After gathering the pertinent answers to the questions above, weigh the pros and cons of the interview and share the information with your expert. Preparation for the interview also depends on the answers to the above questions. Depending on the topic, your expert may not feel comfortable moving forward with the interview; however, in the case of crisis communications or for press conferences, some media encounters may be unavoidable. In all cases, clearly defined key messages will help your expert stay on topic and avoid pitfalls that could potentially damage his or her (or the organization's) reputation.

Identify Key Messages

The best way to reduce the opportunity for misquotes is to have a clear outline of the key message that your expert will cover in the in-

terview. Some journalists will depend on your expert for their education on the interview topic. With newsroom staffs becoming increasingly smaller, many journalists are general assignment reporters and cover a wide range of topics on a daily basis. They may not have any knowledge of your expert's subject matter but must sound convincing and educated on the topic before airtime. Your expert is their key to that information, which plays a huge part in what information is ultimately reported. This provides the perfect opportunity to make sure that your organization's views and information are accurately provided. It is usually best to determine three prioritized messages that your expert should emphasize during the interview. Below are some tips to crafting those key messages:

- **What do you want the audience to remember?** The overall objective of the interview is for the audience to leave with an understanding of a particular fact. Is it an important finding from a research study? Is it that a certain action or behavior can be beneficial to the health of the public? Is it that your product is the best on the market for a specific reason? Is your expert the best candidate for an office? Whatever the case, have your expert determine what the main objective is and that objective will become the focal point of the interview.

After determining the priority message, develop at least two more important messages. Make a checklist of information that is important for the audience to gain and prioritize that information. A list of three to four key points is more than enough information for most media interviews. Remember that all key messages should be short, bulleted items that are priority for the audience to learn. Usually in a media interview there is time to cover only one key topic; because of

this, emphasize to your expert that an emphasis should be placed on communicating the priority objective.

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- **What factual information supports your messages?** An important objective of securing an interview for your expert is for your organization to become a trusted source for your target audience. Providing relevant and concise facts and supporting information is vital to being perceived as credible. For each key message developed, work with the expert to prepare a few supporting facts that the audience will easily understand.

Again, usually there will not be enough time to provide detailed information about each fact, but preparing your expert with this information ahead of time will help with potential follow-up questions or rebuttals for any opposing experts that may also be included in the interview.

- **Find a concise way to deliver the key messages.** This point is very important. Short, concise information is the best way to avoid misquotes or out-of-context sound bites. The average television news package is approximately 1:20, with some 20 seconds available for the expert's sound bite. Often the length is even shorter. The information that your expert provides during the interview, however, helps the journalist craft the story. There still is a great chance that in the journalist's voiceover and narration of the package, they will use

your key messages discussed during the interview. All information exchanged during the interview is useful, even if there is no footage of your expert delivering it.

Prepare your expert for concise answers, but also make sure that he or she is prepared for follow-up questions or useful information that the reporter can use in the package.

- **Remember that the objective is to educate.** Make sure your expert understands that the audience may not be knowledgeable about the topic. Using language that only another expert would understand is not helpful to the listener. Complicated terminology and explanations should be avoided. However, if such terminology is relevant to the interview, the expert should provide a short and understandable definition to help the audience—this is a responsibility of a good interviewer, but you cannot always rely on an interviewer to do it. For example, if a physician is discussing heart attacks, it is best to avoid using the terminology “myocardial infarction.” If a situation calls for medical terminology then the expert should follow with the more common reference, heart attacks. Doing so will engage and educate the audience.

Redirect an Off-Topic Interview

Whether intentional or not, media interviews often can shift away from the original subject matter. When this happens, using tactics such as bridging statements will help your expert redirect the interview to the original key messages. Below are examples of just a few bridging statements to help your expert keep the journalist on topic in an interview:

- “And what’s more important to know is...”
- “That’s a great question; however, I think that we should focus on...”

- “The real issue here is...”
- “Another thing to remember is...”
- “It’s true that...but it is also true that...”
- “I don’t know the specifics of that, but I do know that...”
- “Before we continue, let me emphasize that...”

As you consult with your expert, you can determine the best bridging statements that fit. You also will have an opportunity to develop others; the main goal is to have an effective strategy for moments when interviews need to be redirected. Bridging statements also are appropriate for finding opportunities to restate your key messages. Restating your main objectives is the best way to ensure that your desired points are presented in an interview package.

The best advice to share with your expert is to be conversational and natural. Engaging

in a conversation with the reporter makes the audience feel engaged as well. The focus of the pre-interview preparation is to ensure that during the interview, your expert is comfortable and equipped with the tools to complete a successful interview. Be sure to provide constructive criticism upon debriefing; the best way to become comfortable with media interviews is through practice and consistency. **PRN**

*Melva B. Robertson, MAPW, is associate director of media relations for Emory University, owner and writer for The Write Media Group, LLC, and author of *Congratulations, It’s a Brand: The entrepreneur’s guide to birthing the brand, identifying the target audience, and increasing visibility.**