



Tool: How to respond to media requests

Note: This document is provided for information purposes only. Health professional associations making use of this resource should revise and modify it for use in their specific circumstances.

1. When a reporter first calls

A reporter may contact you or your organisation for background information or to request an interview on an issue of interest. If the request is for background information, be as helpful as possible, as this can provide an opportunity to position the association in a favourable light, to promote the association's key messages, to build relations with the media, and to perhaps pitch a story idea. Provide the reporter with any material on the issue that you have to share.

If the reporter is requesting an interview, consider first whether this is in the best interest of the association at this time. If the drawbacks outweigh the potential benefits of the interview, there is always the option to decline. The decision to grant the interview may be influenced by who the interviewer is, the media he/she works for and their position on the issue.

To help determine whether or not to grant an interview, each request should be pre-screened by asking the following questions:

- What is your name?
- What media outlet do you represent?
- What is the issue or topic that you are interested in?
- What has prompted you to pursue this story? (e.g. document published by your organisation, statement by another organisation, new study, article in the media, local/national/international incident, etc.)
- Are you interviewing others? If so, who are they? (Note: This information will provide you with insight on the angle(s) being pursued and what topics, issues or concerns are likely to arise during the interview).
- Do you have a list of the topics or questions you wish to discuss during the interview?

Note: This question allows you to achieve the following:

1 – Determine the most appropriate individual to serve as spokesperson on the topic

2 - Influence the scope of the interview **before** it takes place: You may be able to suggest topics or angles that the media outlet had not yet considered or you can also specify topics that your organisation is not prepared to discuss.

- How much do you know about our association and the issue?

- What is your deadline?
- When will the story air or be published?
- How can I reach you? (Request a telephone number and email address so that documentation can be provided to the journalist to help them better prepare for the interview).

For radio or television interview requests:

- Will the interview be conducted live or will it be recorded?
- Is it possible for your team to travel to meet our spokesperson or is this individual required to be in studio?
- How long will the segment be? (Note: Most pieces are approximately 2 minutes in length. Depending on the topic, segments could be as long as 5 minutes and very rarely exceed 15 minutes. With anything longer, there is usually more than one spokesperson invited to take part unless it is a call-in segment where you are fielding questions from the general public.)
- Will there be a call-in component? (for radio or television interviews only)
- How much time will you require with our spokesperson? (Note: Most interviews should not exceed 15 – 20 minutes)

Do NOT:

- Automatically grant or refuse an interview.
- Say things “off the record” or reply “no comment”.
- Say anything you do not want to see in print, online, on television or repeated on the radio.
- Get drawn into an interview prematurely.

Based on what you have been able to find out about the reporter and the media in question, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the association have something to gain or lose from doing the interview?
- Does the association’s message stand a chance of being heard?
- Is the media in question an effective vehicle for reaching the target audience (the women of your country, the public, decision makers, etc.)?

DO NOT agree to do the interview if:

- You are not the association's official spokesperson on the issue in question.
- You have no knowledge of the issue.
- It is premature to discuss the issue.
- The journalist wants you to comment on rumours or unfounded evidence.
- The journalist wants you to answer hypothetical questions.
- You could damage the association's credibility.
- You could hinder an ongoing but confidential process.

Once you have made your decision, call the reporter as promised to decline or accept the interview. If you decline the interview, try to be helpful by suggesting other solutions and explaining why it is impossible for you to grant an interview. If you have decided to grant the interview, start preparing your interview strategy immediately.

2. How to prepare for an interview

When setting an interview time with the reporter, try to leave yourself sufficient time to prepare.

DO:

- Ensure to have access to the relevant information/documentation of your association on the specific issue (e.g. a position statement, guideline, key messages, etc.).
- List your association's key message(s) on the issue and ensure that it is formulated in laymans terms. Remember that most media outlets address the general public and they are not generally subject matter experts. For this reason, it is best to express messages in a way that would likely be understood by students at a grade 6 level. (You may want to contact colleagues to help you identify and formulate the key messages).
- Make a list of questions that may be asked. Do not dread the questions; anticipate them and articulate clear, concise and factually correct answers in advance of the interview.
- Make a list of the related topics, particularly those that are likely more controversial or sensitive, that the interview might lead to. Be prepared with key messages for these as well or arrive with a prepared response should the question arise (e.g. *This is a very different subject than the one we are addressing today which is* OR *This topic would require a separate interview to appropriately address the issue. Today, we are focused on the topic of ...* OR *I am not in a position to respond or I am not at liberty to discuss this topic but would like to come back to ...*)
- Set your own interview agenda – decide ahead of time what you want the audience to take away from the interview.

3. Know the rules

From the beginning, you must accept the fact that journalists cannot be controlled. However, you can control your message by setting your own agenda ahead of time and following it every step of the way. That means deciding beforehand what you will say and how you will say it.

On the record – When you speak to a reporter, you are automatically on the record, so be careful. Anything you say and do can be aired or printed.

Off the record – The time to invoke this rule is *before* you reveal an issue that you do not want to have aired or printed, not after. The smartest thing is to refrain from saying anything as you can never be sure if the journalist will respect your request.

Background – You may speak to a reporter on the condition that you are doing so to provide background information only. It means that you do not wish to be identified as the official source and would rather retain anonymity. Make sure this is clearly understood before sharing the information.

Deep background – This involves the leaking of highly sensitive information that can potentially destroy careers, ruin families, or bring down corporations and governments. If you are speaking on deep background, you are relying on the reporter to protect your identity, even under threat of imprisonment, and to confirm the information with at least two independent sources.

4. Strategy and techniques

Your main objective – always – is to keep to your key message(s). Your strategy is to steer the interview in the direction most favourable to you and the association, using various techniques.

In a typical interview, the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee merely answers them. This is a passive approach; it allows the interviewer's agenda to dominate and keeps you from delivering your messages. Set your own interview agenda from the start and stick to it.

The bridge: The bridge allows you to skillfully and politely by-pass the interviewer's question and to steer the interview in the preferred direction. Example: *"You make an important point, but there is another equally important point..."* or *"I understand why you ask that question. What I find troubling or what I believe should be the focus of public debate is ..."*. The key is to acknowledge the question, give credit to the interviewer and stick to your message agenda.

The hook: This technique requires practice and experience. The hook is a word or phrase that obliges the interviewer into asking an obvious question. It allows you to steer the interview in the direction of your choice. For instance, *"Let's not forget what the patient really wants"*, or *"There are other options"* or *"Research suggests differently"*. Remember to stop at the end of the hook. This puts the onus on the interviewer to ask the obvious question: *"What do patients want?"*, or *"What options?"*, or *"What does research indicate?"*. Once the interviewer asks the obvious question, you are free to pursue your agenda.

Other techniques:

- When asked a double-barred question (i.e. a single question that addresses more than one issue, but only allows for one answer), answer the easier part first. This will buy you time to come up with something – hopefully a bridge. The interviewer may return to the issue, or move to something else.
- If the interviewer is aggressive or insulting, keep your cool. If you do not, you can be sure that your reaction will be aired or reported in print.
- If the interviewer interrupts, or does not let you answer, give the individual two chances. At the third interruption, ask politely that you be permitted to answer the question. Keep your cool. The public is on your side.
- If the interviewer's question is ambiguous, ask for clarification.
- If the interviewer refers to unfounded rumours or bases the questions on inaccuracies or presumptions, ask him or her to state the facts upon which the question is based, or correct the remarks immediately. If you let doubt prevail, the public will perceive it as a confirmation.
- If, once you have answered a question, the interviewer remains silent and just stares at you, do not be fooled. It is a ploy to get you to ramble on. Do not be afraid of silence and leave it to them to talk next.
- Never answer hypothetical questions. Refocus the interview by saying: *"I cannot predict the future or what someone else might do, but I can tell you..."* and go back to your key message.

5. The interview

The interview can begin before the tape recorder or camera is even turned on. Remember that any time you are speaking with a reporter, what you say can become interview material. Never say anything you would not be prepared to see or hear in print, on television, on the radio or online.

DO:

- Prepare yourself for the interview.
- Speak in clear, simple terms.
- Correct misinformation and falsehoods.
- Stick to your messages.
- Remember that you know more about the issue than they do.

DO NOT:

- Rush to answer; listen carefully to the question.
- Offer your personal opinion.

- Repeat a negative; always counter with a positive.
- Argue with or talk over the interviewer.
- Lose sight of your audience; the interviewer is secondary.

6. Tips for the most common types of interviews

The telephone interview

- Avoid doing the interview immediately.
- Obtain the information you need and call the reporter back.
- Most journalists prefer the use of a LAN line to a cell phone, particularly for live radio interviews, as sound quality is usually superior, and there is less risk of the call being dropped.
- Close the office door or isolate yourself; ask that you not be disturbed.
- Spread your notes in front of you to help keep to your key message(s). Note: Avoid handling paper during your interview as this could affect the audio quality of the interview.
- Ask the interviewer to tell you when exactly the recording begins.
- Make sure that you can hear the interviewer well.
- Your voice is your only asset – use it.

The face to face interview

- Agree to a time limit beforehand and enforce it, politely.
- If possible, avoid holding the interview in your office for confidentiality purposes. Use a boardroom or other appropriate setting.
- If there is a camera crew, make a point of greeting everyone.
- Ask the interviewer to tell you when exactly the recording begins.
- Project confidence – you are the expert.

The radio interview

- If you prefer to do the interview by phone, check if this is possible.

- If it takes place in the studio, get there ahead of time to familiarize yourself with the environment.
- Make yourself comfortable and ask for a glass of water.
- If you do not need headphones, do not put them on.
- Keep answers short and project your voice – it is your only asset.

The television interview

- Pay special attention to your appearance. If offered makeup, say yes (men too) – you will look better on camera. Avoid wearing clothing and accessories that will distract from your message (e.g. loud colours or patterns, lapel pins, etc.)
- Arrive ahead of time to absorb some of the atmosphere.
- Do not swivel in your chair or fidget; keep your feet on the floor.
- Limit hand movements and avoid holding items in your hands (e.g. pen, paper) unless they are props to support your messages.
- Look the interviewer in the eye with a steady, confident gaze.
- Do not worry about the cameras – they will follow you.
- Remember, as a physician, you already have the public's trust.

Additional tips

- Use facts and figures in moderation to support your message.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so and use the opportunity to reinforce the main message. Example: *"I don't have that information, but what I do know is..."*.
- The audience for most media outlets is the general public. They and the interviewer are generally not subject matter experts. You are. Keep your answers simple and remember that most people cannot retain more than three key messages about a topic.
- Be yourself. If you are being interviewed, it is because people want to hear what you have to say.