Effective Media Interview Techniques

The news media help shape public opinion on health issues. A basic understanding of a reporter's job and a few interviewing techniques can increase your effectiveness in communicating key messages in interviews.

Most journalists are professionals and have degrees in journalism or related fields. Although professionally trained as reporters, they are not necessarily content experts on every subject they cover. They rely on experts for facts and commentary.

Reporters work in a competitive environment. Tight space, time constraints, and decisions made by editors, directors, and producers ultimately determine what stays or gets cut from a story. Reporters who write for monthly publications such as magazines have longer lead times, but television reporters often get assignments in the morning to produce news stories for the evening news. This means less time to research stories, interview sources, and write. Late-breaking news stories can "bump" scheduled stories to later dates or indefinitely. When information you provided does not appear in a story, don’t assume the reporter has ignored what you said.

The reporter's purposes in an interview are to:

- Gain understanding of issues.
- Collect relevant facts.
- Obtain quotes from reputable sources.
- Balance opposing views.

Contrary to common perceptions, most interviews are not "investigative" in nature. Reporters are trained to gather news quickly and accurately by conducting interviews with expert sources like you. However, their initial questions may not always convey the true nature of the interview; therefore never take a call cold. Always find out the nature of the interview before you agree to do it.

Reporters are human and can have preconceived notions about the topics they are covering. They also may be seeking quotes that support specific conclusions. If you find yourself pressed to give quotes you don’t agree with, make a case for your viewpoint. If the reporter doesn’t seem persuaded, decline to be quoted. The most important goal in an interview is not to be quoted; it’s to get your messages across.

ACEP Spokespersons

Speak on behalf of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) if you are designated as a spokesperson. If you would like to be a spokesperson, contact ACEP’s Public Relations Department. Coordinate speaking on behalf of your Chapter with your Chapter leaders.

Remember to identify yourself as a spokesperson for ACEP when the reporter asks how you want to be identified. Getting ACEP mentioned in news stories raises its profile and promotes
the specialty of emergency medicine.
When speaking on behalf of ACEP remember to communicate the organization’s key messages, contained in policy statements, fact sheets, and talking points, available on ACEP.org.
ACEP’s spokespersons are strongly encouraged to take advantage of ACEP’s media training sessions at Scientific Assembly and other meetings.
To have the greatest impact on national policy matters, a medical specialty organization must communicate consistent messages at the national, state, and local levels. Therefore, if a national reporter calls you directly, please coordinate your response with ACEP’s Public Relations Department, especially if the topic is related to ACEP’s strategic goals and objectives. ACEP can provide you with the latest talking points and information on the issue. ACEP also may have trained and designated specific spokespersons to talk with the press on that topic. The emergency medicine specialty will have the greatest impact on national health policy by speaking with one voice on issues.

Why Give Interviews?
Interviews require giving up a certain amount of control, which is why they make most people uncomfortable. The tips in this chapter are aimed at helping you feel comfortable, confident, and in control of your message. Most of these principles apply regardless of the type of interview (e.g., print, radio, or television). In fact, most of them apply to any kind of public speaking.

Pre-Interviewing Basics
Never take the call cold. If a reporter calls -- or shows up at your emergency department with a camera -- never agree to do an interview on the spot. Deadlines are tight for most reporters because news is valuable when it’s fresh. However, find out as much information about the interview as possible and set a time to do it later.
Ask questions. Ask about the subject of the interview, who the audience is (and what type of media), who else the reporter has talked to, and when the story will run. Ask how long the interview will take; be careful with interviews, especially those on controversial topics, which are scheduled to last longer than 20 minutes.
Define your messages. There is only one reason to give an interview: to communicate your messages. Those messages may be about facts from a new study, a public health concern, a medical crisis, your personal reputation, or regarding the specialty of emergency medicine. Regardless of the issue, before you agree to do an interview, you must clarify your messages and decide whether an interview is the best way to communicate them. ACEP has key “take-home” message points on many topics, available on ACEP.org.
Once you decide your main “take home” messages, identify a personal experience to support the messages, and a few statistics to accentuate your key points. During the interview, your primary mission is to deliver these key messages while answering the reporter’s questions. Call ACEP’s or your hospital’s public relations department, or your Chapter. ACEP’s Public Relations Department has talking points and background materials on a variety of emergency medicine issues. In addition, the public relations staff monitors coverage of emergency medicine throughout the country and often can provide information on how other emergency physicians have handled certain subjects. A quick call to one of these sources can help you learn more about the reporter. If you’re asked to speak on behalf of your Chapter, ACEP, or your hospital, call the organization first.

Dos & Don’ts of Interviewing
DO keep answers short. You may do a television interview for 30 minutes, but the average soundbite is 10 to 20 seconds long, so be clear and concise.
DO communicate your messages. Answer questions, but don’t be distracted from communicating your messages.
DO use firsthand examples and descriptive language. Communicating personal experiences can be dramatic and powerful. Use them as often as possible. Describe an experience with a patient or explain what influenced your position on an issue. Put statistics in meaningful terms, such as "two thirds" instead of "more than 60 percent".

DO use plain English. Keep the audience in mind, and speak in terms familiar to them. Avoid medical jargon, such as "prophylaxis," and "present to the emergency department". Don't use questionable humor (self-effacing humor is best), profanity, or any kind of derogatory language.

DO pause before answering. Take a brief moment to consider your response. Even for radio and television, this pause will seem thoughtful and natural.

DO answer the questions. It's best to answer even tough questions, or your credibility with the audience may be damaged. But remember, you're not obligated to agree to the interviewer's statements, and your mission is to deliver your messages.

DO take the high ground. Always respond in a positive way, and turn negative questions or comments into positive statements. Reporters often will ask a negative question or plant a buzzword in a question to get you to repeat it, if only in denial. This makes for colorful quotes. Always respond by answering with positive statements and replacing objectionable words with more acceptable terms. For example:

Scenario: A reporter interviews you about the preparedness of your emergency department.

Question: Isn't it true that more than half of the nation's emergency departments are staffed by unqualified doctors.

Answer: Actually, emergency physicians today are better trained than ever before. Most are career specialists with considerable training and experience, and more than half are board-certified in emergency medicine.

DO question facts, if necessary. If confronted with findings or statistics you're not familiar with or you believe may be incorrect, say, "I'm not familiar with those statistics so I really can't comment on that matter" or "based on [cite other statistics], the most important thing to remember is [statement that communicates your message]". If asked, for example, about a report you haven't read, be sure and say so, but use the question as an opportunity to communicate your messages.

DO use body language effectively. Studies show that voice inflection and body language are even more important than the words themselves when it comes to how messages are received.

To help people focus more on your messages, keep your arms loose, and gesture naturally. This will help you appear calm and confident. Don't clasp your hands together, cross your arms or legs, put your hands in your pockets, or adopt any posture that prevents you from moving naturally. Strive for a relaxed, animated face. Avoid sympathetic nodding, which could be interpreted as agreement. Smile, raise your eyebrows, and use natural expressions. (See the chapter on Speeches for additional tips on delivery skills.)

DON'T ramble. Reporters often wait before asking their next question to encourage you to keep talking. Deliver your message concisely then stop talking and wait for the next question. Become comfortable with silence.

DON'T discuss hypothetical situations or unfamiliar matters. If asked about a situation or case of which you have incomplete information, or about a hypothetical situation, respond by discussing the issue instead. Say, "I can't respond to hypothetical situations, but if you're asking about the issue of [state the issue], it's clear that [state your message]".

DON'T argue or interrupt. You don't have to agree, but don't argue either. And don't interrupt. Other guests are another matter. You may need to jump in when another guest is talking to correct misinformation or to comment.

DON'T lose your temper. You can tell a reporter you prefer not to comment (explain why), but never get angry. In taped interviews especially, viewers may see only your angry response and not hear the question that prompted it.
DON’T lie or bluff. If you don’t know an answer, say so. You can damage your credibility by speculating incorrectly. If you should know the answer but don’t, offer to research the answer, and then be sure to follow up.

Print Media
The print media includes daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, magazines, journals, trade publications, and newsletters.

Face-To-Face Interviewing Tips
Print reporters are looking for quotes, so be sure your messages are quotable. One of the dangers of a face-to-face interview is that you may relax too much. Be careful not to become too “chatty” because you could accidentally mention something that plants a seed for a story you don’t want printed.

Tip 1: Be prepared. Find out exactly what the reporter wants to discuss. Identify two or three key messages you want published. Be aware that a preliminary question, for example, about the protocols for treating abdominal pain, may signal that the reporter is doing a story about a missed diagnosis. In cases like this, it is appropriate to say something like “I can’t comment on the specifics of this patient’s case or what the hospital did, but I can describe the protocols for diagnosing abdominal pain.” Guard against having your statements inadvertently or inappropriately used in legal cases.

Tip 2: Relax and be personable. Keep a good sense of humor.

Tip 3: Support your facts with written materials, if possible. Provide charts, news articles, and data from reputable sources.

Tip 4: Be honest; avoid even the appearance of deception. Dishonesty, or the appearance of it, can severely damage your reputation.

Tip 5: Use body language and facial expressions to help convey your message, even though you’re not on camera. This will help persuade your interviewer, who in turn may persuade the readers.

Tip 6: If you want to speak "off the record" or "for background only," make sure the reporter agrees. If you feel the reporter needs further clarification, and you want to be sure you won’t be quoted, say this is "off the record" or for "deep background and not to be attributed to me or quoted," and "is that okay?" If the reporter agrees, then continue. Be aware, a reporter does not have to honor this request.

Telephone Interviewing Tips
Use all the tips for face-to-face interviews and add the following:

Tip 1: Don’t use a speaker phone. The reporter may not be able to hear you clearly, which increases your chance of being misquoted.

Tip 2: Stand up. Doing this not only will help you be more energized, it also will help you speak more succinctly during the interview.

Tip 3: Use a convincing voice tone. Vary your inflection and pause to emphasize points and to make them more persuasive and interesting.

Television
Television reporters are employed by networks (e.g., ABC, NBC, CBS); cable networks (e.g., CNN, Cox, CNN, ESPN, Fox, PBS, TBN); or television syndicates (e.g., Viacom and Hearst Broadcasting Productions). Each national network has local affiliates in cities across the country.

News Interview Tips
Use the same tips as those for print interviews, but add the following:

Tip 1: Talk in sound bites. Although the camera may film you for 15 minutes, you will only be on the air for about 10 to 20 seconds (unless it’s a documentary), so use brief, concise statements.

Tip 2: Use memorable words. State your message clearly and powerfully.

Tip 3: Look your best. Take advantage of television makeup artists, if offered. Consider having your hair professionally cut or styled. Don’t wear multiple patterns (e.g., stripes or...
checkers) or colors because it causes vibrating lines on the camera. Men should wear neutral-color suits with solid-color shirts, and ties with simple patterns. Women should wear businesslike dresses, with or without jackets, or suits. Jewel-tone colors work well. Avoid large earrings or jewelry that could be distracting. Don’t wear extremely short skirts.

Tip 4: Concentrate on the interviewer, not the camera. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer and smile.

Tip 5: Talk to the floor manager and camera crew prior to the show. One of their responsibilities is to help you do a great job by making you comfortable. Don’t be afraid to ask questions or for assistance (e.g., water, face powder).

Tip 6: Watch your body language. Stand or sit straight. Don’t fold your arms, and appear open and in control. Don’t let your shoulder blades touch the back of your chair.

Tip 7: Television talk shows. Don’t be afraid to engage in discussions when there are other people on the show with you. This is essential to communicating your message.

Tip 8: Stand-up interviews. Take command of your space by standing with one foot slightly ahead of the other, toward the interviewer.

Remote Television Interviewing Tips

In remote interviews, you hear the interviewer’s questions through an earpiece and look directly into a camera, not at a person, because you are at a remote location. Remote interviews are more challenging because you can’t see the person interviewing you. However, they offer flexibility and less travel time and expense.

Here are some tips for a successful remote interview:

Tip 1: Make sure to tell the camera person about any problems. Overcome any anxiety about reporting problems or asking questions so you can resolve them before the interview.

Tip 2: Before beginning the interview, be sure the volume is checked in your earpiece. You need to hear the interviewer, and it’s better to resolve the problem before the interview begins.

Tip 3: Again, sit up straight, and don’t let your shoulder blades touch the back of the chair. If you’re wearing a blazer, sitting on its coattails can help keep your posture in the correct position.

Tip 4: Once the interview starts, look directly into the camera. Speak to it as though it’s a person sitting across from you, or pretend you’re talking to the camera operator.

Tip 5: Maintain eye contact with the camera. Diverting your eyes away from the camera may appear as if you’re being deceptive or avoiding the issue. Just because you’re not speaking doesn’t mean you’re not on camera. Never be caught in unattractive positions.

Tip 6: At the end of the interview, wait until you get the all-clear sign from the camera person before you look away from the camera. It may feel strange to continue staring and not talking, but try to maintain a confident look.

Radio

Radio reaches millions of people each day. Radio interviews can be a powerful tool for communicating news and advocating issues. Many local radio stations have news formats and drive-time talk shows. They analyze the demographics of their listening audience, which make them ideal for targeting messages to specific groups. The radio industry also includes national radio networks, as well as National Public Radio, which broadcast to large numbers of people. In addition, many local radio stations are expanding their listening audiences through the Internet.

Organizations use various methods to get their messages across in radio including radio news releases, radio media tours, and radio public service announcements.

In preparing for a radio interview, find out in advance whether the interview will be live or taped. Consider the format of the station (all news, talk, easy listening) and the program. There’s a big difference, for example, between a talk-show radio host and a reporter from the CBS Radio Network.
Most radio interviews are done over the telephone, or in a studio. If you conduct an interview over the telephone, minimize interruptions and turn off call-waiting. Don’t use a cellular phone. Follow the same tips for telephone interviews and add the
Tip 1: Make sure you can hear questions clearly. If you are even slightly uncomfortable with the volume or connection, say so.
Tip 2: Be sure you can pronounce the interviewer’s name correctly.
Tip 3: Have facts readily available. Consider using note cards.
Tip 4: Use descriptive language to illustrate your points to help the audience visualize what you’re talking about.
Tip 5: If the interviewer’s voice seems distant, resist speaking louder.
Tip 6: Don’t talk over the interviewer’s question.
Tip 7: Be careful about what you’re saying when you’re on the air live.
Tip 8: If you’re taping the interview, and you didn’t make your points clearly, ask to be taped again.

Internet Media
The Internet is becoming widely accepted as a credible way to communicate and track news. News stories from across the world can be seen and communicated faster and reach wider audiences. Through advances in technology, news events are being seen and heard live or streamed on Web sites. People are posing questions online and interacting directly with political leaders and physicians who type in responses on a computer during live Web chats, which are kept on Web site archives for later viewing.
Many news organizations have separate staffs who write news stories for their Web sites. Reporters of some health and medical Web sites (e.g., www.HealthScout.com, www.WebMD.com) need clinical experts to quote in articles, critique research studies, and participate in Web chats.
When responding to a request from an Internet reporter, follow the same tips for telephone interviews. When doing a Web chat, make sure you have the technical skill to type in responses accurately and quickly, or else designate someone to do it for you.

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