

Are You Ready For Your Interview?

How to Prepare for Media Interviews



Special Report

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Are You Ready For Your Interview? How to Prepare for Media Interviews

Are you seeking media attention? Have you sent out media releases to promote your company, product, service, issue, or event? Are you attempting to use the media to reach potential customers, shareholders, sponsors, donors, or other stakeholders? Is there an issue in your sector or at your company that has, or might, capture public attention? Are you dealing with a problem or a crisis?

If you answered *yes* to any of the above questions, you need to be prepared for interviews by reporters, broadcasters, or even bloggers.

When it comes to being interviewed by reporters, *you're only as good as your worst quote*. That means you need to be prepared to hit soft lobs (easy and positive questions) out of the ballpark. But you don't want to stumble over difficult questions or questions you'd rather not answer.

Even if you are not actively seeking media attention, you never know when an issue might arise and a reporter might call.

It's the information age and every executive, corporate spokesperson, and business owner, as well as anybody with an event, project or issue to promote, should be able to condense news, financial data, product information, points of view, and other announcements into brief, convincing messages—expressed in an articulate, newsworthy. They should also be able to respond in a clear, concise, focused, and appropriate manner to simple questions and to difficult questions about controversial issues.

If you are not prepared for interviews, you may not convey the information you want to express, you may not correct false assumptions, or you may look as if you are hiding something—even if you are not.

If you are prepared, you will be able to articulately and accurately reply to simple, complex, negative, or confrontational questions. You will be able to tell your story (or the story about your company, organization, product, service, event, issue, or announcement) in a newsworthy manner.

If you are not managing a crisis, you want to answer reporter's questions—at least those you are authorized and qualified to answer—but you also want to weave your key messages into answers so you can convey your story, as you want it told.

If you are managing a crisis, you don't want to look evasive. That does not mean you have to explicitly answer every question asked. But it does not mean dodging issues or giving false information. It means anticipating questions and answering them as honestly as you can, based on the circumstances. In other

words, if you cannot answer a question, because you don't have the information or you have been legally advised not to do so, you still have to say *something*.

This report will help you prepare to actively and effectively participate in interviews with print, broadcast, and online journalists—whether they are pitching soft lobs or wicked curve balls—by helping you develop key messages, by showing you how to weave key messages into answers, and by demonstrating how to answer difficult questions or questions you'd rather not be asked.

The First Principle

When preparing for interviews with reporters, keep the *first principle* of media interviews in mind:

- You cannot control the questions. You can control your answers.

Preparing for interviews enables you to craft interesting and newsworthy messages, along with supporting points and related anecdotes, that you want to convey. It is your job, then, to bridge from answers to questions to an appropriate key message (more on key messages and bridging below).

The Second Principle

When preparing for interviews, keep the second principle in mind too:

- You cannot write the story. You can influence the story.

By controlling your answers and delivering key messages you can influence the questions that reporters ask, and that can influence the direction the story takes. In other words, if you say something interesting, newsworthy, controversial (if you are so inclined), unique, or colorful, the reporter will—in many instances—ask follow-up questions on topics you've introduced. The hope is that some of what you say will make it into the story. And of course if you are being interviewed live, everything you say will make it into the story, so you really want to be in control of what you say, and how you say it.

No Guarantees

There are no guarantees that what you say will make it into the publication, on air (unless you are being interviewed live), or into a blog. There are a number of reasons for this:

- You are not paying for space or airtime, so you don't control what gets written or aired.
- Story space or airtime time may be limited.
- You may be one of a number of people the reporter interviewed; another person may have said something similar to what you said (and may have said it in a more interesting or colorful—i.e., “quotable”—manner).
- Breaking news may bump the story.

You cannot control these factors, so don't worry about them. You can, however, control your answers, which is why you need to spend time composing your key messages and determining how best to weave them into answers to questions.

What's Your Story?

Key messages are the core of your story—what you want to say about your business, organization, product, service, charity, issue, book, film, play, or whatever you are promoting. (*For the most part, I will use “company” from now on to represent all of that.*) Once you have developed your key messages, you find—or make—opportunities to weave them into your answers.

Developing and delivering key messages that are focused, interesting, easy to understand, and newsworthy are key to successful interviews. In most interviews, you should be prepared to convey several carefully crafted key messages and support them with a couple supplementary points, examples, and/or anecdotes.

You should judiciously repeat key messages for emphasis, while answering questions so you don't seem to be dodging them. At the same time, if there are questions you don't want to, or are not able to, answer, you still need to know how to respond, and this report will show how to respond to such questions.

To prepare for your interview, think about the impression you want to make and the most pertinent information you want to convey. If it helps, imagine preparing for a sales meeting. Would you visit a prospect without thinking about messages you want to convey? Unless you were a savvy, experienced salesperson, you would not. Unless you have a great deal of media interview experience, make sure you prepare for each interview! Then, during interviews, weave your key messages into answers (see below for how to do this).

When preparing for interviews, ask yourself (and your colleagues; it helps to brainstorm with others) the questions below and develop answers for them.

- What is our 30-second elevator pitch?
Describe your company in 30 seconds or so. Focus on what the company does, why the company does it, who benefits from it, and how.
- Who do we want to speak to through the media?
In sales, this is known as your target market. In other words, if you try to be all things to all people, you will end up being nothing to nobody, so have a clear target market in mind when interviewed.
- What main impressions do we want to make? What attributes do we want to associate with the company?
- How do we make the impressions and demonstrate the attributes (such as experience, trust, reliability) we want to associate with our company?
- Where do we sit within our industry in terms of innovation, market share, geographical reach, and other pertinent factors?
- What is our Unique Selling Proposition or USP? In other words, what differentiates us from our competition?

- What would we like to read or hear after the interview?
- If we could write our own headline, what would it say?

Write out answers to the above questions. Keep the answers short and focused—about 30 to 60 seconds per answer—and include a few anecdotes about your company or customers that help demonstrate what you want to say. If possible, get permission to “drop the name” of an established customer who has derived benefits by working with your company.

Anecdotes and customer stories add what is known as “color” to the interview. Reporters often use anecdotes to support your claims. Sometimes, they will ask if they can interview a customer. Having a third party talk about your company can bring greater credibility to your story, so it doesn’t hurt to find a customer or two who is willing to speak to reporters about your company. But make sure they have read this document or are media trained.

Think “W5” When Developing Answers

In addition to developing answers to the above questions, think about the W5 questions of journalism—who, what, where, when and why (and sometimes how), and prepare answers for them.

W5 questions are seldom as simple as the questions below but they are meant to solicit the information that these questions would solicit:

- Who are you?
- What do you do?
- Who do you do it for?
- Why do you do it?
- Where do you do it?
- When did you start doing it?

The *who are you* question might be phrased as “What is your company name?” The *what do you do* question might sound like a statement: “Tell me a bit about your company.”

A journalist might not ask you why you do something—unless you are about to perform a death defying stunt or are personally associated with your company, such as an entrepreneur running an interesting niche business. However, the journalist might ask you a question such as, “Who are you targeting with your product?” That is a great opportunity for you to describe both your target market and *why* you do something—the benefits for the target market. In other words, don’t just answer, “We sell widgets to automotive manufacturers.” Weave in the benefits. “Our widgets save automotive manufacturers production costs and help them produce a better quality product.”

The same principle of weaving in aspects of your key messages applies to a question such as “Where is your company located?” Look at how Nanny Inc., a company that matches nannies with parents, might answer the *where* question.

The Nanny Inc. spokesperson could say, “New York.” That would be true. But why wouldn’t she say the following:

“Nanny Inc. is located in New York, but we place nannies from coast to coast, and we recruit nannies nationally and overseas.”

If the spokesperson only said “New York” and a Californian parent in need of a nanny read the article or saw the interview, the parent might think that Nanny Inc. only found nannies for parents in New York. If someone who did not live in New York was looking to work as a nanny, that person might not apply for a job with Nanny Inc. Instead, by giving a one-sentence, 10-second reply that answered the question *and* included two aspects of the company’s key message, Nanny Inc. could find customers and employees—from coast to coast.

To give answers like that, you need to anticipate questions and jot down answers that include what you want to say—your key messages. You then weave in *appropriate* key messages to *appropriate* questions. (We’ll look at weaving in key messages in greater detail below.)

In addition to questions about your company and the product or service you sell, there are a number of other W5 questions you might be asked. You will not be asked all the questions below all the time. In fact, if you have been asked to quickly comment on a particular industry trend or issue, you may not be asked any of the questions below. But when it comes to preparing for interviews, you want to make sure you have developed answers for each of these questions:

- Where is your company located?
- When was your company founded?
- Tell me about your company...
- What is it that your company does?
- Who do you do it for?
- How did/why did your company get into this business?
- What makes your company unique?
- How would you differentiate yourself from your competition?
- What is your background?
- How did/why did you get into this business?
- What kind of credentials do you (does your company) have?
- Where are your clients located?
- When and why do companies do business with you?
- When and why should companies come to you?
- What issues are companies are dealing with when they come to you?
- How do you solve them?
- What are the main benefits companies derive from your product/service?
- What opportunities do you help companies take advantage of? How?

- What does it cost to buy your product/service?
- How does this compare to the industry average?
- Aren't there more affordable ways to do what you help companies do?
- Is your company profitable?
- How much revenue did your company generate last year?

I could produce a dozen more questions, but I hope you get the point: reporters can ask you many questions. The questions they ask depend on the main issue(s) the story is attempting to address and the scope of the story (space or airtime it will take up).

If you are one of several people being interviewed for a short article addressing a specific industry trend, issue, or situation, you will not be asked most of the above questions. If you are being interviewed for a company profile or a case studied involving your company, you may be asked most of the questions, and additional ones. The key is to know what you could be asked, and to have answers prepared. Your answers should address the question (we'll look at how to "address" difficult questions or questions you can't or don't want to ask) and should include appropriate key message elements (such as where Nanny Inc. does business when asked where the company is located).

Answers Equal Confidence

Answering the questions above may feel like studying for a test, but it is a test about your company and you should be able to ace it. That means you should be able to speak intelligently and articulately about your company and industry.

You may have the answers in your head, but I recommend that you write them down and read them aloud. That will make your answers feel real. Also, time your answers. You really shouldn't speak for more than 30 to 45 seconds on any topic, unless you are taking part in a long interview on a complex topic. Even then, keep your answers as succinct as possible. The interviewer can always ask you for more information, if required.

Writing down and reading (or rehearsing) your answers to the above questions (and others you can think of) will help you feel prepared for the interview. And if you feel prepared, you will speak more concisely and articulately, and with greater confidence.

But once you are prepared, how do you weave key messages into answers to questions reporters ask?

Weaving In Key Messages

If a journalist were writing an article about my media training services, I would expect the journalist to ask me something like, "When did you start to conduct media training?"

I could give a simple, honest answer: “In 2000.”

However, why wouldn't I answer the question in the following manner?

“As a freelance journalist, I noticed people often felt intimidated by reporters, making it difficult for them to convey their story. So in 2000, I started to conduct media interview training to help entrepreneurs and executives get their message across when being interviewed.”

I answered the question honestly—“in 2000.” Notice, however, that in less than 15 seconds I worked in the following:

- a bit about my experience
- a problem
- a solution (my training)
- my target audience

These points are integral key messages. When being interviewed, I want to mention that entrepreneurs and executives (i.e., my target audience) have problems with media interviews, and that I offer a solution—media training.

While I do not control the questions, my answer to the *when* question might spark questions that pertain more closely to the information I want to convey. In other words, through my answer, I gave the reporter fuel for questions such as, “Why do you think people are intimidated by reporters?” or “How do you help people prepare for interviews?”

Now let's look at how the spokesperson for ABC Inc., a Web-based Voice over IP company, might answer the *when* question:

“ABC Inc. was found in 2000.”

That may be true, but I suggest ABC Inc. bridge to a key message:

“In 2000, ABC Inc. began delivering voice over IP, or VOIP, to medium and large enterprises across Canada. In 2004, we added video over IP.”

If you, as the reader, don't know what IP or VOIP is, you might not understand the second answer. And I believe answers should be as jargon-free as possible. On the other hand, if the spokesperson for ABC Inc. is talking to a reporter for a technology publication that reaches a knowledgeable information technology audience, then the answer is perfectly acceptable. If the spokesperson were talking to a reporter from a business publication, the answer might go something like this:

“In 2000, ABC Inc. began delivering voice over the computer networks of medium and large enterprises across Canada. In 2004, we added the deliver of video conferencing over computer networks.”

There is a lot more the spokesperson could say about the benefits and cost savings of voice or video over computer networks; however, your goal is to scale your answers. In other words, you don't want to make a long speech in reply to

the first or second question you are asked. You want to look for opportunities to expand on your key messages as the interview progresses.

While there are no guarantee that reporters will ask follow-up questions based on your key message answer, or use what you say in articles, by incorporating key messages into your answers, you dramatically increase the chance that they will ask questions you want to answer and will tell the story you want to convey.

In fact, unless reporters are seeking answers to controversial business, political, or social issues, they want to hear your story so they can tell your story. That is why they are interviewing you. So why wouldn't you tell your story by weaving in your key messages when answering questions?

In other words, when being interviewed, answer questions and judiciously weave in your key messages. Don't be afraid of repeating key messages for emphasis, but make sure you also answer the questions. If you do not answer questions, journalists will feel as if you are in "spin" mode—like a politician during an election campaign (or at any time, come to think of it).

If you are being interviewed because of your knowledge of a particular subject—such as information technology security—answer the questions asked of you *and* work in your key messages about your company and services. For instance, if asked where your IT security company is headquartered, you might say:

“Special-IT is headquartered in San Francisco, California.”

That may be the truth, but why wouldn't you say:

“From its headquarters in San Francisco, California, Special-IT conducts security audits and implements network security solutions for Fortune 1000 clients.”

That too is the truth, took under 10 seconds to say, and gives the reporter some key information about your company.

Perhaps you are an IT security company being interviewed by a journalist who writes for a computer reseller publication. The journalist will ask you questions that relate to the interests of the publication's readers, so he might ask you something like this: “Can you give me some background on your channel program?” (*Note: channel programs are how manufacturers distribute goods to resellers or retailers.*)

This is something you could wax poetically on for 10 minutes or more, I'm sure. However, you don't want to talk anywhere near that long. You need to know the most important points of your channel message, and you need to distill those points into a 30-second answer, perhaps something like this:

“Special-IT's channel program targets computer resellers working in the small and medium enterprise market. In addition to earning excellent margins on our security applications and training programs, they can resell Special-IT's security audits. We also have in-depth online product training programs and offer channel partners exclusivity in their geographic region.”

No fuss. No muss. You answered the question in a clear, concise manner. If the reporter needs to know more about any aspect of your channel program, he can follow up on any of the points—target audience, applications, training programs, security audits, geographic exclusivity—you made in a concise reply that answered the question *and* conveyed key information about your company.

But what if the reporter only asks you questions about business security issues and you sense he is not going to ask you about your target market? Then what? Keep the first principle of media interviews in mind:

- *You cannot control the questions. You can control your answers.*

Let's say that the reporter has asked you a couple of questions about emerging security threats. Because you know this material cold, you have given excellent answers (which helps boost credibility, one of the attributes you want associated with the company). However, you have not worked in any information about your company. Simply keep your ear open for opportunities.

Say the reporter asks you something like this: "What type of companies are most at risk because they are not on top of their security game?" Reply to the question and work in aspects of your key messages:

"Small and medium enterprises most often lack the in-house IT staff and knowledge to fully secure networks and Web servers. That's why Special-IT offers security audits that help small and medium enterprises determine just how at risk they might be."

Notice how you answered the question about types of companies *and* worked in your key message about security audits, a message that is directly related (therefore of interest) to types of companies most at risk. In other words, your key message is related to the question, so it makes sense to convey it. Again, there is no guarantee that the reporter will use all you have said, but there is a guarantee that your key message will not be used if you do not present it. So wherever you see an opportunity to weave in your key messages, take advantage of it.

Be A Name Dropper

Notice also how the key message answer above includes the name of the company, Special-IT. To help people prepare for interviews, I conduct mock interviews and am surprised at how often executives and entrepreneurs do not use the name of their company (or authors do not mention the names of their books) when answering questions.

I am not suggesting that you include your company or book name in every answer to every question; however, you should use it where appropriate—especially if being interviewed on radio, TV, or for online broadcast.

A print reporter will use your company name in an article, even if you do not mention it. But if you are being interviewed for broadcast and don't mention your company name, the audience might not hear it. Sure, the reporter might mention

it off the top of the interview and might repeat it at the end, but your audience can drift in and out. If they miss the beginning and/or end, they might not hear your company name.

For instance, let's say you are an author who is being interviewed on the radio and a reporter asks, "What inspired you to write this book?" I call a question like that a "soft lob"—something you should hit out of the ballpark. In other words, it's an opportunity to get listeners excited and to motivate them to buy your book, but they can't do that if they don't know the name of your book. Imagine if in your answer you say something like:

"I wrote the book after surviving at sea in a row boat, living through three tornadoes, and living on nothing but rain drops and seaweed."

Simply put, why wouldn't you say something like this?

"I wrote *Ninety Days in a Leaky Boat* after surviving at sea in a row boat, living through three tornadoes, and living on nothing but rain drops and seaweed."

In short, know your key messages, weave in appropriate key messages as you answer questions, keep your answer concise and focused, and integrate the name of your company or product into the occasional answer.

To do this, you have to develop key messages or points you want to make about your company, anticipate possible questions, and develop answers that include your key messages. Ideally, you do this while brainstorming possible questions, answers, and key messages with other members of your company. And you write down the questions and answers so that you can review them before any interview.

Even if you are not asked the questions you have written down, this process will help you feel prepared and confident; it will help you improvise—weave in your key messages even if not asked the exact questions you prepared for.

Exceptions To The Rule

There are, of course, exceptions to every rule.

If you do not know the answer to a question, or if you are not authorized to answer a particular question, let the journalist know that you need time to find the answer or to find someone who can address the issue. Then find the answer or find someone who can address the issue!

Of course, if you are being interviewed live on air, that can be difficult to do, so try to get as much information about the nature and direction of the interview as you can (you can ask about this in advance), so you can prepare or determine if you are the right person for the interview.

If you are dealing with a crisis, say only what you are authorized to say, and no more. That means you need to know, before you are interviewed, what you are

allowed to say. It may be a legal issue; it may be all that the company agrees can and should be placed on the record. In short, you must be prepared.

“The worse the news, the more effort should go into communicating it.” - Andrew Grove, CEO, Intel Corp.

For instance, if an explosion at your place of business seriously injures someone, reporters will want to know the name of the injured person and the cause of the explosion.

In response to, “Can you tell us who was injured?” it is perfectly legitimate to say, “We will release the name of the injured person once the family has been notified.” In fact, not only is it legitimate to say that, privacy laws may require that you say no more than that.

In response to, “Can you tell us what caused the explosion?” it is perfectly legitimate to say nothing more than this: “The Fire Marshall’s Office is investigating and they will release the results once their investigation is complete.”

You might suspect what caused the explosion, but do not speculate. No matter how many times, or how many ways, reporters ask you about the cause of the explosion, simply repeat what you are authorized to say:

“The Fire Marshall’s Office is investigating and they will release the results once their investigation is complete.”

Also, imagine if you speculated—and got it wrong. Or if you lied, and the lie was found out. Either case could have legal implications that might cost you your job and damage your company’s reputation.

In addition to never speculating or fibbing, never go off the record during an interview. While almost all reporters will respect off the record comments, some won’t. Also, you may convey information off the record that the reporter can verify using other sources. The reporter might come back and bite you with the information, verified by a third party, in the story.

In short, say what you know or what you are allowed to say. But don’t speculate or fudge the facts. At the same time, you don’t want to say “no comment” or otherwise appear to dodge difficult questions, as we shall see.

Act Like A Broken Record

If reporters persist with a particular line of negative questioning, persist with what you are allowed to say, as in the scenario below.

Reporter: “We understand your chief financial officer is currently under investigation by the Securities Exchange Commission for embezzlement that has cost the company over a million dollars.”

Let's say that your CFO is under investigation by the Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) and you know it, but nothing has been proven. He has not been charged and the SEC has not announced the details of the investigation. Should you say:

1. No comment.
2. Yes.
3. My gosh, really? Who told you that?
4. No.
5. I have no knowledge of that.
6. I have no knowledge of that, but it would surprise me. He's a great guy.
7. I have no knowledge of that, but it wouldn't surprise me. He's a real weasel.
8. I'm not in a position to speculate on unsubstantiated rumors.
9. Our company is conducting business as usual and will continue to do so, unless otherwise directed by the SEC.
10. Our company does not comment on rumors in the press.

I suspect you would agree that the choice seems to be between 8, 9, or 10—even if you feel like saying number 6 or you didn't know anything about it and want to say 3. In short, it's a difficult question to answer, but here is my take on it.

Answer 8 implies you are familiar with the rumors but are calling them "unsubstantiated." Answer 9 implies that the SEC is investigating but has not asked you to take any action. Answer 10 is the truth. You don't comment on rumors in the press. As much as you might want to say more, by law and by company policy you are not able to say more.

It could be that a reporter has a source at the SEC and follows up with, "My source at the SEC says your CFO is under investigation."

Act like a broken record and simply reply with this: "We don't comment on rumors about our company."

The reporter might present the SEC investigation as a fact, and ask you another question based on that: "How are you conducting business at your company now that the SEC is investigating your CFO?"

Act like a broken record and reply with this: "We don't comment on rumors about our company, but I can tell you that it's business as usual."

Hold The Line, To A Point

For how long do you hold the line? This is something you need to determine as a company. There are most likely legal implications to what you can and cannot say. Understand them and stick to the agreed upon message, but make sure the agreed upon message makes sense, and prepare the messages you want to convey once the SEC makes public its investigation.

At that point, you do not want to stonewall the media. In other words, you want to acknowledge the truth, and the implications of the truth. You want to clear the air as quickly and as honestly as possible, but you still want to say only what you can and should say. And you want to start to look forward, even as reporters want to look back. For instance, once it's clear your CFO has been charge, a reporter will ask, "How did this happen?"

You can speculate or say what you believed happened, but what good will that do your company? Instead, you might say something like this:

"The case is under investigation by the SEC and our auditors are reviewing all systems to ensure a situation like this will not happen again."

Of course your exact wording depends on the circumstances—how much is known and can legally be revealed, how much is protected by privacy and legal implications, and how much you are doing to rectify the situation.

Ideally, when a crisis occurs, you want to do four things:

- Acknowledge
- Accept
- Apologize
- Act

You want to acknowledge the reality of the situation, accept blame (you may want to accept appropriate blame, but don't deflect or underplay your role) and apologize. Expect to do this repeatedly, depending on the nature and severity of the crisis. Once you have gone through the first three steps, you want to tell people what you are doing (have already done) to correct or rectify the situation and to ensure it will not happen again. Only then can you turn the page and start to move on.

By way of an example, I wrote a business-writing book, *Harness The Business Writing Process*. It was proofread by three people. The manuscript then went to a designer who made a number of formatting errors, many of which were not caught or corrected before the book went to print. I discovered the errors after a short run of books had been printed. I was mortified and wanted to bury my head in the sand.

Instead, I took a deep breath and posted this note on website, blog and Facebook pages used to promote the book:

Due to a manuscript approval process misunderstanding, there are a number of technical errors in my business-writing book, *Harness The Business Writing Process*. This is rather embarrassing for any book—let alone a business-writing book. I should have had a process in place to ensure this problem did not occur. The errors do not negate the content of the book, but I am sorry they were made. They will be fixed in the next edition of the book.

In other words, I acknowledged the problem, accepted responsibility, and apologized. Then I took action—fixed the errors and republished the book. While correcting the errors I discouraged people from ordering hard copies of the book and offered anyone who ordered a PDF copy a free PDF of the next edition.

The Money Question

In most instances, however, you will not be managing a crisis. Instead, you will be dealing with reporters who are following up on media releases sent out by your company to promote something new or exciting. With that in mind, answer the questions and weave in your key messages.

There may be some questions, however, that pertain to your business that you would prefer not to answer. For instance, *the money question*. You may be a privately held company that does not release revenue or profit and loss figures, but the journalist may ask you about money: “What was your company’s revenue last year?”

You could say “no comment” but where does that get you? How does that help you or the journalist? You can reply with an extended “no comment” comment, such as:

“We are a privately-held company and we do not release annual revenue figures.”

Again, what good does that do? At the same time, if it is your corporate policy not to reveal revenue figures, then you don’t have to reveal them. But you can answer that question in a more positive and constructive manner. For instance:

“While I am not able to give you specific figures, I can tell you that we are profitable.”

Here are a couple of more interesting variations:

“I’m not able to give you specific figures because we are a privately-held company. However, we are profitable and revenue has increased by double-digits each of the last three years.”

“I’m not able to give you specific revenue figures but I can tell you that we have landed four significant contracts this quarter and are exceeding our projected growth expectations.”

“I’m not able to give you specific figures because we are a privately-held company, but we are meeting projections and are particularly excited about prospects for next year because there has been increased demand in the manufacturing sector for our widgets.”

You are not dodging the question. You are saying what you *can* say by answering the question as best you can and by shining a positive light on your company. In fact, you are probably giving the reporter a more interesting answer than “we made \$x last year” would be.

That is your job: to answer questions as best you can while saying informative and interesting things about your company. It is what you should be doing throughout the interview.

Embellish With Anecdotes

Part of your goal when being interviewed is to give the reporter pertinent and colorful information so he or she will interview you in the future, when writing other articles that pertain to your industry or company.

If you embellish your answers with anecdotes, you can add “color” (as reporters describe interesting tid-bits) to the interview. For instance, in order to convey how some people are paranoid of journalists, I often tell the story about the business owner who answered “no comment” and “I don’t have that information” to almost every question he was asked by a reporter. The interview was about a recent business success; however, with “no comment” as the only answer, the reporter could not write the article.

When telling my “no comment” anecdote, I do not use the person’s name. If you have case studies that illuminate your message, obtain permission to use the client’s name when talking to the media because using names gives your anecdote greater credibility. For instance, I look for opportunities to mention that Infinity Communications (www.infinity-pr.com) hires me to conduct media training for all it’s clients because the company wants its clients to shine when being interviewed by reporters.

While stories often profile companies—what they are doing, how they are doing it or why—the person being interviewed might be closely associated with the mission of the company and can often work personal anecdote (“color”) into an interview.

The president of Nanny Inc., a company that matches nannies with parents, was surprised when asked why she started her business. She mumbled something about “filling a need by helping parents having a hard time finding nannies,” which made it seem like she start the business to turn the problem into a moneymaking opportunity. Now let’s face it, most businesses try to make money by solving problems, but that’s not the impression you want to convey to the media.

The president, a busy mother, missed an opportunity to use a personal anecdote to demonstrate that she understood how difficult it could be for busy parents to find good nannies. So, in response to, “Why did you start you nanny business?” here is the answer we crafted during a media training session:

“I was a working mother looking for a nanny to help with my three children and found that I had very limited options. To find a nanny that I had confidence in was a complex process. I realized that parents in need of childcare could use help finding trained nannies so I established Nanny Inc. to focus on the recruitment, training, and placement of nannies.”

The tone is personal and empathetic, two things parents might want in someone who is helping them find a nanny. And notice the key message at the end of the answer: “the recruitment, training, and placement of nannies.”

Unless you are participating in a live interview, there is no guarantee that what you say will be used in whole or in part; however, if you don't say it, there is a guarantee that the information you want to convey will not be used. So know what you want to say, and say it.

Embellish With Stats

If it makes sense, embellish your key messages with relevant statistics to add credibility to your message. Do some homework about your industry so you have some interesting and relevant statistics ready to use when appropriate. And if you use stats, include the source so the reporter can confirm the information.

For instance, if a journalist asks me how important media relations is to business. I would say, “Very important. In fact, public relations generates 28% of sales inquiries, second only to advertising at 38%, according to a study by Inquiry Handling Services in California.”

If the journalist doesn't ask about the importance of media relations, I weave that statistic into another answer because I want my target audience to read it.

What if the journalist is concluding the interview and I haven't worked my stats into an answer? It's time for me to ask a question: “By the way, I have some stats that support the importance of media relations. Are you interested?” In most cases, the reporter will say yes and I then deliver my 15-second stats story. Again, there is no guarantee that the journalist will use the information, but if I had not presented it, there is a guarantee that the information would not be used, or may come from another source.

Don't Be Negative. Stay Positive!

Notice how the two phrases above say the same thing. The first says it in a negative manner—“*don't* be negative.” The second is positive. Some reporters like to ask negative questions. They often save them for the end of interviews when you are feeling relaxed because you think you have bonded with the reporter who has chuckled at a few of your witticisms.

Don't reply in a negative manner to negative questions. Don't even repeat the negative question. And if you don't like the negative implications, don't become confrontational. Or, to put it more positively: Reply in a positive manner. Reply using positive statements rather than repeating the negative question. Stay calm.

Say, for instance, you are the president of Organic Pet Food Inc., an organic gourmet pet food manufacturer. After what feels like a positive interview, the reporter asks, “Considering the state of hunger in the world, isn't the production of pet food—organic or otherwise—a waste, perhaps even a crime?”

Your instinct might be to say:

“No, making pet food is not a waste or a crime. It’s perfectly legal and moral. It’s not like cigarette manufacturing.”

If you say that, you repeat the negative phrasing (“a waste or a crime”), sound defensive, and associate your product with one that has negative connotations (“cigarette manufacturing”). Your job is to be positive about your company and product when replying. With that in mind, you also wouldn’t say:

“I guess you don’t own a dog or a cat so you don’t understand. I can’t save all the hungry people of the world. They’re not my problem.”

Do you see how the reply is negative, defensive, and personal? At the same time, does it say anything positive about your company or product? In addition, reporters often quote the negative things people say, without mentioning how they antagonized interviewees into saying them. Look at the potential headline: “Hungry people not my problem, says pet food manufacturer!” That may be true—you can’t solve world hunger. But is that the image you want associated with your business?

As I’ve said, *you’re only as good as your worse quote*.

I’d suggest that it is possible to answer confrontational questions in a positive manner, while staying focused on key business messages. The president of Organic Pet Food could say something like this:

“People become close to their pets. They want them to live healthy lives. Organic Pet Food produces food that helps dogs and cats live long, healthy lives—at the cost of regular pet food.”

Notice how we have not repeated the negative message and have not escalated the situation. We have presented the key facts in a calm, rational manner.

If the reporter persists in the negative line of questioning, you persist in your positive line of answering. Repetition is your friend. In other words, if you have no reason for addressing world hunger, then don’t make it an issue. But if the reporter persists, you may also want to appear empathetic to the issue by saying something like:

“That’s a huge issue, one that we’d all like to see solved. At the same time, people become close to their pets and want them to live healthy lives. Organic Pet Food produces food that helps dogs and cats live long, healthy lives.”

If your company has donated to a food bank or some other charity, you might want to weave that in:

“People become close to their pets. They want them to live healthy lives. Organic Pet Food produces food that helps dogs and cats live long, healthy lives. We also try to be solid corporate citizens and contribute funds to the local food bank each year. It’s our way of giving back to the community.”

That is a positive answer. It is not defensive or personal and it weaves in your key messages.

In a similar vein, a PR representative of a film company asked me how to handle questions about negative reviews for a film her company had just released. The film was targeted at a young teen audience and, like many such films, received negative reviews from mainstream media reviewers. I told her that she had several options when asked about the reviews by entertainment reporters.

She could react negatively or defensively:

“Reviewers don’t understand movies like this. They slag them all.”

She could acknowledge the negative reviews:

“Yes, the reviews were brutal. But it’s all subjective, isn’t it?”

Or she could answer with a positive message while weaving in part of her key message—all without repeating the negative message:

“Our target audience, kids from 12 to 16, love the movie. They are writing glowing reviews about <Name of Film> on Facebook and Twitter. They particularly love the gritty action and adventure sequences.”

The above answer doesn’t acknowledge the negative reviews. Instead, it weaves in the target audience, positive personal reviews, and some of the more exciting aspects of the movie.

Relax, Stay Calm

I once conducted media interview training for someone who sold retirement and investment properties in a Central American country. Around the time of the training, two Canadians were killed in a hotel in Mexico. The deaths were particularly gruesome and so when conducting the training, which includes mock interviews, I asked the following question: “With the recent killings of two Canadians in Mexico, do you think it is safe for people to invest in Central American property?”

The questions must have hit a hot button, because the interviewee stood up and expounded loudly, “Those people were not killed by Mexicans. They were killed by Canadians. It was a mob hit, but the media is not telling the true story.”

I tape mock interviews so I can replay them and offer constructive feedback. When we played back the tape, the interviewee got to see himself leap up (instead of his face on camera, all we saw was his crotch) and heard himself shouting a tad irrationally.

Even if he had the facts correct, I would suggest that the answer he gave was not the answer that should have been given. To his credit, when he saw and heard himself on tape, he agreed with the assessment, and we formulated positive answers to questions about safety and security in Central American countries.

In short, when it comes to answering questions from journalists, you have options. You don’t control the questions, but you do control your answers.

Practice, Practice, Practice

After you develop your key messages and anecdotes, practice, practice, practice. If possible, have someone conduct a mock interview and record or videotape your replies. Although it can be disconcerting to see yourself on tape, the best time to feel nervous is while you are rehearsing.

You may still have butterflies before the interview, but that's normal. When it comes to interviews, I'd rather be *prepared* and nervous than *unprepared* and nervous! One way to prepare yourself is to read the sections below—*Tips for Interview Success* and *Orientation for Doing Live TV*.

Tips For Interview Success

Following these tips will help make your interview a success:

- When a reporter calls to set up an interview, respond promptly because every interaction has potential
- Prepare and write down your key message points; review them before each interview
- Anticipate questions (negative and positive) and be prepared to answer both; stay positive
- Take the initiative; know and tell your story
- Answer the questions, if you are authorized to do so, and have the knowledge to do so
- Say it like you mean it; enthusiasm is contagious
- Scale your responses: 30 seconds to a minute at most; expand if asked a follow-up question
- Always assume you are being recorded (or that the camera is always on), even if you haven't been told you are being recorded (or you see the camera light go off)
- "Off the record" isn't off the record; don't go "off the record" even if asked to do so
- Never lie. Never guess; if you don't know the answer, don't fake it—offer to find out
- Concentrate on listening; identify the most pertinent point in a question and answer it while weaving in a key message
- Clarify questions if need be
- Avoid "broken record" repetition unless managing a crisis, dealing with a hostile reporter, or responding to a negative line of questioning

Remember: The reporter controls the questions; you control your answers. Every question is an opportunity *to tell your story*.

Orientation For Doing TV

Most reporters will interview you over the phone or in person. Occasionally, you might find yourself interviewed on TV. Other than preparing your key messages, here are some hints and tips to make your TV interview a success.

Clothing

Keep your clothing fairly neutral—clean lines, no large busy patterns. Avoid white unless you are wearing a jacket or sweater and only the collar is showing.

Wear something that is comfortable and not restricting. Nothing loose or stringy that will dangle in your work or catch on an edge. Avoid expensive silks blouses or shirts, as they may want to pin a microphone to your shirt.

No one sees your feet unless you are modeling shoes. Wear comfortable shoes, or casual business attire. Be sure to wear shoes that will not catch on rugs or compromise your balance.

Vocal Preparation

If you are showering that morning, it's an excellent place to hum to open and relax your throat. This will also help break up morning phlegm. Nerves can make your voice go up in ways you never imagined, so relaxing your throat is very helpful.

Don't drink milk or eat dairy products the day of the interview. Dairy can make you phlegmy.

What To Expect Upon Arrival

Arrive at security. Give the name of your contact (usually known as the producer but sometimes referred to as the *guest wrangler*).

You will be escorted to a lounge/greenroom and all will be explained to you. Ask questions if you have any.

If you are working in a kitchen set, or demonstrating a task, ask your 'liaison' if you can be taken there before the show. Orient yourself. Look around at what may distract you and make sure you have what you need, where you need it.

In The Greenroom

Sometimes there will be food or coffee for guests in the greenroom. However:

- Don't eat or eat very little. If you are nervous, it can make you uncomfortable.
- Drink a little, but not enough to worry about having to use the bathroom at the last minute. Don't eat anything with poppy seeds; check your teeth before you go on.
- Use the time before the show to calm yourself, orient yourself, warm your voice with a little low quiet humming.

On Set

There will be a very brightly lit set with the lights that will make you feel like a deer in headlights. Focus on the host, and ground yourself with the task. Don't worry about the audience. If you hear the audience, you can react. Look up and smile if you'd like, but you need not think about them much. Take in the environment and then forget about it.

If you have the opportunity, talk to the host prior to taping. Doing this can help break the ice and make the interview feel more natural. However, if the host is busy, just sit still and relax. Find out the host's first name and use it when talking to him or her.

If you have a product to demonstrate, ask the producer or host when you arrive where you should keep it. If it's a complex product or demonstration, try to conduct a dry run before taping begins and find out where you should place it when on camera so people can see it. The host or producer help you set it up. Once the segment begins, let the host tell you when to begin your demonstration.

Sometimes during the interview, the host might cut you off. Don't take that personally or let that disorient you. The host is conscious of time and needs to keep the show moving forward.

Remember your key messages and keep them to short, simple sound bites.

The Cameras

There will likely be three or more cameras moving around. You don't have to be concerned about camera positions. Think of cameras and the audience as a third person in a conversation and open your shoulders in that direction just enough to include them. You do not need look at them. Let them look at you.

The camera that is live (or on) will sometimes have a red light lit on the front or on top. Don't look for it or worry about it. The director will choose the best shot.

When you are done, there may be applause. You can acknowledge that with a slight bow or nod of the head. Then smile and thank the host for inviting you. .

At no point should you fool around or say anything untoward—anything you would not want to hear on air—even if the camera lights are off. You may think that the camera has stopped taping, but it may still be on. If you say something after the segment has ended and it's caught on tape, it might be edited into the show.

All the previous information may seem obvious, but when you are in a new environment and feel performance pressure, the simplest things, like your name, may go out of your head. So keep in mind that you were invited to the show because you are the most interesting, knowledgeable person in the room.

Makeup and Hair

Men and women should arrive with their hair styled as a stylist may not be assigned to you for a short interview. However, you may get a little attention from hair and makeup people. Be prepared to have someone do a quick touch-up. You might even ask for a little hairspray if you think you need it. But also bring a brush in case you are left to look in a mirror and take care of your own hair.

Someone from makeup might want to apply a little face powder. Let them apply it. The stage lights will be hot during your interview, and may make you sweat a bit. These lights reflect more than natural light and will make you look greasy if you don't use powder. Even if you are being interviewed outside during the day with no artificial lights, apply (or let the make up artist apply) a little face powder to cut the shine.

Women should not use more makeup than you would use for a business meeting. When on TV, the natural 'you' is best.

Be confident and comfortable.

Throw those shoulders back, smile, and enjoy the attention.

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Paul Lima (www.paullima.com) is a freelance writer, media interview trainer, and author of several business writing books, including *How to Write Media Releases to promote your business, organization, or event*.

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