



Be Our Voice: The Interview

1. DEVELOPING YOUR MESSAGEⁱ

Developing your message is about positioning your issue in the context of the audience's priorities, interests, and beliefs. Always go into a media interview with your messages clearly defined and with three key points you want to make, regardless of the questions the reporter might ask.

Consider the following points as a guide to creating an effective message. A powerful message is:

- **CLEAR.** Your message must be easily understood using words that can be repeated and internalized. Limit your use of technical and medical jargon. Use the same language with your audience that you might use with the children and families you work with.
- **CONCISE.** Most listeners will have a short attention span, so your message must be on point. Stay focused on your message, making two or three supporting points. Every word matters, so choose wisely.
- **MEMORABLE.** Think about which aspect of your message will capture people's attention, then practice your message on friends or members of your advocacy team to strengthen its impact.
- **PERSUASIVE.** Your message must convince people that your advocacy issue is something they can support. Use personal stories and examples to paint a picture that others can relate to.
- **REPETITIVE.** It will take time for your message to sink in. The average person needs to hear a message six or seven times for it to stick, so repeat, repeat, repeat.

GETTING TO KNOW THE REPORTERS

It is important to get to know the reporters who cover your issue. Advocates often want to start with major national newspapers and news stations, but smaller, local outlets can have a larger impact.

Once you've identified likely media outlets, look for articles and broadcasts on your topic, and note the name of the reporters covering the story. Study their articles, see how they write, and determine if there's a pattern to their coverage. Establish a relationship and try to become a source for their stories. Reporters need sources, and becoming one will put you in a position of power. Remember, as a Healthcare Professional, your voice lends credibility to the issue.

You can open the door to favorable press coverage by writing a letter introducing yourself as a resource for certain childhood obesity issues. A good way to introduce yourself is to follow up on an article or television segment that catches your attention. Thank the reporter or editor for featuring your story and give any additional information you think might interest them. If you make yourself available for quotes and further information, you will likely be added to the reporter's list of experts to call. Be sure to give reporters all your contact information, and always return their calls promptly.

DELIVERING YOUR MESSAGEⁱⁱ

Once you are in the door, remember these basic rules to ensure that your message is accurately reflected in the story, editorial, column, or interview you are creating:



- **BE POSITIVE.** Always inject hope and solutions into your stories and descriptions of your advocacy issue. You are selling ideas designed to inspire change and help children and families, not make people feel worse.
- **PUT A FACE ON THE NUMBERS.** Well used numbers can support your message, and good stories can put a face on these numbers.
- **KEEP IT LOCAL.** People are more likely to pay attention to news and communications that affect them personally or hit close to home. Keep your message local by showing how your issue affects your neighborhood, community, city, or state.
- **CONNECT THE MESSAGE TO THE ISSUE.** Be sure your message highlights solutions. Explicitly state the change you are seeking and explain why that change matters to children in your community or state.
- **LEAVE A TAKEAWAY.** If you are meeting with a reporter, bring a handout that captures your message and key points that you can leave behind.
- **BE PROACTIVE.** Reaching out to the media through a press release or other prepared statement makes you the expert and allows you to control the messages. A supportive article in a newspaper brings invaluable third-party credibility to your issue.
- **INVITE OTHERS TO GET INVOLVED.** A compelling message will encourage people to act. When delivering your message, always include an invitation for others to get involved, along with information on how they can do so.

STICKING TO YOUR MESSAGE

Preparing for an interview will help you control it. Choose a few main points to get your message across as briefly as possible, and be ready to answer tough questions you may be asked. When talking, be conversational and state your message simply. Always tell the truth; if you don't know an answer, just say so. Provide information as if the reporter doesn't know anything about the issue. Turn negatives into positives; even if the questions themselves are hostile, be sure to keep your answers upbeat. Always answer the reporter's questions briefly and then go back to stating the main points of your message.

TRACKING STORY OPPORTUNITIES

Be on the lookout for newspapers that accept guest editorials or op-eds. Write some advocacy pieces and keep them on hand for short deadlines. Keep track of TV stations, programs, and "beat" reporters who cover health-related topics and get in contact with them. Ask them to cover your issue and suggest story angles.

"Talk radio" often covers health topics. Listen to shows covering your issue and then write or call the show. You can contact the station and offer yourself as an expert. If you're part of a larger campaign, remember that radio stations usually have free time allotted for pre-recorded Public Service Announcements (PSAs).



MAKING THE PITCH

Media outlets are important forums for debate and public dialogue, but they are also businesses and need to attract an audience. How you approach the media with a story will make a big difference in your advocacy. Here is a quick presentation of what media outlets want to hear from you, and what gets a reporter’s attention.

What the Media Are Looking for in Advocates’ Communications

The Media		Reporters	
Like	Dislike	Like	Dislike
Broadly appealing stories	Old or redundant stories that they’ve already covered	Courtesy and clear language	Rudeness
Controversial issues	Persistence after a story has been rejected	Human interest stories, controversy and snappy sound bites	Being called repeatedly when on a deadline
Accurate information and expert sources (like you)	Inaccuracies and jargon	Expert sources (like you)	Inaccurate data
Novel issues and approaches	Stories that have been covered by their competitors	Timely responses to their queries	Slow response to a request

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- **KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THE INTERVIEW IS ABOUT.** The reporter, radio show producer, or TV station staff should give you some guidance on the focus of the interview. If they don’t, ask. You do not want to be surprised by any questions. If you are not entirely familiar with the interview topic, gather information from a trusted source and come prepared with several key talking points.
- **KNOW THE FORMAT.** Interviews vary. Some are long, some are short; some are one-on-one chats, others are group discussions; and some interviewers are more argumentative than others. Ask about the format of your interview and how much time you will have to speak on your issue. A call-in interview may allow more time than a formatted television “spot,” which can run for 30 to 60 seconds or up to two or three minutes in length.
- **SEND SOME BACKGROUND MATERIALS** in advance of the interview. This can help reporters with their research—and steer them to the issues you want to explore.
- **BE PUNCTUAL AND FLEXIBLE.** Reporters work on deadlines, radio shows start on time, and TV spots are non-negotiable. If you must be late, call your media contact as soon as possible and offer to reschedule. Conversely, if the interviewer must reschedule, be gracious about it. A flexible attitude will earn points with the interviewer and help you stay positive about the interview.



- **BE CONFIDENT AND UPBEAT.** Remember that you are the expert! Keep control of the interview by showing interest in the questions, answering with enthusiasm, and accepting surprises calmly. The more proactive and energetic you sound, the more people you will win over to your cause.
- **HAVE A BACKUP PLAN.** As a Healthcare Professional, you know that emergencies sometimes arise. If on the day of the interview you unexpectedly cannot attend, have a fellow advocate on standby to fill in for you. This way, the reporter won't have to scramble for a new source, and you will know that an equally qualified voice will be presenting your advocacy issue.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- **HAVE ONE CENTRAL ASSERTION** you will make at least once before the end of the interview. Think of it as your Single Overriding Communications Objective (SOCO).
- **KEEP YOUR SOCO IN MIND** and plan different ways you can get it across. Perhaps it fits in a personal story, or you have a powerful statistic to quote. Your SOCO gives you an agenda and some control over the content of the interview. It will also help you appear knowledgeable, focused, and organized.
- **PRACTICE "BRIDGING" QUESTIONS** to highlight what you think is important. Bridging means building a smooth transition from a question you don't want to answer to a question you do want to answer. If you want to discuss the positive aspects of a program but a reporter asks you about its faults, just smile and point out that the program has benefits that far outweigh the costs. Discuss those benefits briefly and stick to your SOCO.
- **LEAVE THE JARGON IN THE OFFICE.** Most people are unfamiliar with technical medical terminology. Spell out acronyms and use common terms for medical conditions. Speak as simply as you can to assure that your message is understood.
- **IF IN DOUBT, PAUSE BEFORE RESPONDING**, or ask for clarification, whenever needed. It is best to understand the question. If you are not sure, say, "I want to make sure I understand your question, could you repeat (or rephrase) that?" The query buys you time and may help to clarify the line of questioning.

Three Big Interview Don'ts

We've all seen it happen. An overeager or inexperienced advocate goes astray in an interview, falling victim to a question designed to lead the interview away from the prepared message. Much damage can result from failing to heed these three don'ts.

- **DON'T SPECULATE.** Reporters and interviewers often begin questions with, "Hypothetically, ..." This is dangerous territory. Simply state that you do not wish to speculate, and then provide facts on the topic raised in the question.
- **DON'T GO "OFF THE RECORD."** All interactions with interviewers and reporters can wind up in the newspaper or on TV. Always choose your words carefully. Don't repeat negative statements if you disagree with them because these can easily be edited to become "your" quote or to make you sound defensive. Instead, simply state what you want to say.
- **DON'T SAY "NO COMMENT."** It just sounds like you are trying to hide something. Simply say, "I'm sorry I don't have that information with me at the moment, but I will get back to you." (This response does not commit you to actually answering the question later, only to closing the loop.)

SPECIAL ADVICE FOR RADIO AND TV SPOTS

- **BE SUCCINCT.** Remember to KISS—Keep It Short and Simple. Your responses to questions should be 20 seconds or shorter. Speak clearly and use simple language. Practice key messages ahead of time and they will sound better. This is important because your key messages may be picked up after the interview to be used as sound bites to “tease” the interview before it is aired or to give a short synopsis of what was said for replay purposes. Make sure the key message is to the point and clearly states your purpose.
- **LOOK AT THE INTERVIEWER,** not at the camera or broadcast equipment. You will look and feel more conversational. Speaking in a relaxed a tone, as you would with a colleague, will keep you from looking or sounding nervous (even if you are).
- **CHOOSE YOUR TV WARDROBE CAREFULLY.** Don’t wear patterns, especially stripes. If you are a clinician, wear your white coat; it will highlight your medical credentials for viewers. Men should wear a dark suit and a blue shirt; women should avoid all-black or all-white outfits. Avoid wearing anything shiny that can catch the light. If you are unsure about your choice, ask the camera operator or interviewer if what you are wearing will read well on video. Also avoid noisy jewelry that could be picked up on audio, and don’t forget to silence your cell phone.
- **DO NOT REFER TO NOTES OR OTHER PAPERS ON CAMERA.** The rustling is distracting and it will make you appear nervous. Memorize a few figures and stick to those wherever possible.

How to Redirect an Interview

“Pivoting” and “bridging” are ways to redirect the flow of an interview. Pivoting turns a question aside, while bridging leads to a new one. If the direction of a question is heading down a road you would rather not travel, try some of the following phrases to pivot or bridge to get back on track.

- *In my personal experience, what happened was ...*
- *That’s an interesting question, let me remind you ...*
- *What’s important to remember is ...*
- *What I think your readers would like to know is ...*
- *Before we finish that topic, let me add ...*
- *That’s a good point, but I think your readers/viewers/audience would be interested in knowing that ...*
- *Let me give you some background information ...*
- *Let’s take a closer look at ...*
- *That’s an important point because ...*
- *Now that we’ve covered that issue, let’s move on to ...*

ⁱ American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). *AAP Advocacy Guide: Pointing you in the right direction to become an effective advocate*. 2009. Available at: www.aap.org/moc/advocacyguide, Pg. 108-109



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