Preparing for an Interview

- Prepare and practice your message points. Your goals are to control the interview as much as possible and ensure that your message points are communicated. Anticipate difficult questions and how you will answer them in a way that brings you back on message.

- Select no more than three key message points you want to communicate to the audience and focus on getting those points across during the interview.

- Know your interviewer. If possible, review other stories the reporter has done. Familiarize yourself with the editorial stance of the TV or radio station or publication.

- Know your audience. Each publication, newspaper, television or radio station has different audiences and needs.

- Never lie, guess or speculate. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to get back to the reporter with the necessary information in a timely fashion.

- Ask about the details of the interview beforehand, including the estimated length of the interview, the range of topics to be covered, and when the reporter's story will run.

- Do not say anything "off the record." Expect that anything you tell a reporter could be attributed to you in the published story.

- Be relaxed and cordial without being silly or flippant.

- Use short and succinct sentences in your answers, but avoid using slang, jargon or acronyms.

- Do not let a reporter put words in your mouth. Give the answer to the reporter's question in your own words.

- Use concrete, not abstract words. Use anecdotes and examples to make your point.

- Support your statements with facts, figures or quotes from experts.

- Do not argue or attack the interviewer or the media in general—it will detract from your message and work against you. Be honest, cooperative and friendly—even on a story you do not wish to publicize.

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- Do not underestimate or overestimate the reporter's skills—always provide the facts and documentation necessary to tell the story you want to tell. Offer to provide more detail or background as necessary.

- Never say, "no comment." Either answer the question or explain why you can't.

Taking a Reporter's Call

Basics:

1. Begin the call on the right foot. Keep in mind that reporters are human, too.

2. Be polite, honest and helpful.

3. Be professional and friendly.

Think of the call as a two-step process:

1. Interview the reporter:

- Find out the deadline.
- Establish the purpose of the call—what information is the reporter looking for?
- Get the correct spelling of the reporter's name, his or her phone number and the media organization he or she represents.
- Find out who else the reporter is talking to for the story.
- Clearly establish the limits of your authority—if you are not authorized to be quoted on behalf of your department, tell the reporter that and identify the correct spokesperson.
- If you are the correct person to be interviewed and you are not feeling prepared to answer the reporter's questions at this time, set up a time to call the reporter back for the interview. If the reporter is on an immediate deadline, it's appropriate for you to say that you need five minutes to organize yourself and promise to call the reporter right back.

2. Call back:

- Honor your commitment—call when you said you would.
- If you are not the best spokesperson, find out who is, brief that person and have him or her call back with you.
- Have all the information you need on hand and in front of you when you call back. If the reporter asks questions that you cannot answer, promise to find out the answers and call back with the information.

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What to Wear on Television

1. Wear a suit or professional outfit that is appropriate for your organization. Do not dress in something that you are uncomfortable wearing and moving in.

- For persons of color, avoid stark white, black and red (if you are going to be in a studio, though, red is fine). Blue is good, along with forest green and magenta.

- For persons with light skin, avoid wearing light colors and white. Neutral colors of blue, gray, brown and khaki are better than black.

2. Avoid wearing anything striped, bright plaid, or shiny, which makes nearly all cameras buzz and distracts the viewer.

3. If possible, keep an extra suit, jacket or solid-color shirt in your office so you are always ready for an interview. Women might keep a scarf handy to use for making an everyday outfit look more polished.

4. Wear dark shoes, white or light colors draw unnecessary attention to your feet.

5. Do not wear light-catching or jangling jewelry, as it will be distracting on camera.

6. Women should wear regular makeup in natural tones. Use a neutral face powder to get rid of the shine. Lip liner can give more definition to your lips and softer shades of lipstick are typically better than bright red.

7. Men should have a clean-shaved or well-groomed look.

8. It's totally acceptable to ask the photographer or camera crew if your appearance is okay. They may suggest adjusting your hair or smoothing your clothing; it's better for them to provide feedback than to hear it from people who see the interview later.

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