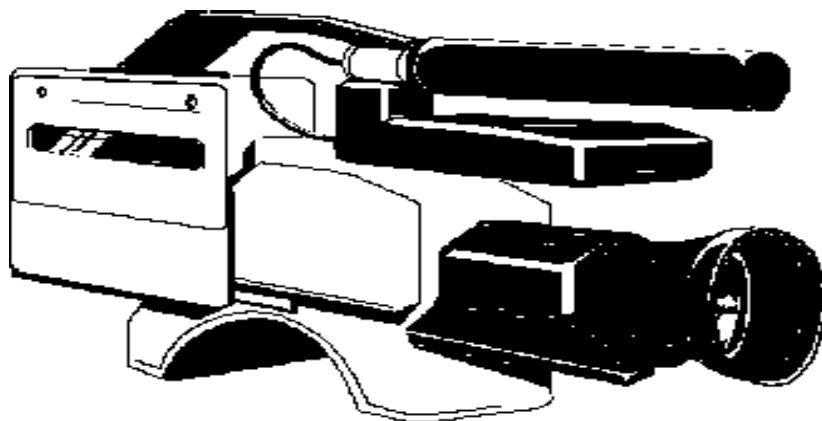


Media-Safe: News, Media Relations & Interview Training



Developed & Presented by:

Schaefer Communications, LLC
Susan Schaefer, APR

Introduction

To enjoy successful media interviews, whether in print or broadcast, take the time to better understand the reporters, editors, interviewers, and producers who keep it going. This booklet, in conjunction with the workshop, provides essential guidelines and helpful tips to manage your media relations.

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Workshop Facilitator

Susan Schaefer, APR

Susan Schaefer, APR, president, Schaefer Communications, has more than 25 years of public relations, public affairs, journalistic, and academic experience.

Susan taught English for ten years as an adjunct professor at Temple University, Philadelphia Community College, Camden County College, Moore College of Art, Spring Garden College and LaRoche College. She spent a year teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) for the Centro Colombo-Americano in Bogotá, Colombia. Susan has devised and implemented executive training programs for such organizations as Browning-Ferris Industries (BFI), COMCAST Sound Communications, Bell Atlantic, Honeywell, ECOLAB, and the Minneapolis Institute of Legal Education, to name a few. In recent years she facilitated media and interview training sessions with Cuningham Group Architects, the Council of Consulting Engineers, Edward Kraemer & Sons' Burnsville Sanitary Landfill, and Ellerbe Becket Architects.

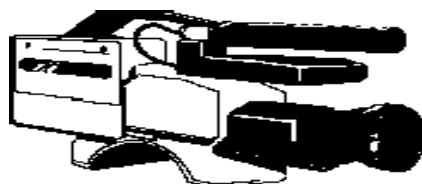
As a journalist, Susan wrote for two of Philadelphia's daily newspapers, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Philadelphia Daily News*. She co-founded, published, and edited that city's award-winning alternative community weekly, *The South Street Star*. In addition, Susan has published articles in national magazines and journals.

A former director of public relations for Provident National Bank and founder and chief executive officer of Ingram & Picker Inc., both of Philadelphia, Susan has developed and implemented award-winning programs in employee relations, community relations, media relations, and crisis communications. In 1997, her work on the Minneapolis Riverfront gained her public relations' second highest international award, the coveted Silver Anvil Award of Excellence. The same year she was as conferred Temple University's Diamond Achievement Award in Humanities.

Susan is accredited in public relations, signifying that she has passed the rigorous oral and written exams administered by the PRSA. She has served on PRSA's National Honors and Awards Committee, chaired their International Film and Video competition judging, and is currently the 1995 president-elect for the Minnesota Chapter of PRSA. In 1993 Susan served as Program Chair of the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of

Commerce's Leadership Minneapolis Program. Susan earned her M.A. and B.A. from Temple University. She has earned MIT-Harvard Public Disputes Program certification in "Dealing with an Angry Public," and has completed the Hamline Law School course in Environmental and Public Interest Dispute Resolution.

Part 1: Media Relations: An Introduction



- *Characteristics of News*
- *Understanding and Responding to Different Media Types*
- *Thinking Like a Reporter*
- *Building Blocks of Media Relations*

Characteristics of News

Perhaps the most common mistake in media relations is the failure to consider what makes an event, person, or issue newsworthy. What's important to you or your organization may not be important to a reporter or editor. Conversely, what's important to the media may not always seem like the "whole story" to you or your organization.

Reporters and editors do not have a responsibility to care about the impact of a story on you or your organization. Their job is to present newsworthy information in an interesting way to their readers, viewers, or listeners. Generally, an event, person, or issue becomes newsworthy when it has one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Timeliness:** Did it happen recently?
- **Proximity:** Did it happen nearby?
- **Significance:** Is it important to my audience?
- **Prominence:** Does it involve a well-known person?
- **Conflict:** Does it involve violence, anger, or sharp disagreement?
- **Human Interest:** Is it unusual, strange, humorous, or heartwarming?

Identifying and empathizing with the motivations, concerns, and needs of reporters and editors will enhance your media relations effectiveness!

Understanding and Responding to Different Media Types

Different types of media interpret newsworthiness in slightly different ways. A front-page story in the newspaper might receive only a brief mention on television or radio. Information that's esoteric or irrelevant to a general interest publication can win prominence in a magazine or trade publication.

Don't regard the media as monolithic! Successful media managers tailor their information and approach to the reporter and media outlet they want to reach. Here are some general categories to keep in mind:

Print Media

- Daily newspapers. Daily newspapers usually reach a wide audience, often covering news on a regional, state, national, and international level. Their format allows them to report stories in great detail, and reporters usually work on tight deadlines. At large metropolitan dailies, reporters often work specific "beats," which allows them to develop in-depth knowledge in specific topic areas.
- Weekly newspapers. An important voice in neighborhoods and small communities, weeklies often fill the information gaps left uncovered by the large regional and metropolitan dailies. Oriented more toward feature stories than hard news, they tend to avoid reporting on regional, state, or national issues unless a strong local angle exists. Reporters at weekly newspapers must be generalists, and staff limitations often make weeklies more likely to rely on "canned" information generated from outside sources.
- Magazines, trades & newsletters. An enormous assortment of specialty publications exist. Some are general interest publications, but many are targeted to more specific, sometimes very narrow audiences. They usually provide opportunities for in-depth reporting or unusual story angles. They publish less frequently and usually plan content well in advance of publication, making long-range planning critical in approaching them with story ideas.

Understanding and Responding to Different Media Types

Electronic Media

- *Television.* As is the case with daily newspapers, television stations focus on regional reporting. Unlike newspapers, television news is linear, usually provides less detail and context, and places great emphasis on the visual. Stations face intense competition to provide compelling information that attracts and holds audiences. Television conveys emotion well, and TV reporters are constantly working to capture the personal or “human” dimension of a story. TV reporters in larger metropolitan areas will work beats, but most tend to be generalists ... and usually work on even tighter deadlines than print journalists.
- *Radio.* While the powerful visual appeal of television orients it to a “mass audience,” radio is a more intimate medium ideal for targeting specific audiences. In metropolitan areas, most radio stations (with a few exceptions) program to narrow demographic groups; in smaller communities, programming is usually broader and more diverse. While radio broadcasts attract smaller audiences than television, radio offers a unique one-on-one quality ideal for reaching targeted audiences. Radio reporters face constant deadlines and may prepare many stories in a given day, often revising and updating stories as they acquire fresh information.
- *Alternative Media.* Technology is not only revolutionizing traditional media institutions and opening up new communication opportunities, in some ways it is redefining our concept of mass media. Phenomena such as cable television, fiber-optics, 'zines, online services and the Internet, and the gradual fragmentation of traditional mass media audiences promise to play an increasingly important role in devising media relations strategies. Although this presentation focuses on building relationships with members of the traditional mass media — reporters and editors — don't overlook potential opportunities to apply the tools of the communication revolution to reach your audiences more effectively.

Thinking Like a Reporter

As noted earlier, reporters and editors do not have a responsibility to care whether a story helps or hinders you or your organization. Their job is to present newsworthy information in an interesting way. What are reporters and editors concerned about as they approach the issues important to you or your organization?

- *Telling a good story.* Reporters and editors are concerned about presenting information that is not only accurate, but appealing, provocative, or meaningful to their audience. Your efforts to communicate the many details and fine shades of meaning associated with a given issue can easily be interpreted as obfuscation by a reporter. Put yourself in the position of the reporter and the audience.
 - >>> Emphasize the elements that make the story interesting or important.
- *Skepticism.* Good reporters fear being used by sources. You can expect them to be suspicious of your intentions. They'll ask the same question in different ways to test the consistency of your position. They'll look for information to confirm or contradict your statements, and will contact other sources that offer different or conflicting perspectives.
 - >>> Remain patient and be willing to identify alternative sources of information.
- *The public's right to know.** Because of the role it plays informing the public and shaping public opinion, the press has been called the "Fourth Estate" of government. Many, if not most, members of the media view themselves, quite rightly, as responsible for preserving and maintaining the public's right to information. (*Refers to United States 1st Amendment.)
 - >>> Don't withhold public information and don't try to manipulate reporters.
- *Fairness in reporting.* We often expect news media coverage to be "objective." But reporters and editors are not objective and do not have a responsibility to be objective. Each member of the media brings a different perspective and a different set of biases to a given

story. However, most reporters and editors attempt to be fair by presenting different sides of an issue.

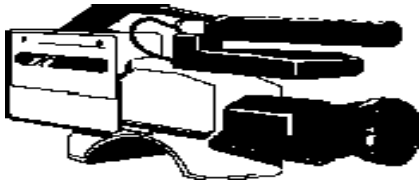
- >>> Learn to accept minor inaccuracies and biases in reporting. Focus on the big picture, not on small details that will be quickly forgotten.

Building Blocks of Media Relations

On the surface, it may seem that effective media relations depends on an appealing personality and clever techniques: a charming demeanor and glibness of speech that wins reporters over with tasty sound bites. Effective interviewing skills are important, but building sound and enduring working relationships with the press depends just as much, if not more, on establishing and maintaining trust. The following factors are critical in building trust:

- *Information.* By consistently providing information that is accurate, useful, and timely, you make the reporter's job easier. The reporter is more likely to communicate your message in the story and more likely to seek you out as a source of information in the future.
- *Access.* By making yourself accessible to reporters and respecting their deadlines, you help reporters produce more accurate and more thorough stories, increase the likelihood of having your message communicated, and express respect for the media's role.
- *Credibility.* The single most important asset in media relations, credibility is earned not by demonstrating knowledge, but by proving you are believable. Your credibility depends on your willingness to tell the truth. Once destroyed, credibility is difficult to restore.

Part 2: News Interviews



- *Responding to a Media Inquiry*
- *Preparing for the Interview*
- *Conducting the Interview*
- *Following Up After the Interview*

Responding to a Media Inquiry

The phone rings. The person on the other end of the line identifies herself as a reporter and asks you to discuss an issue. What to do?

Don't respond prematurely! Ask questions and establish some ground rules. While there are no absolute rules, there are guidelines. The objective is to place yourself on equal terms with the reporter during the interview. Find out:

- Who is conducting the interview ... and on whose behalf?
- What's the story about ... and what information is being sought?
- How long will the interview take ... and where will it be held? If appropriate, select your own location.
- Who else will be interviewed for the story?
- What's the reporter's deadline?

Preparing for the Interview

Good interviews are no accident. You will benefit from planning, preparation, and practice. Even for relatively simple interviews that don't involve complex issues, it's worthwhile to take time to establish a communication objective and define key messages. To prepare for the interview:

- Learn about the reporter and the publication or station where the piece will run. If it's a publication, what's the editorial position? How has the topic been handled in the past? What kind of interview and writing style does the reporter use?
- Select an appropriate spokesperson. The head of an organization or person most skilled in handling interviews is not always the best spokesperson for a given story. Does the reporter want detailed information or a more general sense of an organization's position on an issue?
- Determine a communication objective. What do you and your organization want to accomplish from the interview?
- Define key messages. Write down two, three, or four key points that you want to focus on during the interview.
- Decide what information needs to remain confidential for legal or ethical reasons. Be prepared to explain politely why you can't respond.
- Anticipate actual questions and rehearse responses.

Conducting the Interview

- During the interview, remain clear, concise, calm, and cooperative. If you are adequately prepared, you have little to worry about! Keep the following tips in mind:
- Rely on your key messages ... but don't memorize responses. If you internalize your key messages by preparing well, your answers will flow naturally.
- Present answers in terms of the public's interest, not your's.
- Make sure you understand each question. Ask the reporter to repeat the question if necessary.
- If you don't know, say so ... then offer to find out. Set a clear deadline for getting back to the reporter with the information.
- State conclusions first, then offer supporting information. For any given question, you have 20 seconds or less to get across your point. After that, the listener's attention drops off sharply.
- Use examples or analogies to simplify complex issues.
- Avoid using technical terms, acronyms, and other jargon.
- Don't speculate about information you're unsure of ... or about another person's position on an issue. Explain politely why you can't comment.
- Control the interview ... stick to your points. Inform, but don't lecture. Avoid becoming defensive, abrasive, or condescending.
- Remain relaxed, not argumentative or impatient. Be careful about jokes or sarcasm; they can be misinterpreted.
- Don't say "no comment." (It sounds as if you have something to hide.) If you can't comment, explain why. Conversely, don't say "I'm glad you asked that" or repeat the question back to the interviewer.
- Tell the truth, even if it hurts.

Following Up after the Interview

- Interviews are most effective when regarded as part of a long-term process to establish positive and productive relationships with the media. Keep in touch: become a media resource!
- Reporters are always interested in saving time. When they find a reliable and articulate source, they'll contact that source for information on future stories. What you do after an interview can help win respect and strengthen your relationship with a reporter:
- Provide phone number(s) where you can be reached for last-minute questions or clarifications. If you won't be available, refer the reporter to a reliable and informed colleague.
- Don't ask to review a story before it is published or aired (although some publications, such as trade pubs, sometimes ask interviewees to review stories for accuracy).
- Don't offer information "off the record." A reporter is not bound by it, and may feel an obligation to report the information if it is newsworthy. It also implies that you are treating some reporters differently from others or are trying to manipulate the press. The rule is simple: Don't say anything to a reporter you wouldn't want to see in print!
- Provide well-organized background information. The emphasis is on quality, not quantity. No two-inch-thick reports please (unless the reporter requests it).
- Offer a list of additional resources and contacts, especially the names of persons who disagree with you. Your willingness to direct the reporter to alternative or contrasting viewpoints helps build credibility.

Part 3: Special Techniques



- *A Formula for Answering Questions*
- *Adversarial Interviews ... Handling Tough Questions*
- *On-Camera Techniques*
- *Microphone Techniques*
- *Mental “Cut and Paste”*
- *Getting Back on Topic*
- *Ten Most Common Interview Errors And How To Avoid Them*

A Formula for Answering Questions

Experts in risk communication have devised the following formula for responding to questions and concerns about risk issues. Particularly effective for use in media interviews, the formula underscores the importance of stating your key points early in your response. (Remember, for any given question, listener attention drops off sharply after the first 20 seconds of your answer.)

- **EMPATHIZE:** How would you feel if you were in the questioner’s position?
- **State a CONCLUSION:** Is it safe?
- **Present supporting INFORMATION:** How did you reach your conclusion?
- **Re-state your CONCLUSION.**
- **ACTION:** What are you going to do about the issue in the future?

Adversarial Interviews ... Handling Tough Questions

Watch out for:

- *False assumptions*: A reporter may, either intentionally or unintentionally, construct questions around a misconception or inaccurate perception.
- *Leading questions*: A reporter may attempt to lure you, by implication, to draw a conclusion about a particular issue.
- *Putting words in your mouth*: A reporter may attempt to suggest what your response might be.
- *False dichotomies* (“forced choice” questions): The “either-or” question places you in the position of choosing between two unacceptable positions.
- *Speculative ... hypothetical questions*: The “what if” question asks you to speculate about imaginary or future circumstances.

What to do:

- Keep your composure ... don’t get personal or defensive.
- Don’t repeat false information.
- Set the record straight.
- Stick to facts ... stick to what you know.
- Bridge to key points.

On-Camera Techniques

- Choose a location that projects a positive image. For example, don't sit behind a desk or stand against a blank wall. Find a location that offers a context or symbolism consistent with your message.
- Dress to project an image of competence and credibility: usually a dark-colored suit, skirt, or dress and a light-colored shirt or blouse. Avoid herringbone and heavy jewelry — they can reflect bright television lighting in strange ways.
- Look at the questioner, not the camera (unless you need to make a direct appeal to viewers).
- Maintain erect posture ... if seated, sit on the front half of the chair.
- Keep movements slow and natural. The camera tends to make movements seem faster than they really. Slowing down gestures will make them seem normal on camera.
- Use facial expressions and gestures to emphasize points. Remember, television conveys personality and emotion well, so use those qualities to your best advantage.
- Project a sense of friendliness, warmth, and concern.

Microphone Techniques

- Modulate your voice to emphasize points and maintain listener interest. Be careful not to fall into overly-predictable patterns of intonation ... a monotonous or sing-song effect.
- Articulate for distinctness ... but avoid over-articulation.
- Keep vocal pacing conversational. Visualize your listener as a specific person. For example, imagine you are explaining something to your next-door neighbor.
- Avoid “ahhhhs,” “errrs,” and “y’knows.” These vocal habits result from the fear of “dead air” ... silences that seem unnatural or awkward. Don’t be afraid of a brief silence. When necessary, pause to collect your thoughts and properly frame your statements.
- Develop a microphone technique. Move closer to increase “presence” ... move away when you laugh or raise your voice. Watch an experienced vocalist work a microphone, holding it close for soft passages and moving it away for louder passages.

Mental “Cut and Paste”

Frown says interviewer didn’t understand:

- Cut to: “Here’s the important point ...”
- Paste up: A better explanation

Surprise question, you’re unprepared:

- Cut to: “I don’t know the answer ...”
- Paste up: “But I’ll find out and get back to you by ... (day/time).”

Question doesn’t fit key points:

- Cut to: “What most people ask me ...”
- Paste up: A key point

Question is hypothetical (“What if?”):

- Cut to: “While no one can forecast the future ...”
- Paste up: “We know that (key point) can solve today’s problem of...”

Time is running out:

- Cut to: “The most important point to remember is ...”
- Paste up: Key point

Getting Back on Topic

Use transition statements:

- “Another problem we’ve tackled ...”
- “That reminds me of a case history ...”
- “On the other hand, we’re working ...”

Use “break” statements:

- “That’s not my expertise. However ...”
- “I’ll cover that later, but first ...”
- “Hold that thought and consider this:”

Ten Most Common Interview Errors And How To Avoid Them

1. *Assuming the audience knows as much as you*
>>> Avoid by using brief examples
 - State key point (one sentence)
 - Include quick, simple explanation
 - Offer example or use visual model
 - State benefit, conclusion
 - Avoid jargon, abbreviations
2. *Assuming the audience is stupid*
>>> Avoid by respecting your audience
 - Make key points in plain language
 - Watch reaction of the interviewer
 - Be honest and forthright in approach
 - Try to answer the entire question
3. *Assuming the interviewer is out to “get” you*
>>> Avoid by being very well prepared
 - Research your key points in advance
 - Know how the news media perceives you
 - Stay positive and upbeat
 - State forthright conclusions
4. *Thinking the entire interview will be used*
>>> Avoid by getting key points up front
 - Pre-edit your statements in rehearsal
 - Practice keeping statements to 15 seconds
 - See how medium handles other interviews
 - Think in terms of time/space constraints
5. *Letting the interviewer take your part*
>>> Avoid by taking command of the interview
 - Know your key points backward/forward
 - Ask gently for the chance to respond
 - Be positive and logical in responses
 - Bridge from one key point to the next

Ten Most Common Interview Errors And How To Avoid Them

6. *Getting too personal with the interviewer*
>>> Avoid by sticking to key points
 - Focus on your agenda, not the reporter
 - Speak through the medium, not to it
 - Set the tone and pace and stick to it
 - See yourself as positive yet neutral
7. *Using curt or single word responses*
>>> Avoid by framing responses in sentences
 - Practice beforehand with a tape recorder
 - Saying “no comment” sounds shifty, arrogant
 - Remember the news media has the last word
 - How you say it determines perceptions
8. *Speaking “off-the-record”*
>>> Avoid it!
 - Don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to see in print
 - Know there is nothing to be gained by it
 - Treat all news media the same, up front
 - Say that you don’t do it and stick to it
9. *Trying to fake an answer*
>>> Avoid it by saying that you don’t know
 - Nobody will mind, you can’t know everything
 - Say that you will find out and call them (set the time and stick to it)
 - Call the reporter personally with response
10. *Assuming the reporter is your friend*
>>> Avoid by keeping professional distance
 - Reporter’s first responsibility is to readers, viewers, and listeners
 - Interviewer has job to do ... so do you
 - It’s not fair to put media friendships to test