

Engaging with media

Getting your message across and protecting your reputation.

Fronting a camera or a journalist can be uncomfortable, especially for those who don't do it regularly. Even the most experienced feel slightly anxious before an interview which is totally appropriate given personal and organisational reputations are on the line.

Whether media interaction is part of a co-ordinated engagement plan or required by circumstances, the cost of getting it wrong can reinforce negative perceptions, undermine public confidence, or harm a career.

If what your stakeholders think is important, you have an obligation to understand the media, its needs, and how to engage effectively. Advertising can raise awareness, but news or editorial content is more credible and has a big influence on public opinion.

The good news is there are learned techniques to help make media engagement more effective. Coaching is essential and the most effective communicators are those who prepare, rehearse and refresh regularly.

Understand who you're working with

Journalists are the gatekeepers to your audience so understanding them and how they work is key to your success. In mainstream media, journalists are likely to be young, working under pressure, and without a background in your sector. These journalists are neither experienced, well supervised, well paid, nor interested in your problems. If anyone is to advocate for your organisation, it needs to be you.

It's not about winning ... it's about not losing!

A single interview in mainstream media will not turn the tide of public opinion nor change the views of opponents – it can, however, inform, educate and provide an alternate perspective. If the interview is negative, it may be a case of protecting trust and confidence. Either way, an interview demands you are clear, effective and you communicate professionally and credibly.

Prepare, prepare, prepare

Never give an interview without preparation and planning what you're going to say but also what you won't say. Most organisations have a communications team that will likely triage any interview requests and help you prepare. If you're surprised or door-stopped by a journalist – buy time. If you're called out of the blue – tell them you'll call back. Before you speak to a journalist, you should be clear about the story, deadline and the general line of questions.

Messages are essential, but do you have a story?

Key messages are important, but they are often over-sanitised, corporate speak. There should be three or so simple statements that focus on the points you want your audience to register and cut through the noise and focus on what's really important. Those who are good at media engagement can weave messages into an effective story that is short, relevant to the audience, active, and fact-based.

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata – don't forget who you're talking to

People respond to events with their heart as well as their head and an effective response needs to address both. If you want people to hear you, you need to acknowledge their concerns and treat them with respect. Don't jump straight to the explanation and mitigation – if something's gone wrong, you must first show you understand the issue, how it impacts people and what you're going to do. Empathy will always trump trying to defend your reputation and tone and manner can matter as much as what you say.

Tips for effective media communications

Control what you can – most people are led by the interviewer and can miss telling their story. Begin with a short statement outlining what you want to say, remain in control and never get into an argument. Techniques such as “transitioning” to shift the conversation to what you want to say, and “flagging” to highlight key messages, can also help shift a conversation to your narrative without looking evasive.

Body language counts – always maintain eye contact the interviewer or the person asking the question – looking away makes you look shifty. Back it up with good body position – if you're sitting, don't slouch or lie back in your chair – sit up straight and lean forward slightly.

Look the part – if you want people's trust, your dress should reflect that. If you're on a building site, a suit and tie might look awkward. Solid colours work best on camera and get rid of pens in the pocket, funny ties, oversized earrings, or noisy bangles that distract from what you say.

Think what they'll write – convey your facts in order of importance and try to anticipate and prepare for all questions – a media team that's afraid to ask the awkward questions does you no favours. You can't control the coverage, but you may prevent them getting the wrong end of the stick and have a far better chance of getting your side of the story across.

Anticipate the media's needs – make the journalist's job easier and help yourself. Media are there to do a job, they appreciate and respond to other professionals.

Start with the answer – modern media is under pressure and fast paced and time can be critical. Go straight to the answer so your message gets out and you're not cut off in the middle of providing context and detail – if the journalist wants more, they'll ask.

Don't try to fill the silence – answer the question then stop talking. Sometimes a journalist will leave a silence to make you feel like saying more – don't. If you've answered the question, wait for the reporter to move on. If you do say something else, go back to your prepared narrative.

Don't repeat the negative – the classic example was a reporter asking Richard Nixon “Are you a crook?” – his answer was “I am not a crook” which became the headline and a soundbite in his own words. By repeating the negative, he gave the accusation more weight.

Correct inaccuracies – if the journalist makes an error, correct it politely then answer the question. The same goes for any wrong assumptions – they're easier to correct before they're published. Don't be afraid to ask the journalist to repeat or clarify a long or confusing question.

If you slip, recover – if you make a mistake, say so immediately then go back and restart your answer – it won't be held against you. Make sure your team knows to alert you to any mistake.

The media doesn't do complexity – it can kill the story or confuse your message. If you can't summarise it simply, how do you expect the reporter to? At the same time, don't assume the reporter or the audience have any level of background knowledge.

They are not experts, you are – If the journalist is confused, the public will be too. Remember, a lot of the interview may be for background or the information that will be used to bulk up the story or as script or “voiceover”.

Watch for provocation – losing your cool makes good television or radio, but will undermine all the effort you have invested. Your reaction will be shown or reported, not what provoked it.

The camera is always live – the interview begins as soon as you interact with the journalist. Remember still cameras also take video and treat all microphones as live. Never say anything you don't want to see published – this includes before and after the interview. Unless you really know the reporter and what you're doing, never go “off the record”.

Relax and be yourself – try to ignore the equipment and concentrate on what you know. You have communications advisors for a reason so use them to prepare and rehearse. Like most things, the more media interviews you do, the better you'll be.