

6 tips for taking control in media interviews

By [Joanna L. Krotz](#)

Hard-charging business executives roll their eyes at the mention of media coaching. The idea of practice sessions designed to make you look and sound good in public is dismissed by many as pure puffery — a silly ego exercise irrelevant to the real business of running the company.

But every time an executive looks into a camera, clips on a microphone or speaks at an event covered by reporters, the company's standing is on the line. Yet few executives really understand how to communicate their own expertise, media experts agree.

"In my experience, CEOs have the most trouble with the simplest questions: What do you do and what does your company do?" says Stephen Gendel, a media coach and former TV reporter. "CEOs are so close to the situation they are literally lost among the trees."

Fortunately, crafting memorable messages and turning around "gotcha" questions are skills that can be learned — assuming, of course, that you acknowledge you want some help. Read on for some media-savvy lessons and six tips from media coaches and reporters who have been there and done that.

Never wing it

The first lesson is not to wing it. Just because you're immersed in some subject every day doesn't mean you can spontaneously pull on the right threads to weave a public performance.

The fundamentals always come down to preparation. Whether you work with a professional coach or prefer to go it alone, invest time and effort in rehearsals. Get your spouse or partner or a trusted pal to lob questions at you. Make sure those lobs have some zing. How will you respond to tough or hostile questions? Do you have a clear, honest and appropriate answer to the most negative query you can imagine?

"Plan your answers with key messages and try to second-guess supplementary questions," says Becky Boyd of MediaFirst PR in Atlanta. Make sure to research your listeners and their expectations beforehand. In any interview, you're really speaking via the reporter to his or her readers, listeners or viewers. Videotape your performance and use the results to make changes.

Try smaller venues before hitting the big time. "Trade shows present the perfect opportunity within a frenzied, live setting to conduct a large quantity of media and business meetings, all forums to practice media training tips," says Mark O'Toole of The Castle Group in Boston.

Shaping your message

The real difference between talking to the media and talking directly to an audience, of course, comes down to control. For a speech, you pick and choose your points and timing. But for interviews, reporters wag the dog.

That doesn't mean you lean back and remain passive. The idea is to get out the message you want while still responding to questions and ceding control to the reporter. At the outset, it helps to personalize the experience. "Always break the ice with reporters by asking something about them — where they grew up, what their interests are, what kind of stories they have covered," says New York media trainer Virgil Scudder. "Showing an interest in them makes you more likable." Once you've accomplished that, here are six tips to help you master the art of getting out your preferred message.

- 1. Set goals for every appearance.** "One of the tools I use with corporate leaders is 'OSTA': objective, strategy, tactics and audience," says Mike Paul of MGP & Associates in New York. "Everything communicated should have an OSTA plan of attack."
Plan to hammer home your key messages. For interviews, keep answers — especially for TV or radio — to about 25 to 40 seconds each. When it's appropriate, use props or visual materials to vary your pacing.
- 2. Nothing is 100% off the record.** "Once notes are made, editors, publishers and lawyers can review them," reminds TJ Walker of TJ Walker Media in New York. This goes for all appearances, not just interviews. Whatever you say — anywhere — can follow you around endlessly and perhaps disastrously. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then later on, be certain to get back to the reporter with an answer.
- 3. Watch your body language.** "Even in positive interview situations, interviewees sometimes look tense or stiff, which can have a big impact on credibility," says Gail Gardner of Adamson Public Relations in St. Louis.
Before on-camera interviews, if there is time, do some exercises or walk around to relax your body. Also:
 - Stand up during phone conferences. It will make your voice more energetic and authoritative.
 - To check notes during presentations, move your eyes, not your head.
 - On camera, "to keep your smile, try pressing your tongue against your top teeth when you smile," says Bill Johnson of Halstead Communications in New York.
- 4. Stay on track with your message.** Reporters usually can only use what you say against you," says Margo Mateas at the Public Relations Training Company in San Jose, Calif. "If the interview goes off track, stop it." You can ask for a break, a glass of water, a visit to the restroom. "It doesn't matter if the excuse seems lame — they will use footage of you on-camera, not off," she says.
- 5. Learn how to "bridge."** This technique allows you to deflect any attempts to derail your message. "Bridging" creates a transition so that you can move from one subject to the message you want to communicate. First answer the direct question, then transition to your message. Atlanta media trainer Debbie Wetherhead suggests such bridging phrases as:
 - What's important to remember, however . . .
 - What that means is . . .
 - That's a good point, but I think you'd be interested in knowing . . .
 - Let me put that in perspective . . .
- 6. Prepare take-aways.** Always plan the points or facts you want the reporter and, by extension,

the audience to walk away thinking about. You might identify these points as the building blocks of your presentation. If someone else prepares your material, discuss the take-away points first.

"Narrow the focus," says Philadelphia trainer and former TV news reporter Karen Friedman. Then, to get listeners to remember you, "deliver those points passionately and succinctly through analogies and recreating experiences."

Finally, it's not over when it's over. Make sure to track the results and get reviews of your performance. Ask pals and peers how well your message went over. Be smart and brave enough to make the necessary improvements, so you do even better next time.