



# rethink

## Television Interviews

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### 1. Develop your talking points

Typically, experts or advocates know a great deal about a given issue and they naturally want to share that knowledge. Bear in mind, though, that an interview is unlikely to address all aspects of a subject, unless it is a long-form investigative piece.

With that in mind, we recommend that you give serious thought to the following questions:

1. What would be the perfect quote for you?
2. What are three things you want to say?
3. What is the number-one thing you want listeners to *remember* from watching the interview?

These questions should guide the development of your talking points. Keep them simple, but make sure that your answers to the questions above—whatever they are—are addressed.

Once you have these questions answered and you are clear on **what** you want to say, consider **how** you want to say it. It is important to understand that, while a reporter will listen to you and ask their own questions, a producer will be the one to decide what makes it on air (unless it is live TV). The producer's job is to capture the key sentences and phrases that make your point or that tell the story they're trying to tell.

Your job is to make their job easier.

If you can, put some creative effort into developing solid sound bites. We've all heard of sound bites, but many of us are intimidated by the prospect of creating them. You'll have to brainstorm first, but here are a few tips to guide the process:

- Try to develop a 7–10 word phrase that encapsulates your number-one message.
- Metaphors or analogies are often the best way to do this.
- Use colorful, interesting, or catchy language.
- Always avoid jargon.
- Remember: you may be talking with a reporter, but your audience is the listeners. Your sound bites should resonate with them.
- If appropriate, try to use humor to illustrate your point.

### 2. Research & Practice

Two things are absolute imperatives when it comes to TV interviews—**research** and **practice**.

1. **Research.** Research both the program and the interview. Check out their website. Who is their target audience? If possible, watch a few of their interviews. Do they appear to have a political slant?

Watch the show before you go on and find out what the format is: live? live-to-tape? one-on-one interview? panel discussion? combative? rapid-fire or thoughtful? Look for transcripts on the website.

Speak with the booker and ask a few questions: What point-of-view are you expected to fill? Who are the other guests who will be appearing?

2. **Practice.** *Always* role-play with one of your colleagues prior to an interview. The role-play should mimic the style of the show. Practice your sound-bites until they feel comfortable. Prepare for all predictable interview questions. Imagine your worst nightmare question and practice answering it. Get your colleague to ask your hard questions. It is always better to practice for hard questions and face easy ones than to be surprised.

### 3. During the interview

There are a few key things to remember during the interview.

- Make sure to get out your key messages early.
- Prioritize delivering your message. It can be tricky to balance answering a reporter's questions with delivering your own message, but you are primarily a spokesperson, not an interviewee.
- Avoid getting pulled onto tangents that may draw upon your experience but use up your time and distract from getting your message out.
- Repeat your core messages as often as you can, using variations. There are many different ways to drive home a core message.
- Always stay calm and on-message. Don't let an interviewer rattle you.
- Be careful with your inflection. Emphasize important phrases with your tone and your hands.
- If you're doing a taped interview and you make a mistake, tell the producer you'd like to stop and start over. You can ask about this before the interview begins so you know what the ground rules are.
- If a reporter asks you a complex, multi-part question, answer the one question that leads you back to the key messages you want to deliver.
- Although it may seem strange, you do not have to answer direct questions directly. You can use bridge phrases to move back to your primary messages. For example, you might say, "The key issue to remember is..." or "The more important aspect of the question is..."
- Keep your cool. Give calm and balanced answers and focus on presenting yourself as a confident, reasonable person. Appear more reasonable than your detractors.
- Speak slowly. Your audience needs to understand you.

### 4. About the camera

If you are interviewing with a host or other guests, do not look at the camera. Make eye-contact with the host and other guests. The camera crew will be filming a conversation and they'll choose to cut between different cameras as they see fit.

If you are doing the interview by satellite, maintain eye-contact with the camera itself. This can seem very peculiar, but the studio will make it appear as though you are speaking directly to the audience.

A few more things to bear in mind when you're being filmed:

- Smile! This will make you seem comfortable, it will help you relax, and it will make a personal connection with the audience.
- If you are being attacked, feel free to interrupt, firmly but politely. Keep interrupting for as long as your need to get back on track, but make sure that you do it with an insistent smile.
- Always refer to your host by name. This creates the impression of a warm conversation and projects confidence.
- Don't ever say anything you wouldn't want to see yourself saying on TV. Never assume that the camera isn't rolling.
- Use natural hand gestures, but don't raise your hands too high or move them too quickly.
- Every "um," "like," and other phrase you use repeatedly will be magnified, so be careful with your diction. Usually if you're mindful of this, it's pretty easy. Speaking slowly will help.
- When the interview is over, do not get out of your seat until the producer or host tells you that you are done.

### 5. Appearances

As a general rule, you will appear more comfortable if you are more comfortable, so choose something you know flatters you and wear it at least once before the interview.

Here are some more specific guidelines:

- Do not wear stripes, checks, plaid, polka dots, flowers, or other patterns. The camera picks them up and visually emphasizes them, which can make viewers dizzy.

- Don't wear white—it's too bright.
- Don't wear very dark colors, especially black—they absorb light.
- Don't wear dangly earrings.
- Avoid oversized jewelry.
- The best colors to wear are pastels.
- Wear a tie.
- If you're a man, button your jacket.
- Ask the production crew for makeup even if it seems uncomfortable. The bright lights of TV cameras distort facial colors, highlight imperfections, and cause people to sweat.

## 6. Final Tips

- Don't use sarcasm. It doesn't translate well on TV and you won't like how it looks.
- Relax.
- If you have a choice (although you likely won't), always choose an in-studio interview over a satellite interview. You won't have to deal with an artificial environment, you'll have a chance to establish rapport with the host, and you'll be able to see the other guests.
- **The best way to get better is to watch your interview and practice some more.**