

MEDIA RELATIONS:

PRESS INTERVIEW TIP SHEET

Media relations needn't be complex or intimidating. You can successfully engage with journalists by setting a clear objective for what you hope to achieve in an interview, understanding reporters' interests and needs, and providing them with what they need to do their job. Use this tip sheet to guide you through the basics of message development, resource preparation, and media interaction.

GENERAL INTERVIEW BEST PRACTICES

Pre-interview:

- **Do your research.** Get the details on the reporter, the outlet, and previous coverage of aging services. By doing so, you gain insight into whether the outlet has a point of view, the tone of the stories, and the style of the reporting.
- **Determine the focus of the story.** That way you will have a solid understanding of what the reporter wants/needs and can respond appropriately. Ask for the questions in advance; sometimes reporters will share them, or at the very least tell you what the story is about. (If a reporter is responding to your pitch, do this via a friendly inquiry: "Thanks for your response to my email. Tell me what aspect of the information I sent you would like to focus on.") Never assume you know the focus of the reporter's story, even if you have pitched it. Ask.
- **Prepare and practice.** Know the messages you want to communicate. If you aren't the interviewee, spend time with that person to prepare them. Ask the reporter for their contact information (name, outlet, email, cellphone) so that you can contact them after the story is live and build a relationship.
- **Clarify the ground rules with the reporter.** It is important to understand how/whether the reporter will use and attribute your words; this should be done when agreeing to the interview, not during it. If your organization has a PR person, ask them to handle this step. To elevate your organization's visibility, it's useful to stay on the record. If there is information you'd like to share with the reporter (perhaps to build yourself as a source) but can't have your name associated with it, you could provide it on background or off the record (see all terms, below).

During the interview:

- **Speak slowly, using clear, jargon-free language and short sentences.** Avoid acronyms. Reinforce the messages and facts from your pitch or from the talking points you've prepared by rephrasing (but not repeating) the language.

- **Deliver your core message/s.** Repeat your key messages in each question. When you have made your point, STOP talking. If there is some silence, don't feel pressure to fill it.
- **Stay on message using a "bridge" or "pivot."** Even if the straightforward response to a reporter's question does not allow for inclusion of the point you want to make, you can nonetheless steer the conversation to your point by bridging, or pivoting. Examples include:
 - "I can't speculate on that, but what I can confirm is..."
 - "That's something I will look into, but what we are concerned with now is..."
- **Back up your statements.** Do not assume that a reporter has knowledge of aging services. You are the expert. Include facts, preferably with credible sourcing, to prove your points. Share short anecdotes about people who are affected by the topic under discussion. Reporters are always looking for real-life examples to illustrate the impact of an issue.
- **You are not obligated to answer a question if you do not know the answer.** Telling a reporter that you want to double check and get back to them is perfectly acceptable. If they press you for an answer, be firm and politely decline, but promise to follow up quickly, then do so.
- **Wrap up the interview effectively.** At the end of the interview, ask if the reporter has additional questions; if you've agreed to send information (e.g., a report, a link to a study, a photo) tell them when you will do that. If a photo is requested, confirm file specifications (file type, etc.). Ask when the reporter expects the story to be published (they may not always know).

REPORTER SPEAK

Journalists have their own jargon to define the ground rules of your interaction. Here are a few helpful phrases to know.

On the record*: the information can be used with no caveats, quoting the source by name and title.

On background*: the information can be published but only under conditions negotiated with the source. Generally, the sources do not want their names published, but will agree to a description of their position (e.g., "one aging services expert said").

Off the record*: the information cannot be used for publication.

Press embargo: the information may not yet be released by the media. Sources can offer advance review of material to give reporters time to prepare stories, with the understanding that it won't be released until the embargo is lifted.

* Descriptions based on [Associated Press guidelines](#).

Post interview:

- **Remember to follow up.** If you are pleased with the results, send a brief note of thanks acknowledging the work and offer to be a source/contact for future stories. Build the relationship. Follow the reporter on social media and share their work with your followers. Track the reporter's coverage. Stay in touch. Refer to the interview and include a link to the published story ("We spoke a month ago for your story on XYZ") when you want to reach out with a new pitch or simply follow up on an evolving story or issue. Reporters appreciate knowing that their work is followed. They're always in need of good sources and a fresh angle.

- **Errors, oversights, mischaracterizations.** Reach out as soon as possible after the piece is published if you find an error in the story, or if the reporter has omitted important context. Many outlets will correct obvious factual errors (e.g., misspelling a name). However, having major changes made to a published piece is more difficult. Not liking the published product is not a sufficient reason for the outlet to make corrections. Reporters and their editors will expect you to provide proof of an error. Getting a story fully retracted is rare. If you have significant issues with a published piece, the editors may instead encourage you to write a letter to the editor to explain your point of view.
- **Above all, timing matters.** The longer you wait to make your concerns known or request a correction, the less likely you are to get a positive response.

BROADCAST TIPS (IN ADDITION TO THE ABOVE):

Pre-interview:

- **Ask if the interview will be live or recorded.** Majority of the time, it will be recorded. The reporter and/or producer will cut and edit the interview to a few sound bites for a news piece.
- **Ask if the reporter will bring a photographer or other colleague.**
- **Establish and share your organization's privacy guidelines.** If residents are not to be shown, clarify the terms. Is it OK to blur faces, or is a particular unit off limits, or must staff give their permission to be included?
- **Give the reporter instructions on where to shoot video.** Select a spot beforehand, with suitable backdrop in place.

Camera/Mic Setup:

- **Lav mic setup:** If the reporter brings one, for best on-camera results, feed the wire under your shirt and clip mic on your collar. Put the battery pack in your pocket. Holding it in your hand may produce static.
- **Build rapport:** Use the set-up time to get to know the reporter, get comfortable. Ask a few questions: how long have you been at the station? What is your beat? NOTE: Once you are with the reporter, consider the interview started, even if the reporter hasn't pressed the record button.
- **What to do with notes, glasses, etc.:** If you have notes, put them on the floor. If you need to reference them for data or numbers, let the reporter know you may need to peek at them during the interview; the reporter may have recommendations on how to handle that.

During the interview:

- **Whether in person or virtual:** eliminate any background noise or potential interruptions from cellphones, other employees, etc.; be sure that no resident/client information is in view.
- **First question:** It is always the same! “Can you please say your first and last name, your role, and organization’s name?”
- **Keep it conversational:** Treat this like a normal discussion with an acquaintance.
- **What if I mess up on a response?** Ask if you can restate your answer. Most reporters will say yes, but this may be a question you’d want to ask before the interview begins.
- **Fashion faux pas:** Avoid clothing with patterns/plaids and big, shiny jewelry. These can be distracting to the viewers.

Post-interview:

- **How to get copies:** Due to copyright issues, the best way for you to get a copy is to use the link to the outlet’s website for the article and link to YouTube for the video. Most TV shows will say they cannot give you a copy, not even for purchase.
- **What if there are errors?** Assuming that a station publishes both a broadcast and digital version, two things could happen: 1. The web article would be updated and 2. There may need to be a retraction or update made on air with the correct information depending on what they got wrong. In order to get that, first start with the reporter you worked with. Be clear about what they got wrong and provide a revision of what would be correct (i.e, Stephen not Steven; there are seven nursing homes in our county, not three, per XYZ source). If you do not receive a response from them within a day or two, call the TV station and ask for the News Director or General Manager. It’s their job to get it right if the reporter is unresponsive.



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