



# Media Interview Training for School Leaders



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# When journalists contact you

## What to do when a reporter rings

Ask her about the interview. What will it cover? What is the angle of the story? Is it live or recorded (if broadcast media)? Is it a news or feature interview? Is anyone else being interviewed? Most importantly, don't do interview then. Find out her deadline and get back to her, even if it only gives you five minutes. This gives you the chance to get organised.

## Should you do the interview?

You should do most interviews. The only times you shouldn't do it is if you are on a hiding to nothing and your appearance is likely to lower your reputation. These situations are highly unlikely and even when they occur, you should still send a written response to put your side of the story. They are usually when you know your argument will not cut it with the audience, so you are in a no-win situation. There will also be times when you can't comment. It's important here that you say why you can't comment. For example: "I can't go into that because it's before the courts," or "Out of respect for the family involved, we have decided to deal with the matter privately."

## What if it's some sudden crisis and journalists arrive unannounced?

If this happens and you haven't already had time to prepare your media message, you must use a delaying tactic. Let's say for example, a TV crew turns up at your school and put a camera in your face with a journalist asking you about a complaint he's received about recent bullying of students.

The last thing you should do is run away, cover your face, say no comment or be antagonistic. This is probably the response they are looking for because this is great for TV.

What you do is greet the journalist politely, say you can't talk now, but if they would like to meet you in your office later, at a mutually convenient time, you would be happy to do the interview. This way they haven't got any decent footage. They wouldn't use that on the news.

So they have no choice but to grant your wish. Then you have time to prepare and be ready for them.

### Should you do the crisis interview?

If we are talking about a crisis like a student death or allegations of parents drinking to excess on the school camp, you must be available to the media. You can use a slight delaying tactic at the beginning, but then be available.

This is because if you don't, people will wonder why you are not talking. This can imply guilt, while the media often become aggravated. This usually leads to more negative stories. The media will have to find other angles to use and your points (and often the facts) will not be included in the subsequent story. Journalists will have to seek out other residents, employees or even your competitors for comment.

But if you are always available, they will come to you for comment, allowing you to control the story.

The media outlets will run a story, so you might as well be in it. Then you can put your case, be seen as cooperative by journalists and prevent the broadcast or publication of inaccurate information.

# Body language

Body language is a vital part of all interviews, not just television, although that's where it's most important. This is because if your body language doesn't match your words, people will not believe you. For radio and print, it's important to use so you maintain the passion and emphasis on your messages.

## Body language for TV

During television interviews, you need to sit up straight with the upper part of your body facing slightly forward in the chair. Sit straight, and then move your upper body forward about 15 degrees. This may seem uncomfortable, but it's the best way to look. If you sit straight, you look stiff and if you slouch back, the camera focuses more on your stomach than your face.

Use hand gestures. This is a great way to express yourself, adds energy to your voice and makes you more believable. Also move your head and upper body freely.

If you are doing a standing interview, it's a good idea to place one foot in front of the other. This stops you swaying. Lots of people do sway when standing and this takes the focus of viewers away from the words coming out of your mouth.

It's good to have a slight smile on your face throughout the interview, as TV makes a natural look seem more like a frown. Always appear friendly with the host, as those at home watching usually develop a bond with interviewers.

When it comes to talking, you need to show a bit more energy than usual. TV can also make us appear less energetic than normal, so ramping up your intensity is a good idea.

With studio interviews, you will be asked to wear make-up. This is totally normal for men as it prevents you from looking as white as a ghost and the bright studio lights reflecting off your skin.

For studio interviews and those at your place with a reporter, always look at the person asking the questions or talking at the time. If the camera focuses on you doing something else, you will appear disinterested.

The other interview type is the satellite interview. This is where you are in another studio or on location somewhere and you are talking to a presenter live in the main studio. You've seen this many times on TV news. All the audience sees is a big TV screen in the studio with the interviewee.

The interviewee can't see the presenter, so has to look directly down a camera rather than into the eyes of the questioner. You need to pretend the camera is the person you are talking to. This can be difficult. Look continually at the camera, because if you look away and people at home are seeing that, you can also look disinterested.

These interviews are best to avoid if you can because the conversation is difficult for you to gauge. This is because you can't see the person asking the questions or their reactions to your answers. If at all possible, I'd try to get into the studio with the presenter.

### What to wear on TV

In all TV interviews, what you wear is important. You want to appear as a trustworthy and confident expert, so you should dress well without going over the top. This is of course, unless your image is to be eccentric.

Checks, stripes and boxes look blurred on TV, while white can be bright and glary. Dark suits are good for men with a blue shirt. Always make sure your tie goes with the shirt.

Women are better with darker colours also. It's all about making people focus on your face and not drawing them away to your interesting clothing. Dangly jewellery is a bad idea as it can reflect off the studio lights.

Always go with the right clothing for the time and place. A suit is usually good for men in the studio, but if the interview is at your house on a Saturday evening beside the barbeque, this would obviously not work. It's best to dress conservatively so that people are totally focused on what you are saying, rather than what you are wearing.

### Body language for radio and print

Most interviews for radio and print will be on the phone. It's important you maintain your body language here, particularly for radio. If you stop moving your hands and head for example, it can affect your voice box and make you sound in monotone. And with radio, your passion and enthusiasm must come across.

You should do the same for print because you want the reporter to feel your enthusiasm. Also, if you are sitting down with a print reporter, your demeanor can influence how he or she feels about you. Also, if it's a feature they are writing, they often comment on your demeanor in the story.

Basically, you need to be passionate and proactive in all interviews and your body language is part of showing that.

### A few other points about radio and print

Never use speaker phone for radio interviews and avoid cell phones if you can. For print, if the reporter is visiting you, he may want to record the conversation. This is a good idea because it reduces the chance of misquoting. Also be ready for a photo to be taken as he may be accompanied by a photographer.

# Media messages

Media messages are the best way to get your points across in media interviews. They should last no more than 25 seconds and include the three most important points you want to get across in the interview. These are the fundamental step for any interview preparation. They are the points you most want to get through in the interview.

The plan must always be to get these points incorporated into the story, whether for print, radio or television. The best way to find them is to ask yourself, ‘If the journalist said to me, what are the three points you would like me to base this story on, what would they be?’ You must sum each of these up in about 10 seconds each. While they must benefit you, you must also keep in mind the need for them to appeal to the media and the audience. If they are not new, put a new twist on them.

## Why you need them

Media messages are the best way for you to get your points across. The reason all three must be summed up in 25 seconds is because that is the way the media works in the digital age. There is no time for longer answers.

The idea is for you to keep coming back to them throughout your interview. This does not mean you need to repeat them word for word. As long as they have the same meaning, you can say them in a number of ways.

You need to keep coming back to them to avoid the journalist using other points in the story. If you give him 50 points, he will only pick three because he only has so much space. Would you rather give the three you want, or the choice of 50?

By giving three, there is also far less chance that he will misunderstand the issue and get the story wrong.

This applies to both good news stories and during a crisis.

## Crisis media messages

When we are talking about a crisis, such as the few examples mentioned above, a good place to start when organising your media message is by using the three Rs. The three points you can start with can be Regret, Response and Reassurance. This will not always work, but it will in many cases.

For example, if we were talking about a pupil who died of mysterious circumstances in the school grounds, the following three points may be the ones used.

### **Regret**

“This must be a difficult time for family and friends of the victim. Our hearts go out to them.”

### **Response**

“We’re doing all we can to support everyone involved.”

## **Reassurance**

“The safety of our students is our number one priority.”

### **Legal advice**

While you will need to take legal advice on what you can say to the media in crisis type situations, be wary if Lawyers advise you not to comment. Their entire focus is to keep you out of jail, while Public Relations Consultants and Media Trainers are concerned about the court of public opinion.

If a Lawyer tells you not to comment, you have to weight that up with how that will come across to the public and your stakeholders. Failure to front up in a crisis can have major implications for your school’s reputation and long-term viability.

Also remember that you can comment without taking responsibility. If an incident does lead to a courtroom, the sensitivity of your media responses in the aftermath can work in your favour. But if you don’t comment, you can look insensitive and guilty. Notice in the first point above, we show our remorse, but we don’t claim responsibility.

# Answering questions

When it comes to answering questions, lots of people brainstorm for hours on likely questions. This isn't necessary, but you should think of the obvious questions like where, when, why, what, who and how.

Most people think media interviews are simple. Reporters ask questions and we answer them. But it's not that simple with the media. It's all because journalists can pull quotes out of context.

A quote by its very definition is pulled out of context. This is difficult for many because throughout our whole life we've answered questions by starting at the beginning and giving lengthy answers, while being able to reference back to earlier parts of the answer. This is not so in media interviews.

You could be interviewed for an hour or 10 hours by a journalist and they may pluck a 10 second quote from the whole interview and use that as the focus for the entire story. This is why everything you say must be able to stand on its own and not be reliant on other answers to make sense. That's another reason you need to keep coming back to your key messages.

This is different from every other conversation you will encounter.

That's why this needs practice. Because of this context issue and time constraints, if a question doesn't relate to a key message, you answer it briefly, then bridge back to a key message. You need to avoid the temptation to answer in detail, particularly if it's not a key message.

While we've been focusing on key messages, it is still important to answer the questions asked of you. However, it's important that you answer these briefly and then bridge to a key message.

## Bridging

Bridging is an important element in media interviews. It is the transition you make from answering a question to introducing a key point. Bridging should be done throughout an interview. It lets you take control and be pro-active, rather than just reacting to questions. This is how you keep referring back to your key points. There are many ways to do this.

For example, you could answer the question and then say "that leads me to another important point", or "something else I must mention is". There are countless ways of doing this. See the Appendix One for examples.

### Answer in complete sentences

For non-live interviews, when your answer is a positive one, use complete sentences. This makes it quotable for the reporter. For example, if you were asked what your number one priority was after a major accident, you might say: “Supporting the victims.” But that can’t be used as a direct quote. So you are best to say: “Our number one priority now is supporting the victims.”

### Joe Average

While bridging is a huge, there are other points you need to remember when answering questions. Firstly, remember who you are talking to. Your target is Joe Average on the couch at home, not the reporter or presenter, so you need to use language he will understand.

### Avoid detail

You need to avoid the temptation to answer in detail, particularly if it’s not a key point. Lots of people fall into that trap. It is tempting to try to impress with your knowledge and go into major detail. This doesn’t work in the media. You won’t get messages across and the media will only use a small piece of you point, meaning it probably won’t make sense.

### Avoid being complex

Your interviewer probably won’t understand you if you use complexity and industry jargon. That could lead to inaccuracies and your audience won’t understand either.

### I don’t know is fine

If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. You can offer to get the answer later, or use a bridging technique like: “I don’t know that, but what I do know is.” This is vital in a crisis where there will be many occasions when you don’t know the answer. You will need to use statements like “We don’t have that information yet, but we’ll let you know as soon as we have more.” “We need to see the Police report before we can confirm anything.”

### Emotion

Another important point is the need to accept and understand people’s feelings during emotional events, even if you disagree with a point.

For example, if you had to expel a pupil for smoking, a key point for you may be: “We need to stick to our high standard of pupil behaviour,” but you should preface that in the media with: “I understand it’s a difficult time for the family, but we need...”

# Traps to avoid

## When you can't give a 'yes' or 'no' answer or a guarantee

There will be times when reporters ask you for a 'yes' or 'no' answer or 'Can you guarantee' something. If you can, do. But sometimes it will be unwise. For example, if asked: "Could this bully attack someone again tomorrow?" It's probably dishonest to say no, but if you say yes, tomorrow's headline could be something like, "School admits bully could strike again tomorrow."

All you can do is bridge away with a statement such as: "What I can say is that we have strong safety measures in place and (Then back to your message). If you are asked again, you just have to repeat your answer. If asked a third time, tell the reporter you have answered the question and then something like "let's move on."

This is the same principle a nuclear power plant manager would use if there could be an accident at his plant tomorrow. The same approach applies if you are asked to guarantee something that you are unable to guarantee. Just say something like, "What I can guarantee is..., or if the context is right, "This is not a black and white issue."

## Don't repeat negative statements

If you repeat negative statements, you give journalists great quotes that do you no favours. For example, if I was asked: "Don't you feel guilty making a living out of teaching people to lie," I don't want to answer that because if I said "I don't make a living out of teaching people how to lie," I've just given the reporter a great negative quote, and I've just used my name and the word lie, in the same sentence. The headline could then read, "Media Trainer denies teaching people how to lie," which makes me seem a bit shady and it's a negative story. The journalist will then use the quote I've just given him in the story.

But if I paused and thought about it, I could reword it. I would think in my head that he wants to know how I feel about what I do, so I could respond with: "I feel proud that I make a living out of teaching people how to communicate the great things they are doing to the media."

I've answered the question with a positive answer, rather than repeating the negative. Think of history's big ones. Nixon's "I'm not a crook," or Clinton's "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Always remember, a small pause is quite acceptable in an interview. If it's not live, it will probably be edited out anyway. If it's print, no-one will know and in a live interview, it gives people time to take in what you've already said.

### Speculation and hypotheticals

Never get drawn into speculating on something negative. For example, if a reporter asked you how many pupils you think may have been killed in a sudden bus crash, but you don't know, you are asking for trouble. You are best to bridge away with a statement like: "That would be mere speculation. The focus is on supporting all the victims and their families."

### Loaded questions

This is when the reporter asks you a question that includes an assumption. For example, "Since your school has now had a rash of bullying incidents, don't you think you should change your policy towards it?" If you answer, you are agreeing with the assumption. You must challenge the assumption. For example you could say, "I dispute the premise of the question," or "On what do you base that assumption?"

### Conclusion to Answering Questions

Remember that media conversations are different than any other. If you repeated yourself in other environments, people would think you were insane. But remember with your key points, you can use different wording and different examples all the time.

It's just the point that's the same. It might feel a bit awkward, but it won't when you pick up your daily newspaper in the morning.

Also remember that most reporters are happy with this. They know they only need a few points for their stories, so if you have interesting ones that are simple to understand, they will be grateful, not upset. If you get what you want at the same time, it's win win. You will also avoid being misquoted and taken out of context.

# Sound bites

If you're like most clients, you are probably worried that you'll sound like a broken record if you continually repeat your key points, even if in slightly different ways. This is a fair point and the way to deal with it is the use of sound bites.

These are the parts of radio and TV news stories where the person who has been interviewed by the journalist is talking verbatim. Typically they are 8 to 12 seconds long. In print, these are called quotes.

## Every story needs sound bites

Every story needs these so if we can dress up key points into sound bites the media find irresistible, we can almost guarantee they will be used. Good sound bites give perspective and allow journalists and presenters to use language they are not allowed to use themselves. They bring stories to life. This means they need you and if you give them great sound bites, they will come back to you again and again.

The way to use these is to sprinkle them through your interview as another way to repeat a key point. Remember before we talked about repeating key points in different ways. Sound bites are one way to do this. Also, never use a sound bite more than once, but do give more emphasis to it. The best idea is to have one or two organised for each key point.

## Difficult to come up with

They can be difficult to come up with so we've developed a system that allows you to turn any key point into a sound bite that journalists and editors will find irresistible. It's called the RACES system, which is an acronym for rhetorical questions, action, analogies, absolutes, clichés, comedy, emotion, examples, statistics and stories.

**Rhetorical Questions:** These allow journalists to use some variety in their stories. They are simple because all you need to do is change a message point into a question. Example: "Wouldn't any school do all it can to save its students?"

**Action and conflict:** Journalists always want to bring action and conflict into their stories. You can do this by using action words. Example: "We'll fight for as long as it takes to get our school the funding it deserves."

**Analogies:** These are a great way to take difficult concepts and make them understandable in laymen's terms by relating them to already understood notions. Example: "Just as a mother does everything to keep her baby safe, we do the same for our pupils."

**Absolutes:** Reporters can highlight trends and patterns, but they can't state things with absolute certainty. But they love using quotes from sources who do. Just by inserting words like must, never, always or absolutely, you add drama to the point and make it more memorable.

**Clichés:** These are a colourful way to make a point in a way that journalists can't use themselves.

Example: "We'll leave no stone unturned until we find out what happened to this special child." See Appendix Two for a few examples.

**Comedy:** This will get you quoted almost every time, but be careful. What's funny to you might not be to someone else and may get you into trouble. "I'm about as likely to have enough funding this year as Tiger Woods is to becoming the next Pope."

**Emotion:** Venting your emotions is a sure-fire way to get quoted by reporters. Journalists are supposed to be unbiased, dispassionate and disinterested. They aren't supposed to show any emotion to their readers, viewers or listeners, for fear of being accused of having bias. But they love quoting you expressing them. You just have to say how you feel. The following examples are great ways to start sound bites.

- "I am shocked that this has happened at our school."
- "It was the happiest day of my life when . . ."
- "We were disappointed that . . ."
- "I felt sickened by . . ."

**Examples** One sure way to be quoted by the press is to give specific, tangible examples that demonstrate your message point. This could be personal stories, historical examples or case studies. Reporters are capable of describing things at an abstract level, but if you can give a down-to-earth example, you increase your chances of being quoted.

"We call in a psychologist each month to help our pupils with any mental issues they face."

**Stories:** These are similar to examples, but can be made up. It's important to make them brief in media interviews. "My son went through a similar experience, so I really do understand the pain this family will be feeling

**Statistics:** Backing up a message by referring to a statistic gives it credibility is a great way to prove a point. Example: "We've never had one suspicious death, but because we can't be complacent about this, we're launching our own review."

# Post interview

## Don't say anything off the record

Just because the camera has been turned off or the print journalist has stopped his tape recorder, don't assume the interview is at an end. Chances are you are not involved in a controversial interview, but never say anything you don't want broadcast until you have parted company with the journalist or interviewer.

There have been many famous examples of this. Prime Minister Jenny Shipley was at the centre of one before the 1999 General Election when she told journalists after an interview that she had made a figure up out of thin air. That was the lead story on One News for the next three nights. Also, the camera may still be running, even though it appears to be turned off.

## Don't demand things from journalists

Whether it's a crisis or a good news story, some people still like to know what questions will be asked. A request for these before an interview is unlikely to be accepted by a journalist, because that is not how the game is played. It will also do little for your credibility among media, and they are unlikely to use you again. Times have changed since Rob Muldoon would only agree to interviews if he knew exactly what would be asked.

The point is that while you don't have control of the questions, you have total control about what comes out of your mouth.

It's also rude to ask a journalist to see the story before publication. Remember he or she is working for readers, viewers or listeners, not you. But do take up the offer if invited and do offer to be available to check any facts, should the journalist wish to do this.

## Post interview footage

With TV interviews in the studio or at your place, the crew may want to take some footage of you talking to the reporter when the interview has finished. The words will not be used, but it gives them another angle to use when they put the interview package together for the programme it will be on. If it's a serious topic you were discussing, never laugh or smile strongly during this period because this footage may be used in the story and would look as if you were laughing during the interview.

# Appendix One (bridging techniques)

## General

The real issue here is...

The fact is...

What's most important is...

Let me just add that...

Let me answer you by saying that...

That's an important point because...

What that means is...

Let me re-emphasise something I said earlier about...

Building on that point...

At the end of the day, what this is all about is...

It's also worth noting that...

What's important to keep in mind here is...

Looking at the big picture...

The biggest point here is...

I think the point people really need to know is that..

In a nutshell, the point I really need to get across is that...

If you don't know the answer the best move is usually to admit it and offer to get the information later, but these are three bridging techniques you can use:

That's not my area of expertise, but what your viewers might be interested in is...

That's unclear, but what is clear is...

I don't know the answer to that, but what I do know is...

## Appendix Two (clichés)

The writing was on the wall

It's a win win situation

It's a slippery slope

Rome wasn't built in a day

Come hell or high water

Go the extra mile

Worth its weight in gold

Not for all the tea in China

That's the icing on the cake

Letting the cat out of the bag

Once in a blue moon

We'll move heaven and earth to make this happen

When it rains, it pours

Clean bill of health

Firing on all cylinders

We'll leave no stone unturned

It was earth shattering

Every cloud has a silver lining

You can't judge a book by its cover

Don't count your chickens before they've hatched

## About the trainer



Pete Burdon is founder and head trainer of Media Training NZ, a company that specialises in crisis communication and media interview training for schools. Pete has trained School Leaders across New Zealand.

He is a former education reporter and government press secretary. This puts him in a unique position, having worked on both sides of the media fence.

He has Masters Degrees in both Communication Management and Journalism.

Pete is also the International author of “Media Training for Modern Leaders”, currently selling in bookshops across Australia.

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