

Media Interviews

As a patient advocate, one of your main goals is to get your message out to as wide a group of people in as short a time as possible. One of the most effective ways to do that is through the media: newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet. Done properly, a media interview can be your most powerful tool in raising awareness about your cause.

To help you achieve your goals, we've put together some tips on how to make sure that you get the most out of that interview, increasing the likelihood you'll be asked to do more in the future. At the bottom of the page you'll find a cheat sheet to help you remember them all.

Know What the interview Is About

This may seem obvious but it's surprising how many people go into an interview not sure what the reporter wants to know. Always find out what the focus of the interview is, who else the reporter is talking to (this will help you understand your role in the story) and if possible what questions the reporter is likely to ask. All this will help you deliver a message that is focused and specific to this story.

Know Who Your Audience Is

The reporter is not your audience and is not the one you should be aiming your message at. It's the person watching the news, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper that is your audience. The language you use to talk about your cause has to be aimed at them. That means no jargon, no technical terms, and if you do have to use some technical term always make sure you explain what that is.

Prepare Key Talking Points

Identify ahead of time what it is you want to say and then put together *three* key points that lay out how you want to say it. Having just three key points helps keeps your message focused. Make sure these messages are positive (always avoid being negative), jargon-free and expressed in easy-to-understand language. They should also be unambiguous so that everyone understands exactly what you are saying. While the reporter may talk to you for 15 minutes or more it's likely that only a few quotes or sound bites will actually be used in the final piece—so the more succinct your message, the more likely it is to be used. Remember, the average sound bite on TV news today is only around 10 seconds, so make sure every word counts.

Tell Stories

People learn best and are most engaged when they hear stories. You can have a mastery of facts and figures but unless you have a compelling human story to draw people in, it's hard to get them to listen. So start with a story about a person, a vivid illustration of a point you are trying to make. Once you have someone's attention you can use the facts and figures to support your story. But keep the story succinct. A long drawn out tale will lose your audience as quickly as a long list of statistics. Shorter but emotionally powerful is always best.

Prepare Quotes and Sound Bites

Reporters need quotes and sound bites for their stories. They are essential building blocks to add interest, credibility and emotion. So never go into an interview without knowing in advance the quotes you want to see in tomorrow's newspaper or on tonight's newscast.

How do you turn a message into a memorable quote? By using one or more of the following elements:

1. Analogy: It's like a _____. It's like when _____. It's the next _____. So, instead of saying "we had a good year" say something like "We hit it out of the ball park more this year than the Dodgers/Padres etc"
2. Bold action words
3. Emotion
4. Humor

Practice, Practice, Practice

Have you ever watched someone who is really good at doing a media interview and thought, "they make it look so easy"? That's because they put a lot of time and thought into making it look effortless. Once you have your key points down, you should then rehearse how you want to say them. The more fluid and articulate you are, the better job you'll do in getting across your message.

This is particularly true for TV and radio interviews where the reporter is not going to have the time or inclination to edit out every "uh" or "like" or "you know" from your piece, so the smoother your answer the better.

One good way to prepare for a TV or radio interview is to practice your messages out loud or with a friend. Sometimes what looks good on paper doesn't actually sound that good when it is coming out of your mouth. And if you practice with a friend they can give you feedback and help you improve your delivery.

You might also try recording yourself, then playing back the recording to see how you did and where you can improve.

The goal is not to have you memorize every phrase, the goal is to have you responding in a way that sounds natural and feels comfortable for you. The more natural you sound, the more convincing you will be.

Allow Yourself Plenty of Time

If you have to be at a TV studio or are doing the interview at a location away from your home/office always allow plenty of time to get there. The last thing you need is to be rushing to the interview, worried that you are late. It's a distraction you don't need. Getting there early gives you time to go over your answers once again.

What to Wear

This is particularly important for a TV interview and while it may seem like a trivial point; after all you are talking about a deadly disease or disabling condition who cares what you wear? Your audience does. If you are dressed in a ratty old shirt with stains on it no one will take you seriously and may actually undermine your message.

Men: crisp, clean shirt and a jacket

Women: dress or jacket in solid colors—avoid patterns or stripes and spots, they're distracting. Light, understated jewelry.

If you are not sure what to wear look at how guests on TV talk shows or news shows dress, those are usually good models to follow.

How to Answer Questions

There may be some topics you don't wish to discuss in an interview. Here's the good news; you don't have to answer a question you don't want to. The reporter can ask you a question but that doesn't mean you have to answer it—remember you are in control of the interview.

Instead, you can do what is called "bridging", reframing the question to give the answer you want.

Examples of how to bridge are to address the interviewer with "That's an interesting question" or "That's a good point" and then move on to the issue you want to address by saying "But what I think people are more interested in...." or "But I think the key issue here is....."

Your goal is to get your message out to the audience—don't let the interviewer to lead you in a direction that doesn't do that.

Know When to Stop

A good reporter knows that they can often get the best answers to questions by just allowing the person to carry on talking. Even if the person being interviewed has finished, the reporter may just sit there. Often, faced with that uncomfortable silence, the person being interviewed will carry on talking, adding more detail to what they have already said. *This is where you can get into trouble* because may say something you hadn't intended to, or say it in a way that can be misleading.

Once you have finished saying what you want to say, know when to stop and don't say anything else. Sooner or later the reporter will follow up with another question. Don't do their job for them.

Don't Be Afraid to Say You Don't Know

If you don't know the answer to a question don't try and talk your way out of it; just admit you don't know. Then tell the reporter you will get the information they are looking for and send it to them after the interview.

Don't Say "No Comment"

Saying "no comment" always seems to suggest you are hiding something; even if you aren't. Instead, you should either bridge to another question or say something like "I really don't know enough about that to offer an opinion."

Don't Be Afraid to Pause

When a reporter asks you a question feel free to say "let me think about that for a minute" before answering. This gives you a chance to think about what you want to say and how you want to say it. An important exception is if you are being interviewed on live TV or radio. If you are being recorded on TV or radio and you mess up halfway through what you are saying, don't be afraid to stop and say, "let's try that again." Most reporters are just looking for the best sound bite or quote for their story and will be more than happy to let you start again, the end result is a better quote from you and a better story for them.

Don't Assume

At the end of the interview the reporter may say, "that's great, thanks very much" but don't assume the interview is actually over. As long as you are talking to the reporter you should assume that what you say can be used in the article. Reporters will often leave the camera or tape recorders running so that what you say is still being recorded. They are not trying to be sneaky; they just know that sometimes when people think the interview is over they'll just be more candid in what they say and how they say it. If you are still talking to the reporter, unless you know the camera or recording device is off and you and the reporter have agreed that whatever else is said is "off the record" then assume it is on the record.

TV Interviews

In TV you have a very short time to make a big impression so everything you do counts.

When doing a sit down interview, **sit up straight and look attentive**, nothing is more distracting than seeing someone slumped in their chair chewing gum while doing an interview. The audience is going to spend more time wondering why you are sitting like that than listening to what you have to say.

Always look directly at the reporter. It's distracting if you are constantly switching your gaze from the reporter to the camera. While you are answering questions the reporter may glance down at their notebook to take notes or to check what their next question is going to be—keep looking straight at their head. The audience at home won't know that the reporter is looking down, all they will see is your eyes wandering around and they'll wonder what you are doing.

Think about your body language. If you are smiling when you are talking about death and disease that can be distracting. If you normally use your hands while you talk that's fine, just not in a wild fashion. Speak with energy and passion where appropriate. TV has a peculiar habit of making your ordinary speaking voice and manner seem a little flat. So before the interview starts take a deep breath and think of it as a performance, this will help you avoid looking stiff or flat.

The Reporter Is Doing a Job

Before an interview starts a reporter will often make polite small talk, asking about your family, your job, your pet etc. They're just trying to put you at ease so you do a good job during the interview. But nice as they seem (and most reporters are really nice!) they are doing their job. Once the interview begins, it's time for you to do yours. They are not your friend, they are the person who is helping you get your information out to the public. Your focus should be on the audience.

If you think that's a lot of work to get ready for a simple interview here's a video of what can happen when you don't do your homework: <http://vimeo.com/32207413> And to help you remember all of this, here's a cheat sheet:

Media Interview Key Tips

- An interview is not a conversation
- Know your message (write it down in advance)
- Keep to your message (but don't read it)
- If you misstate, correct it promptly
- If you have given a good answer, stop
- Use sound bites, TV 8-12 seconds. Radio 10 to 45 seconds
- Assume all microphones are turned on
- Look at the questioner, not the camera

- Caveats are good, adjectives generally are not (i.e. preliminary=good, best=bad)

Interviewee Bill of Rights

- Who am I talking to?
- What type of show/publication?
- What is the focus of the story?
- Are others being interviewed?
- If broadcast, what is the format, live, taped, call-in?
- You can set a time limit.
- [You do not have the right to see questions in advance or review the story]

Bridge to Your Message

First acknowledge the question, then find a way back to your message and deliver that message.

Some bridging phrases:

- Yes . . . and in addition to that . . .
- No . . . let me explain what really . . .
- I don't know . . . but what I do know is . . .
- That is the way some used to do x . . . here is what we do now . . .
- I think what you are really asking is . . .
- That speaks to a bigger point . . .
- Let me put that in perspective . . .
- I don't know about that, but what I do know is . . .
- The most important thing you should know is . . .
- What's important to remember is . . .
- What your readers/viewers need to know . . .

Source URL: <https://www.cirm.ca.gov/patients/patients-toolbox/media-interviews>