

This tip sheet includes best practices for developing talking points, preparing for an interview, doing interviews using video conferencing software, advice for ensuring that your on-camera appearance projects credibility and professionalism, and things to do during an interview.

DEVELOP YOUR TALKING POINTS

The producer or reporter called you because you know the subject matter, but an interview is not a data dump. You need to make intentional choices about what you are going to say.

Here are some points for you to consider to help you achieve this goal:

- ① What would be the perfect “headline” for you? [Note: In television jargon this would actually be the chyron, the captioning you see that is usually at the bottom of the screen.]
- ② What is the number one thing you want viewers to know?
- ③ Once you answer these questions, get clear on your core message, that number one thing viewers need to hear. Then consider how you want to say it.
- ④ Develop up to three short phrases, 7-10 words each, that each encapsulate your core message. Keep them simple.
- ⑤ Remember—you may be talking with an anchor or reporter, but they are not the audience. Your audience is the viewer. Your sound bites should resonate with them.
- ⑥ Avoid trying to memorize a long sentence or paragraph. Focus on a few key phrases that help you express the point.
- ⑦ Metaphors or analogies are often the best way to do this.
- ⑧ Use vivid, interesting, or catchy language.
- ⑨ Appealing to your audience’s values or aspirations, rather than reciting data, is more persuasive.
- ⑩ Always avoid jargon.
- ⑪ If appropriate, try to use humor (not sarcasm) to illustrate your point. Do not use sarcasm. It does not translate well on TV and you will not like how it looks.

It is also a good idea to consider what the worst “headline” would be and to make sure that none of your talking points could possibly take you there.

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

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

Research: Research both the program and the interviewer. 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?

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?
- Will you all be in the studio or will some guests be remote?

If you have a choice (although you likely will not), always choose an in-studio interview over a satellite interview. You will not have to deal with an artificial environment, you will have a chance to establish rapport with the host, and you will be able to see the other guests.

Practice: In your early career, we recommend that you 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 hard questions and face easy ones than to be surprised. Later in your career, many quick-hit interviews will not require practice. You are always wise to practice for longer-form interviews, particularly those that feature oppositional hosts or guests.

APPEARANCE: PROJECT CREDIBILITY AND PROFESSIONALISM

The audience will assess your appearance and, even if unconsciously, make decisions about your credibility before you even begin to speak. With this in mind, the general principle is to wear clothes that help you project credibility and professionalism.

Here are some more specific guidelines:

- Do wear professional clothing.

- Do wear pastels. Spokespersons with darker skin tones can wear nudes and pastels.
- People have different cultural backgrounds. Do not be afraid to have that influence your clothing choices.
- Do wear fewer colors. It is less distracting to the viewer.
- Both men and women should be comfortable wearing makeup for an interview. Most things are shot in high definition. The tech staff are trying to make you look more professional; let them do their jobs.
- Do not wear stripes, checks, plaid, polka dots, flowers, or other patterns. The camera picks them up and visually emphasizes them, which can create odd effects on screen.
- Do not wear white—it is too bright. Do not wear very dark colors, especially black—they absorb light. Cream is a substitute for white. Dark greys and navy are a good substitute for black.
- Avoid distracting jewelry, such as dangly earrings and oversized pieces. One concrete example of jewelry to avoid is bangles that may make noise as you move your hands while speaking. This can be distracting.
- Many women of color go one shade lighter with their foundation, powder, etc. while many white women go one shade darker. If this is the case for you, relay this or ask the makeup artist to test the shade they're going to use on your face and adjust if necessary. In case you are not in a studio, you can also find makeup tips for video calls online.

INTERVIEWS USING VIDEO CONFERENCING SOFTWARE

[Note: Tips adapted from "How to Look Good on Camera, According to Tom Ford," New York Times, April 7, 2020]

- Place your laptop or other device so the camera lens is close to level with the top of your head. Often this is done by putting your device on a stack of books. Avoid having the camera below your head so it is looking up at you.
- There should be some space around your head.
- Your light source should come from in front of you, not behind you. A lamp or window behind your camera is good. Avoid having open windows or uncovered bright lights behind you.

- We suggest turning off self-view during your interview. It is distracting to see yourself when you are best focused on the questions and hitting your talking points. In Zoom, this is done by mousing over your image, then clicking on the three dots. One of the options that appears is “hide self-view.”
- Check your background. You want to be the most interesting thing in the camera view, and a pile of laundry can distract your audience.
- Tech staff will often say headphones with mics are a better option for sound quality. If you wear headphones, select a set that is minimally visible. This is not the time to break out your Hello Kitty headset.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

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

- ① All mics are hot. All cameras are on.
- ② Repeat your core message as often as you can, using your talking points as variations. It can be tricky to balance answering a reporter’s questions with delivering your own message, but you are a spokesperson and this is an interview, not a regular conversation.
- ③ It may feel odd, but you do not have to answer direct questions. You can pivot back to your core message. For example, you might say, “I think to understand this issue, the key point to remember is ... [insert your talking point.]”
- ④ A more advanced version is to use a keyword in the question as your pivot. For example if the reporter asks, “What did you have for breakfast?” You can respond, “As I was having breakfast today, I was thinking about ... [insert your talking point].”
- ⑤ It is okay to ask a reporter to repeat their question. Sometimes questions are unclear and you need clarification. Other times, you just need a moment to consider your answer. “Can you repeat the question, please? I am not sure I heard you fully,” is one example.
- ⑥ Every “um,” “like,” and other phrase you use repeatedly will be magnified, so be careful with your diction. Speaking slowly helps.
- ⑦ If you are doing a taped interview and you make a mistake, tell the producer you would like to stop and start over. You can ask about this before the interview begins so you know what the ground rules are.

TOP TIPS

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TIPS FOR TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

- 8 Keep your cool. Give calm, balanced answers and focus on presenting yourself as a confident, reasonable person.
- 9 If a reporter asks you a complex, multi-part question, answer the one part of that question that leads you back to the core message that you want to deliver.
- 10 If you are unclear where to look, ask the tech people before the interview starts where they prefer you look. Generally, if you are interviewing in-person with a host or other guests, make eye-contact with them. If you are doing a remote interview maintain eye-contact with the camera itself.
- 11 Smile. Refer to your host by name. This creates the impression of a warm conversation and projects confidence. But think of it as seasoning in a recipe: a little is good, if you repeat their name in every sentence, it becomes overwhelming.
- 12 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.
- 13 When the interview is over, do not get out of your seat until the producer or host tells you that you are done.

Contact ReThink Media if you need help preparing talking points or want to run through a mock interview for practice.