

# NINE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL MEDIA INTERVIEWS

The Hastings Group

**1** *Always have an agenda.* Every interview should be approached as an opportunity for you to "score" points. Before returning a media call or walking into an interview, take the time to decide what you hope to achieve. Focus on the two-four messages you want to communicate and make a conscious effort during the interview to get your points in -- and at least twice, for reinforcement purposes. If natural opportunities to assert your agenda do not arise, create your own openings. ("That's an important question, but let's not forget that ..." or "I've been asked that before, but I think the real issue here is ...")

**2** *Rehearse.* Always take adequate time to prepare yourself. Decide on your positions to obvious questions. Figure out what the tough questions will be. If possible, try your best answers out loud. Work on your responses until they sound "natural." While brief, pithy "sound bites" are useful for television, they may fall flat in print interviews. Trying to be clever can sap the concentration you need to stay on top in an interview. As a beginner, you should avoid the trap of fretting about coming up with "good quotes"; if you are comfortable with the process you will be sufficiently quotable.

**3** *Stay on the record.* Reporters assume that everything they see or hear is fair game to be reported. Never spill your guts and then say: "That's off the record." If what you said is newsworthy, even a "friendly" reporter may fail to honor your after-the-fact request for anonymity. Assume that everything is on the record and act accordingly. As a general rule, say only what you would feel comfortable seeing in print. At the same time, keep in mind that when you "clam up" reporters will have to rely on other sources, some of whom may have anything but your best interests in mind. The bottom line is that if you want your side of the story represented, you have to talk. Most reporters will reward candor with good coverage -- and repeat interviews.

**4** *Gather your thoughts before responding to a question.* The only time this doesn't work is on live television or radio, where "dead air" may be seen as a sign of evasion or a weak grasp of the issues. Taking your time in a print interview may permit you to spot interview tricks such as the loaded question, in which a reporter tries to get you to accept his or her definitions. Feel free to break questions into

components, if doing so will allow for a more clear or accurate response. If a question is unfair or contains incorrect information, reformulate it and then respond. (As in: "I'm sure that what you're trying to get at is ..." or "That's a good question, but somewhat misleading since ...")

If you are completely stumped by a hostile question for which you do not have a response, tell the reporter that you have a file or colleague that you need to consult in order to give an intelligent (or up-to-the-minute) answer. Do not betray a sense of panic. Instead, you should try to make it sound as though you are taking the question in stride and will be back to the reporter once you have the necessary information in hand. (If the reporter protests that he or she is on deadline, indicate that the delay will only be for a few minutes. Take advantage of this time to compose yourself – and an answer.)

**5** *Don't alienate reporters or try to convert them into friends.* An interview is a business transaction, plain and simple. It should not be approached as an opportunity to vent your spleen or, conversely, to win over someone with charm or guile. The biggest risk is that a reporter will take advantage of anger or a desire to please and use it to his or her advantage. Remember that some reporters deliberately ask what may seem like stupid, personal or insulting questions in an attempt to bait you into making an impatient or intemperate response. Don't take it personally.

Retain your calm throughout the interview, even if you feel rattled or caught off guard. A placid demeanor sends the message that you are in control. Stay confident: You have "the home court advantage," since you are light years ahead of the reporter when it comes to knowing the facts about your profession or issue. Reporters are human and throw far fewer unhittable "curveballs" than most people believe. Assume you are going to knock most of 'em right out of the park! Look for ways to "reroute" the story to favorable terms. Reporters are always in the market for "fresh angles"!

**6** *Stay off the defensive. The key to a successful interview is staying in control.* This requires a clear emphasis on accomplishments and plans for improvement of weak areas. If past successes are few, keep the focus on exciting goals or plans in the works. Come to every interview armed with a few, specific "nuggets" that illustrate your successes. Where possible, use anecdotes that involve vivid details, such as the real-life circumstances of real people. Offset areas of weak performance with details about accomplishments in other areas. An interviewee who goes on the defensive is likely to stay there and, as a result, seem weak and ineffective. Remember: Nobody scores points on defense. Forget about your ego – rest assured that nobody cares about it but you!

**7** *The "mother" rule.* Apply this simple rule of thumb to every interview situation: If your mother (or spouse or best friend) would have trouble understanding your answers, the chances are good that you will lose the reporter, too. Rightly or wrongly, most reporters interpret use of insider slang as a defense mechanism employed by interviewees who either don't know their stuff or have something to hide. Avoid bureaucratic jargon, legalese and industry-speak. Keep your answers within the boundaries of lay English. Doing so means that your message stands a much better chance of being understood without error.

The hard truth: Most reporting "misquotes" and "inaccuracies" are actually the fault of interview subjects who were too technical and left reporters guessing as to the meaning of their statements. In short, ambiguity is an engraved invitation to faulty or even negative coverage. *The appearance in print of an "out of context" quote is no one's fault but your own.* You supply the context, so make sure that the reporter gets it right. Watch the reporter's body language and, in particular, eye movement when you are speaking. These nonverbal cues provide dead giveaways as to whether or not they are following you.

**8** *Stick up for your rights.* When a reporter starts shooting pointed questions at you, stop the proceedings and ask what it is that he or she is trying to get at. You'll be better able to evaluate questions and frame your responses if you know, for example, that the reporter is doing a national trend story, rather than a profile of the accomplishments of your particular firm or office. Nail down the assumptions behind the questions or your quoted remarks may well end up wide of the mark or, as discussed above, "out of context". Don't be a victim. Assert yourself as an equal partner in the interview. Good reporters will not be offended or put off by an interviewee who wants to know why he or she has been contacted. This probing into the reporter's assumption and/or prior information also may provide you with ideas about how to steer the subject onto different and more positive terms or issues.

**9** *Always follow through on your swing.* Reporters are less likely to bite the hand of someone who has the potential to be a regular source of information. Always offer to be at the reporter's disposal for follow-up questions or as a resource for documents or other contacts that may have some bearing on the interview or the reporter's beat. When a positive development comes up days, weeks or months later, get back in touch with the reporter and fill him or her in on the good news. Even if you are treated badly by a reporter in the first go-around, stay in touch and be a good and steady source of future information. Reporters who are written off by "burned" sources have a tendency to come back around for a "second bite". A cause for hope: **Some of the best relationships between sources and reporters start out stormy.**