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## 2024 PENNSYLVANIA BUILDING OFFICIALS CONFERENCE Preparing for a Media Interview – Best Practices

Earned coverage in traditional news media is an incredibly powerful tool. A single news story can have a direct, long-lasting impact on a municipality's reputation – and yours. Despite today's rapidly changing news cycle, everything reported in the media has high visibility and a long shelf life on the internet, making effective communication more critical than ever.

### The “Golden Rules” of Interviewing

- Everything is on the record - always.
- If you don't want to see it in print, hear it on a broadcast, or see it hash-tagged on social media, don't say it.
- Never argue with a reporter.

### The Current Media Landscape

- News cycles have evolved from 24 hours to 24 x 7.
- To get a scoop, reporters are more given to “gotcha” reporting. To avoid this trap, it's important to establish credibility and viability by building relationships with reporters.
- Remember it's not easy for readers/viewers/followers to distinguish trustworthy news sources.
- The immediacy of social media reporting adds an extra layer of complexity. This means good news gets out faster, but it can also spread bad/wrong/incorrect information before it can be addressed.

### News Reporters

- They're looking for news, and how it affects their readers/viewers.
- They want a scoop, something their competitors don't have.
- By nature, they are skeptical about everything, so they may challenge what you say. This is only to ensure that they're getting accurate information.
- The more transparent you are with a reporter, the better the interview will go.
- If you're not transparent, reporters are trained to ask good follow-up questions, and they will find a way to get information (sometimes, from other sources).

### Key Principles of Interviewing

- Understand the media outlet and its audience and know who the reporter is and what topics the reporter wants to discuss (and why).
- For issue and crisis-related interviews: Understand the current internal and external environment and be prepared for a “worst case scenario.”
- Only discuss publicly disclosed information.
- Always safeguard undisclosed and proprietary information.
- Try to have professional communications support during an interview.

## Best-in-Class Interviewing Techniques

- In a face-to-face interview, always look into the reporter's eyes.
- Make sure you understand the reporter's question. Ask for clarification if unsure.
- Think before you answer any questions.
- Understand the key messages you want to convey.
- Answer the question that is asked. If it's a yes or no question, start with yes or no.
- Stick to provable facts, no opinions.
- Always tell the truth and be transparent.

## Message Preparation

- Know in advance the key messages you want to convey.
- Know the proof points that support those messages.
- Know the value of those messages to the audience of the media outlet – e.g., what's in it for them, why they should care.
- Use anecdotes to make the information easily understandable.

## Typical Interviewing Mistakes

- Not owning the message. Reporters will read this quickly.
- Trying to "spin" the message. This is a very dangerous trap to set for yourself.
- Not having a credible message. Transparency, again, is extremely important.
- Lack of "awareness." Especially during a video interview, body language, facial expressions, gestures, etc., can derail an interview (and sometimes a career) quickly. (to see how an interview can spin out of control quickly, click [here](#)).
- Misjudging the reporter or media outlet (to see what can go wrong during an interview when you presume too much familiarity or comfort, click [here](#)).
  - "It's a local publication, so they have to/will treat me fairly." They're reporters; their job is to provide news, not promote us.
  - "The reporter is a friend." Never take a pre-existing relationship for granted. They are reporters first and foremost.
  - "I'll start by going off the record." Provide background when necessary or important, but never go "off the record," because a good reporter will always find someone to say the same thing on the record.
  - "The reporter doesn't know what I know." Never presume that a reporter has not done his or her research adequately. Typically, they know more than we think.

## "Do's & Don'ts" of Interviewing

### Do:

- Be genuine (be yourself).
- Stick to your topic.
- Focus on key messages.
- Use simple, positive language.
- Relate understandable anecdotes & examples.

### Don't:

- Repeat a question you don't like (becomes a quote).
- Speculate or guess.
- Ramble.
- Use jargon and acronyms.
- Simply say "no comment."

## Proper “No Comment” Responses

- Proprietary information - “Because that information is proprietary, we are unable to comment on that.”
- Rumors and speculation - “We do not comment on rumors and speculation.”
- Personnel matters - “Because that is a personnel matter, we are unable to comment.”
- Lawsuits - “Because the matter is the subject of a legal proceeding, we are unable to comment.”

## Best Practices for Social Media

- Look at the source/sources of an attack.
- Determine the credibility of the threat before responding.
- Identify misinformation that needs to be addressed.
- Carefully assess all options before responding, including a non-response.
- When you respond:
  - stick to key messages,
  - look to inform, not antagonize,
  - don’t give credibility to uninformed sources,
  - focus on solutions, and,
  - double-check any links you include.

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