



Truman National Security Project

Tips for a Successful Media Interview

1. Know what you want to say.

NEVER LET THE MEDIA FRAME YOUR MESSAGE FOR YOU! Before going in for an interview, think about the one thing you want those who see or read you to remember, then say it yourself in one sentence. This is your basic message.

Your main message is your soundbite. Think about what is the main point you want your audience to remember after you're gone? When your audience member turns off the TV or radio show you were just on or throws away the newspaper article that contained your quote, what is it you want them to remember about what you said? What is the message you want them to be able to repeat to their spouse or neighbor? *That* is your main message. Repeat this exercise and you get message points two and three.

For example, if you are in favor of building alliances with other countries, start off by saying something like "building alliances with other countries is the best way to keep Americans safe." Your supporting points might be: "National security presidents like FDR and Truman supported our alliances with other countries because they let us share the burden of national security costs, rather than bearing all the costs on our shoulders." Even if the host should cut you off, you'll have already associated your policy (alliances) with the idea of national security.

Why do you have to make your point in 30 seconds? Well, that's the longest you will get before a media host or debating partner is likely to interrupt. It's reality. Find your main message, and keep it short.

2. Stay on your basic message.

Make sure that, no matter what the question is, you give an answer that supports your basic message. Remember – the interviewer will have an agenda; you must have yours.

To help you stay on message, use transition phrases. Here are a few examples: "That's an interesting question John, but my constituents are more concerned about..." or "The real issue here is..." or "What's relevant to this debate is..." You get the idea. The goal is not to avoid the question, the goal is to stick to your message and say what you came to say.

This doesn't mean you should be impolite. You do need to acknowledge his or her questions, but make sure to include your talking points in the answer. For instance, if you are trying to drive home the importance of alliances, and your interlocutor asks about America's nuclear arsenal, you might say, "America's weapons systems play a role in

national security—but we need allies to really be secure—terrorists plotting in London can't be stopped by a nuclear bomb, after all.”

Be ready for the three types of questions: (1) the easy question, where the interviewer tees up the response you want to give, (2) the vague or open-ended question, where you have to first explain the topic and what's at stake yourself and then deliver your message; (3) the overly-specific question, where you have to pivot away from the question asked to make the points you want to make. The first is easy, and the third you watch out for, but the second is deceptively hard – you get to say what you like, but you have to be ready to explain the whole topic concisely.

3. Show that you care about keeping Americans safe.

This sounds a bit cliché, but it is still crucial to successfully marketing an idea. A common bit of advice that acting coaches give actors is that the audience only believes in the story as much as they believe in themselves. You need to really care about Americans' right to live in safety, and you need to convey that to your audience.

Remind Americans that our policies are meant to keep them safe, and that you care about keeping America secure—that is not self-evident!

4. Personalize your message

In order to connect with your audience, you must use language familiar to them and examples that make sense in their daily lives.

When President Bush was trying to sell his tax cut to the public, he frequently talked about (and had standing behind him) “a family of four making \$50,000 who would get \$1825 from this tax cut.” The president's advisors knew if this tax cut was going to gain momentum with the public, the public had to see how it would affect them. Al Gore similarly drew attention to the high cost of prescription drugs by reminding audiences of Winifred Skinner, a grandmother who was collecting aluminum cans to pay for high drug costs. When boosters for the Chicago World's Fair at the turn of the last century described the statistics for the huge building they were creating, they got no press play—the numbers meant nothing. Finally, one worker said, “the building will be so big that the entire Russian standing army would be able to fit inside it!” That statement got quoted coast to coast, and Rand McNally even created pictures for schoolbooks of the building with fur-hatted soldiers standing inside!

When politicians and advocates use big numbers and make high-brow philosophical arguments, the public often has a hard time seeing how any of it personally impacts their lives. Instead, show them through easy to picture examples, anecdotes, and picturesque language. Make them feel what they have to gain or lose—don't make them guess. You have a much better chance of connecting with them, and therefore persuading them.

5. Don't load your audience up with details and information.

Policy facts are interesting. *But those facts don't directly affect the welfare of each person.* Americans are busy people. They have busy lives and don't have the time or the interest in becoming an expert on everything. Yet in the policy world, we flood our audience with information that they just can't process. Because of this, many good ideas get lost in the stacks of paper.

Instead, focus on the core values and the end results you want. What do we want in Iraq? A policy that keeps Americans safe and gives our troops the leadership they need. What do Americans need to know about energy? That reducing demand for oil puts less money in the pockets of countries like Iran and other oil states that threaten us, and gives us a freer hand to not intervene in the Middle East. They don't need to know biology to understand bioterror, and they don't need to understand the energy market to understand why oil dependence is bad for our security.

6. Be likable.

One of the true keys of conducting a successful interview is to be "likeable." You'll be surprised how much better you look if you just smile! Just remember that smile has to come from inside, not be pasted on – you have to feel it. Also remember only to smile in appropriate moments – when greeting your interviewer, or talking about how Americans can come together, etc. – NOT when discussing threats or negative consequences.

This also means that – as much as possible – you should refrain from responding to attacks. If your host, or another guest, attacks you, just smile and say, "I'm not interested in personal attacks. My concern here is making sure that the government does its job and keeps Americans safe." If you get angry, people at home will also assume you have something to hide.

7. Tone of voice matters.

Americans are inundated by television, and most TV viewers forget the majority of what is said. What they remember is the emotion you convey. Are you tough? Compassionate? Ditzzy? Serious?

Your tone of voice and rate of speech convey your emotions. If you're tone is loud, you will likely come across as angry. If you're speaking quickly, you're exuding excitement and a sense of urgency. If you're tone is soft, you come across as compassionate. If you're speaking at a slow pace, you're calm and understanding. Make sure you are using the tone of voice that accurately communicates the emotion you want to convey. There is much about the media you can't control. You can't control what questions will be asked, the bias of the reporter, or what a caller might say on a radio program, but you can control your tone of voice.

8. Avoid wearing pale colors, patterns, or too much bling.

Don't dress like a frumpy or out-of-touch activist, or believe you can get away with a less polished look even if you're young. If you want to be taken seriously, dress seriously. *Do* wear a well-tailored suit, navy or gray; textured weaves like wool or cashmere look better on TV. Stay away from orange, green, white and pastels or light colors in general—the former make you look sallow, the latter wash you out. When it comes to suits, navy and gray are good basics. Women can brighten them up with colored blouses underneath and men can do the same with shirts and ties. It's better to over-dress than under-dress. Men should be sure to wear long socks; short socks can expose your skin when you cross your legs. Women should be conscious of skirt length. In some interview settings a too-short skirt will detract from your presentation.

Men should choose a tie with a simple design that won't jump on camera. Try folding your tie in half from side to side. Do both sides look the same? If so, it's probably a good choice. Don't wear herringbone, plaid or busy striped suits or dresses. It will be hard for the camera to focus on you, and you'll seem to be moving, even when sitting still. Don't wear bright jewelry, including tie bars, lapel pins, broaches or large earrings.