Prepare, Respond, and Follow Up

In a perfect world, we would be able to generate exactly the media coverage we want for our organizations, in exactly the way we want it. We would be able to schedule interviews and press events on our own timeline with journalists who understand the value of our work and effectively communicate it to their audiences. There would never be a crisis in need of a response, and we would never be misquoted.

However, we live in the real world, and it is likely that you will receive requests for interviews or comments when you least expect them. If your organization is prepared to respond to these requests, you can substantively improve the chances of getting good coverage that spreads your messages accurately and further builds public trust.

Five key points for preparation, response, and follow-up

1. Make certain your organization has a media policy in place and everyone understands how to handle media requests.
2. Identify your spokesperson(s) and promote spokesperson training to ensure that they are comfortable in the role.
3. Learn as much as possible about the request before committing to a response—but be respectful of media deadlines.
4. Have an array of talking points/messages prepared in advance that speak to your issues and audiences.
5. Follow up after media interviews and monitor your media coverage/reach.

1. Make certain your organization has a media policy in place and everyone understands how to handle media requests.

Your organization may already have a media policy in place and an office through which all requests are channeled. You should check with your Public Information Officer (PIO) or other media point of contact for your organization to learn more. If not, you will want to develop a policy that outlines how and to whom requests should be prioritized and directed.
A thorough media policy should:

- Identify the person(s) who will handle requests as they come in.
- Outline a specific process for receiving and triaging requests. This can be a simple form that identifies such things as:
  - Media outlet, journalist, and deadline information.
  - The issue or topic at hand.
  - Level of priority/importance for any request.
  - With whom do they wish to speak and when?
    - Are they speaking with anyone else?
    - Is this story a response to breaking news? For a feature?
    - Will this interview be live or recorded?
    - Do they need anything else (B-roll, photographs, etc.)?
- Define a clear, standard operating procedure for processing each request and obtaining important approvals.
- Include contact information for everyone who is involved with handling or responding to media requests.
- Provide additional do’s and don’ts for handling media requests. This can include steps to be taken by those not authorized to engage the media, processes for interviews that are conducted at or away from your organization’s offices, and any policies on privacy or confidentiality your organization may have.

2. Identify your spokesperson(s) and promote spokesperson training to ensure that they are comfortable in the role.

While everyone within your organization should be able to speak accurately about your issues and work, it’s important to designate those within your organization and amongst your partners who can step into the role of public spokesperson.
Your spokesperson(s) should evoke trust. Look to your organization’s subject matter experts and leaders or those who have regular contact with the public in the course of their work.

Once chosen, your spokesperson(s) should be prepared to work with the media. Messages and talking points that speak to your issues and are tailored for different audiences should be on hand (addressed below).

Spokesperson training may be of benefit as well. It can help refine messages, strengthen interview skills, and develop techniques for answering difficult questions.

3. Learn as much as possible about the request before committing to a response—but be respectful of media deadlines.

Media interviews reach wide audiences—it’s important to be prepared and poised before doing an interview. Therefore, when an interview is requested, a spokesperson should resist the urge to speak until he or she has had a few moments to decide whether to do the interview. If the spokesperson agrees, he or she may need to get internal approval from their organization and take time to gather information.

These considerations can assist you in that process:

- How might participating in this interview benefit your community/promote your messages?
- Is there a downside to saying “no” to this particular media request?
- What does the organization know about the reporter? Is there an existing relationship (e.g., positive, negative) with the reporter or media outlet?
- What is the reason or context for this interview? Is this in response to breaking news, or is this for a feature story?
- Does the reporter already know/understand/have an opinion about your issue?
- Are any key questions available in advance?
- Will this interview be printed or broadcast? When?
- What audience(s) are likely to see/hear/read this interview?
- Has the media reached out to the correct spokesperson within your organization? Are you the best person, or is someone else better suited for this opportunity?
Communication Fundamentals

Responding to Media Requests: A How To Guide

4. Have an array of talking points/messages prepared in advance that speak to your issues and audiences.

One of the most critical jobs of any spokesperson is to represent your organization’s issues and positions with accuracy, clarity, and consistency. This is often described as “staying on message.”

Of course, it’s tough to stay on message if no message has been developed. That’s why crafting messages tailored to your audiences that can be adapted and used in talking points and media interviews is critical.

We recommend a simple and concrete 4-step process for framing your messages:

1. **Specify the problem in your community.** Grab attention by presenting a compelling fact or real life example. Avoid using difficult-to-understand percentages or public health jargon.

2. **Illustrate the current landscape.** Explain why this issue matters. Explain what is at stake—and what the consequence is if nothing is done. You can illustrate the number of people impacted with human stories of local residents by providing compelling local data and appealing to the core values and priorities of your community.

3. **Describe the solution.** Provide a sense of hope. Help audiences see that the solution is realistic and achievable. Offer concrete examples of successes you are seeing (data, stories) and link your progress back to your community’s core values and priorities.

4. **Define what the individual or groups should do.** Clarify how audiences can support your solution—either individually or collectively—with realistic, concrete direction.

Remember “one size does not fit all,” and different audiences respond to different messages. A spokesperson should prepare to speak to a media outlet with their audience in mind.

5. **Follow up after media interviews and monitor your media coverage/reach.**

**Say thank you.** It’s called “media relations” for a reason—we want to build long-term relationships with journalists. It is entirely appropriate to follow up after any interview with a note or call expressing your thanks for the opportunity to share your message. This simple show of courtesy will be appreciated—and remembered.
**Responding to Media Requests: A How To Guide**

**Monitor your coverage.** Be sure to take a look at every final, edited interview. Make sure you keep a record of the event as well as a list of media outlets (and contact information for particular reporters) you’ve worked with or want to engage in the future.

Add links to your Web site, save clippings and .pdf files, and archive video links. All of this earned media helps tell your story, over time, to your community and stakeholders.

It’s possible you may be misquoted or misrepresented in the final news story. If you find yourself in this situation, respond promptly and offer a polite clarification, in writing. You may also ask a partner to help with this effort. Focus on facts, not opinion, and offer that your organization may have been responsible for any misunderstanding. The media outlet may or may not correct their mistake, but you will have acted with professionalism and grace.

**Track your reach.** Most media interviews and stories reach wide and diverse populations. Quantifying your reach and impressions is an important part of your communication efforts. This earned media offers an important snapshot of your efforts. It summarizes the kinds of coverage you’ve received, gives an overview of how many people have likely heard, seen, or read the story, and offers insight into the actual value of that coverage had it been paid for. The simple table below illustrates core information you will want to capture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>Time Period of Placements</th>
<th>Circulation/Viewers/Listeners</th>
<th>Media Impressions</th>
<th>Value of coverage (earned only)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
<td>206,094.00</td>
<td>618,282.00</td>
<td>6,000.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
<td>208,890.00</td>
<td>1,294,450.00</td>
<td>10,500.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Print</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
<td>99,092.00</td>
<td>191,184.00</td>
<td>2,200.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/New Media</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outdoor</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>04/2012-03/2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
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<td>514,076.00</td>
<td>2,110,916.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Media outlets should be able to provide you with important information like audience size, demographics, and rates. Ask outlets for their advertising rate cards. These will also be able to help you calculate the value of each story. Many media outlets publish this information on their Web sites.