

# On the Record

## Steps for a Successful Interview

By D'Lyn Ford, media relations trainer

Whether you are new to working with the media or experienced in giving interviews, you can improve your ability to communicate clearly in your role as a county official. While the reporter chooses the questions in the interview, you have control of your preparation. Successful interviews help inform the public, build your credibility and establish a foundation for effective long-term relationships with the media.

### Preparing for the interview

When a reporter calls to request an interview, be sure to ask a few questions of your own:

- What is your name and which media outlet do you represent?
- What is your deadline for getting the interview?
- What is the interview topic?
- When will the story be printed or broadcast?
- Who else will be interviewed for the story?

Before you meet with the reporter, take a few minutes to think through what you want to say. If the request is for an immediate phone interview, offer to call back in 15 minutes. Use that time to prepare. Write down three points you want to make. Each should be one to two sentences long. Say them out loud. If you have time, have a co-worker ask you questions for practice. If there's a question you dread, prepare your answer.

The one absolute rule of giving interviews is to tell the truth. If you cannot legally answer a question (because it deals with a pending personnel issue, for example), say why. Don't say "No comment." It sounds as if you have something to hide.

You are never "off the record." Assume that everything you say in the reporter's presence could be made public, even if the camera is off or the reporter has stopped taking notes. Say nothing during an interview that you'd be embarrassed to have your mother or your boss hear.

### During the interview

Tailor your approach to newspaper, radio and television interview formats.

For newspapers

- Remember your main points.
- Talk no faster than with the reporter can write. Pause to give the reporter time to catch up.
- Use correct grammar to reinforce your professional image.
- Use common terms instead of acronyms. Define any specialized terms you use.
- Provide background information in writing, if you have it.

### For radio

- Find out what general questions will be asked before the interview begins.
- Imagine you are talking with a friend who knows nothing about your topic.
- Pronounce your words distinctly. If you have a speech impediment or accent that prevents you from being understood, consider having someone act as a spokesperson.
- Try to stay the same distance from the microphone. Turn away if you have to cough.

### For television

In addition to previous suggestions:

- Wear comfortable clothing that's appropriate for the setting. Keep a jacket and tie or TV-friendly outfit ready for office interviews.
- Slim-fitting clothes in medium tones—blues, greens or grays—are most flattering. Black and white clothes or loud prints are least flattering. Avoid clothing with fine stripes, tiny checks or small houndstooth patterns, which can create problems for the camera. Avoid excessive shiny jewelry.
- Use makeup or face powder if needed. Powder can eliminate distracting shiny spots on a face or balding head and help conceal five o'clock shadow. A woman's normal makeup should be acceptable.
- Lean forward slightly in your chair and sit still during the interview. Avoid chairs that rock or swivel.
- Look at the reporter, not the camera. If you're uncomfortable with direct eye contact, focus on the reporter's forehead between the eyes.
- When you have made your point, stop talking and wait for the next question.

## Following the interview

Give the reporter your business card to ensure that your name and title will be correct. Never ask to review or approve the reporter's story. However, offer to be available for follow-up questions, clarification or additional information.

Realize that the interview will be condensed in the writing and editing process. Only your most striking statements will be directly quoted. Others will be paraphrased. The order of information may be changed and its emphasis may be downplayed or highlighted. Some points may be omitted because there is not enough time or space. Other points of view may be added, changing the focus of the story.

Listen to your radio interview, watch the TV story or read the newspaper article to see which information was used. Listen to feedback from your constituents, co-workers, friends and family members. Monitor local and regional media to become familiar with reporters and learn who covers the county government beat.

Remember, interviews get easier with practice. Keep at it!