

'Handling the Media'



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Using the media – why and how

The media is very powerful. Harness its power and you will find it does you more good than bad.

The public sector in particular can use the media to get across vital information to the public, whether the story is ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

Information in this booklet is for guidance but you should always work closely with your organisation’s communications team/press office on any media work. Normally, they would lead on any involvement with journalists.

Media contact normally falls into two categories:

Proactive: This is where you approach the media with a story you want to get publicised.

This is usually when something positive is happening, such as a new service being launched or you have achieved success. However, you sometimes need to be proactive when a negative issue has emerged. For example, a hospital may need the media’s help to inform a group of patients if there are concerns about their treatment.

It’s important to make sure your organisation works proactively with the media and builds relationships with key journalists.

Reactive: This is where the media contact you for a comment on a story they plan to print or broadcast. This can be when something ‘bad’ is claimed to have happened or possibly a ‘good’ story has emerged about your organisation. You may also be asked to give a comment to a local journalist on a national issue, or to a national journalist about a local issue.

Whenever your organisation takes a media call from a journalist contacting you about a reactive issue, you must decide whether it is appropriate for you to give a comment. Then you must take time to prepare any response.

Is the story relevant to your organisation?

Are you responsible for the issue?

Is there something to gain from giving a comment?

What makes a news story?

There are lots of characteristics which make up a news story. Here are a few, which should give you a clue to what sort of stories could put your organisation in the media spotlight:

Current/newly revealed – news is normally ‘new’

Controversial – journalists like rows or disputes over issues

Fear/risk – you must try to ensure the journalist reports risk appropriately

Injustice – the media sees its role as fighting for the public

League tables – the best/worst performing school, hospital, etc

Research/surveys – conduct your own, or comment on someone else’s?

New services – make sure you explain the benefit or impact on the community

Human interest – something the audience relates to. Often a ‘real’ person tells their story.

Relevant – local or relevant to the journalist’s readership/audience

Topical – this issue is flavour of the month, so the story may get more exposure

Awards/success – if you’ve achieved something, tell the world

Pictures – photocalls can bring a story to life

Case studies – reporters want to talk to ‘real’ people affected by a story

Scandal – when something’s gone wrong and it should have been prevented, or there’s corruption

Simplicity – reporters like simple language and arguments their audience will understand

Soundbites – a dramatic or colourful phrase can make the headlines, whether it was intentional or not!

How to handle a media call

Make sure you and other staff stick to your organisation's media handling protocol. This will normally mean a nominated person or team takes and makes media calls in the first instance.

If you take a call from a journalist, remember:

- Never say the phrase 'no comment' – it makes you sound guilty even if you're not. Use another way to explain that you can't give a response.
- Ask their contact details.
- Pass the details to your communications team/press officer **OR, if appropriate** (bearing in mind your media handling protocol), continue to ask:
 - What are the basic details of the story?
 - What's the source of the story?
 - What questions do they have (but expect others too)?
 - Who else are they talking to?
 - If it's radio/TV, ask if the interview would be live/prerecorded
 - What's the deadline?
 - Explain when you or someone else will call them back.

Be calm, polite and helpful, but don't give any comment or conduct an interview during this first call. This first contact should be a chance for you to ask questions. You should not give an interview or comment at this stage.

Media statement or interview?

You must decide whether it's appropriate to comment at all on the story. Is it relevant to your organisation? Are there any legal/confidentiality issues?

If you do decide to respond, a pre-prepared statement will often suffice for the print media, although they sometimes prefer to talk to someone to get a fuller understanding – or a more 'exciting' story. A media statement, where it's possible to give one, can help you avoid being misquoted or saying things you shouldn't. Discuss the options with your organisation's media lead. The broadcast media usually prefer someone to talk to, for obvious reasons.

Handling a media interview

If you decide to accept a request for a media interview, treat it as an opportunity to get some important messages across to the public. Whether the story is 'good' or 'bad' you must prepare properly and ensure your messages are not lost.

Top tips for success:

- **Do your research** – know who you're being interviewed by, their style, their audience, and how much they plan to use (full interview, short sentence or two...)
- **Ask them what questions they want to ask** you in the interview (but expect surprises).
- **PREPARE** (more on this later).
- **Brief the journalist before you start the interview** – before they begin, ask them if you can give them some background. They may know nothing about the story. But don't talk off the record, it's still being recorded/noted down.
- **Avoid jargon** – remember your audience and use language they will understand. Don't lose your key messages because of jargon.
- **Prepare a small number of key messages**, say them at the start and keep bringing your answers back to them.
- **Be passionate** – especially during a broadcast interview, your tone and body language should reinforce your message.
- **Stay calm** – even if the questioning and style get aggressive, remain calm and focused on your messages.
- **Focus on benefits and impact** of the issue – explain how your work is benefiting the public.
- **Don't be afraid to say you don't know** something or that it's not your area of expertise/responsibility. Don't be led into blaming others.
- **Empathise** – if there is fear or anxiety about an issue, acknowledge this.
- **Beware 'off the record'** or 'speaking personally' – don't say things you don't want printed or broadcast. You're representing your organisation.
- **Use examples** – they explain complicated issues and 'prove' your point.
- **Be quotable** – give your key messages impact by using powerful, memorable language. You will find these become the 'soundbites'.

Soundbites

Journalists often want just a couple of sentences for their report and will use the most dramatic or interesting thing you say. You can use this in your preparation. Prepare (but don't try to read!) snappy phrases or sentences that sums up your key points.

Interview Preparation

Before any media interview, spend a few minutes filling in the guide below and you will have a stronger chance of success.

3 key messages: (what are the most important messages for your audience)

Example: (what simple examples or anecdotes will reinforce your messages. Do you have any simple but compelling statistics)

Questions: (what questions should you expect – both factual and difficult/awkward)

Handling difficult questions

When you face difficult questions you may get away with ignoring them, with some reporters. But if you're doing a broadcast interview, and especially if it's live, the reporter may feel you're being dismissive or arrogant, and simply ask you again!

It may be useful to remember your **ABC**:

Address/acknowledge the question

Bridge away from it, then...

Communicate one of your key messages

For example:

Q: "You're cutting your budget – local people will suffer!"

A: (Address...) "We don't think so. Like all departments, we are having to spend less (Bridge...) "however (then Communicate...) "We have changed the way we work to ensure we keep all our services running."

Bad news or crisis? Remember your 3 R's:

REGRET (empathy)

REASON (investigation / cause)

REMEDY (action taken)

Handling a media interview (continued)

Where possible, almost every question should eventually lead to one of your key messages. This way, you stay in safe territory and your key messages become the theme. Remember, it's okay to 'Address' a question with a brief but polite rebuttal, before moving on. It's also okay to address a question but saying you are not the right person to answer it, so long as it makes sense to the audience.

Most important is that the key messages to bridge back to are clear, interesting, relevant and quotable.

Newspapers, Radio and TV

There are some important differences between print, radio and TV interviews. Here are a few points to bear in mind:

Newspapers

- More chance to discuss the background with the reporter.
- More risk of waffling or going 'off message' because it can feel like a friendly chat – stay focused.
- You can be paraphrased or quoted out of context. Don't simply agree with a question/summary of facts from the reporter unless you're happy with the exact words used.

Radio

- Is it live or pre-recorded? If live, you could face a more aggressive or pacey interview because the presenter has an audience to please. The presenter is there to act for the audience. If pre-recorded, find out how much they want to use. If they plan to replay the whole prerecorded interview it may still be aggressive or pacey. If they just want a soundbite or two, the interview may be more relaxed and even disjointed. But stay focused.
- Speak clearly, not too fast, in the appropriate tone. It's not just what you say, but how you say it.
- In person or over phone? If you can make it into the studio or meet the journalist in person, do so. You'll sound warmer and more engaging.
- Is anyone else on air with you? When arranging the interview, you want to know if they plan to put you live up against an 'opponent' or disgruntled person. It's often better to avoid 'face the enemy' interviews if possible.

TV

- Dress appropriately. Dress smartly and with nothing distracting. Avoid all black. Remember, TV studios get very warm so don't wear too many layers. Avoid elaborate jewellery or accessories.
- Eye contact is crucial. Look at the reporter during the interview, avoid the camera and try not to look to the side, down at the floor or up at the sky! Some interviews are 'down-the-line' where you are not with the person asking the questions. In this situation focus on the camera lense and imagine it's your audience.
- Don't fidget or move around. You will look nervous and less credible.
- Smile where appropriate, for example while being introduced. It makes you appear warmer and more natural.
- When the interview is finished, stay where you are for another few seconds. No strange facial expressions or gestures. Say and do nothing you might regret even when you think you're off air.



Remember, a media interview is a chance to get your messages across. **Don't waste it.**

Press releases

A well-written press release can help you gain useful publicity. A poorly written one will go in the bin or could be distorted as the reporter tries to make sense of it.

Here are 10 top tips to help:

- **Decide your angle** – a reporter should be able to identify the story straight away. The headline should show the angle clearly.
- **Make your most important point first** – focus on the most exciting or news-worthy facts at the start of the press release, to hook the reporter in.
- **Avoid jargon** – use ordinary every day language the reader will understand.
- **Get the facts right** – get them right, and don't leave out anything important.
- **Use quotes** – have direct quotes from named people in the press release. These should contain some comment or emotion, and show how exciting the story is.
- **Third-party endorsement?** – can you contact another organisation involved and get them to include an agreed quote in your press release? It almost gives the reporter a ready-made story and adds credibility.
- **Keep it short** – don't waffle on with long-winded sentences, and keep the whole thing to one or two pages
- **Photocall?** – Does the story lend itself to a photocall? If so, think about inviting the media to a photocall, but there are no guarantees they'll turn up.
- **Contact** – at the end of the press release, make sure there are contact details for someone suitable who can give further information to the reporter.
- **Notes to editors** – this is a section after the formal press release is finished, in which you include more background or technical information which you are happy to see published.

Remember...there are no guarantees your press release will be used, and if it is, it may be changed significantly before going to print. Write it clearly, make sure it gets to the right person, and you increase your chances of success.



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NHS Foundation Trust Director

Mark Brealey Communications

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