

Dos and Don'ts When Working With The Media

DO:

Stay On Message

Give concise, to-the-point answers (prepare written talking points to stay on track). Go into an interview with two or three points you wish to make – then make them, no matter what questions are asked. Get to key messages by ‘bridging’ to your answers—turning the question around and returning to your point.

Listen To The Questions Asked (Even if the Question is Asked of Someone Else)

Ask a reporter to clarify what he or she means if you don't understand a question. If necessary, take time to think about an answer before you give it. Also, it's important to look at and address the person who is speaking to you.

Be Accessible

If you're going to work with the media, you're going to have to accept that reporters live by the deadline. That doesn't mean you have to do an interview unprepared, though. Set a time to talk that will meet both the needs of the reporter and your own needs as well.

Provide Written Background Information and Follow Through According to the Reporter's Deadline

It is very helpful to send a reporter some information in advance to help reporters to better grasp the subject matter you'll be talking about and provide information as follow up (especially if you have promised to do so). This will help better position you and the organization in the final story. Your national organization's web site [www.vor.net] has almost all of our publications available on the web.

Remember “Repetition equals Retention”

You cannot repeat your key message too often. It's said that your audience may need to be informed of your key messages as many as seven times for the information to sink in!

DON'T:

Use professional jargon or acronyms

Keep your message simple, but not condescending. Even though terms like “HHS,” “DOJ,” “CMS” or “I/DD” may seem very familiar to you, don't assume the reporter will know what you mean.

Say ‘No Comment’

This can make you seem unresponsive, or, worse yet, evasive or guilty! If it is a question you don't want to answer, use it as an opportunity to bridge to a question you DO want to answer!

Go ‘Off The Record’

NEVER go off the record unless you have known the reporter for a very long time and you trust him or her. NEVER speak off the record for the electronic media. If you don't want a statement quoted, don't say it!

Lie, Embellish, Or Generalize

You WILL be caught. Honesty and credibility are valuable – once you lose either, it's nearly impossible to get it back.

Be Defensive Or Lose Your Temper

You lose control of an interview if you respond in kind to what you perceive as a personal attack. On the other hand, it is okay to object to a line of questioning you believe to be unfair or that asks you to reveal personal information.

Let Inaccurate Statements Go Unchallenged

If you feel a reporter has made a mistake or ‘put words in your mouth,’ correct it immediately, or, if necessary, even after the interview is over.

Feel Pressured To Fill An Awkward Silence

It's a little trick reporter's will use to make you say something stupid – because when people try to fill the silence, they aren't thinking as clearly and are more apt to say something unplanned. Don't fall in the trap!

Be Afraid To Say ‘I Don't Know’

It's fine as long as you also say “I will find out the answer and make sure to get back to you.” If it is a question you cannot answer, say so and direct the reporter to another source of information. Just don't use it too often!