

Short Sound Bite Secrets

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“That’s not what I said!” That is a common complaint people have after seeing their interview incorporated in a radio or television piece. But ask yourself, was this really taken out of context, or did the reporter just not have time to include the entire response?

Interviews may last for 10 or 15 minutes, but just a few lines will likely appear in the story. Reporters have to tell the entire story in one to two minutes (and sometimes even less).

The secret to getting one’s message in radio and television news stories is to make it easy for the reporter to use them by responding to questions with short, concise answers. This is known in media jargon as a “sound bite.”

Key Concepts to Remember

Delivering a key message or solid sound bite requires skill and technique. Outlined below are several techniques for elected officials to consider when responding to a reporter’s questions.

Develop Your Key Message in Advance

When a reporter calls or emails, take a few minutes to try to find out what information the reporter hopes to get from the interview and who the audience is. Develop two to three key messages to emphasize. The way to do this is to make them in single sentences in the active voice. Work with agency staff to provide supporting data and sync messages for consistency with the latest media strategy. Keep information simple and easy to understand.

Be Prepared

To ensure a successful interview, know and practice messages. Before the interview, write up a list of anticipated questions and practice the answers.

The Institute is grateful to Jann Taber for preparing this piece. Ms. Taber has thirty years’ experience in media relations working with government officials, public agencies, non-profit organizations, and private firms.

Have someone ask these questions as well as some surprise questions to practice concise answers. Use a clock or stopwatch to time answers. Aim for seven seconds.

Speaking faster to squeeze an answer into seven seconds is cheating! Speak at a pace that allows clear articulation of each word. Practice, but do not memorize answers. The goal is to sound spontaneous and conversational.

Make Answers Simple

Answer questions as if speaking to a friend. Do not use jargon, acronyms, wonky terms or complex words.

“If you can't explain it to a six year old, you don't understand it yourself.”

- Albert Einstein

One would never say to a friend, “the financial condition of the agency is difficult because the revenue stream is not keeping pace with the expenditures and we face the possibility of having a deficit.” Instead, one might say, “Things are tough right now because we don't have enough money to pay the agency bills.”

Reporters are more likely to use sound bites that average resident can relate to and understand.

Be Relaxed and Personable

One of the reasons Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were so successful was their ability to speak to YOU and only you. When answering a question, imagine speaking to someone. When being interviewed by a television reporter, look at the reporter when answering the questions, not at the camera. The reporter is the conduit for getting information to the community, not the end consumer of the information.

Remain Focused

It's okay to pause for a few moments before answering a question. This provides an opportunity to focus on one's answers. Stick to one subject at a time. Lead with the most important point first. Then give an explanation or additional information to back it up.

Try to include your two to three main points as often as possible. The interview is likely to be edited prior to publishing or broadcasting. Repeating the main points reduces the possibility that key messages will be edited out.



Additional Resource for Working with the Media

A companion piece to this tip sheet, “Media Relations Tips for Newly Elected Officials,” is available on the Institute's website:

www.ca-ilg.org/working-media

Speak Clearly and Confidently

Most people use non-words like “umm” and “uhh” unconsciously. Not only do non-words fill up precious time, they can make a speaker sound boring, uneducated and unsure. Instead, pause without sound.

Stay Away From Traps

Avoid filling in silences. After responding to the question and delivering one’s key message, stop talking and wait for the next question. Many reporters will pause to make sure the interviewee is finished. Natural human reaction is to fill in these silences with more talking. Stick to the message, give the answer, and stop talking.

Sometimes a reporter will ask a question one cannot answer or does not want to answer. Say one does not have the information they need. If it is a policy not to discuss certain issues, it is fair to say "It's our policy not to discuss XYZ" and then bridge on to what the agency can talk about. Never say “no comment.” It sounds like the agency is hiding something.

Avoid saying things “off the record.” If it was not meant for the public’s ears, don’t share it with a reporter. Avoid saying anything you don’t want as the lead story of the news.

Sometimes a question may be based on wrong information. A good strategy is to lead with correction information, if possible without framing the information as a denial.

The Basic Questions

Reporters will generally ask basic who, what, when, where, why and how questions.

Who

Who is most affected by this issue?
Who will foot the bill for this initiative?

What

What does an official know about an issue, and what still needs to be learned?
What does this mean for a city, county, or region?
What do officials see taking shape because of this development?
What would it take to create change on this issue?

When

When did officials first become aware of this development?
When do officials think this will be resolved?

Why

Why did this happen?
Why should residents or voters care?

How

How does an official make a difference in addressing this issue?
How can constituents take action or access additional information?

A clear and concise response to a reporter’s questions provides an opportunity to convey important information to the public.

Speak in Complete Thoughts

It is good practice to include part of the question in one's answer to ensure a complete thought. Remember, a quote is going to stand-alone so it should be easily understood without any set-up.

Question: What should people know about staying safe in this area's hiking trails?

Answer: If you want to stay safe when hiking in the "City of / County of X", the single most important thing to do is always stay on the marked trails.

When appropriate, consider starting each response with your agency's name.

Question: What efforts are being taken to conserve resources?

Answer: "The 'City of / County of' X has established aggressive sustainability goals to help conserve resources and save money."

Overcome Your Fear

Microphones, cameras and lights can often create nervousness. The practiced seven second answer may turn into a long, rambling answer spoken too quickly in a real interview situation. Nervousness may cause one's voice to go up a pitch, or break up completely, which can undermine one's credibility.

One option is to practice to increase one's comfort delivering messages in a real interview situation.

Conclusion

Interviews are an opportunity for an elected official to deliver a message in a clear, concise manner. Thinking through key messages and using these techniques to shape sound bites will help establish credibility and poise. Remember, the reporter is talking to the official as an expert. Media needs officials and officials need the media, so be prepared and welcome this opportunity to bring key information to the public.

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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