

## Interviewing Like a Pro

When your media work pays off and you get an interview, you'll need to prepare for it. With the exception of a few taped interviews, most are live and led by an interviewer who most likely won't have the same objectives for the interview that you do. Remember: Not all coverage is good coverage. Depending on the topic and the media personality involved, it may be better to decline an interview request. If it makes sense to accept, here are some tips to ensure your interview goes as smoothly as possible.

### Know What You're Going to Say

Craft your talking points before the interview. Talking points are brief one- or two-sentence answers that articulate your message. When asked a question, be ready to respond with a talking point.

*Ask someone to role-play the types of questions, language, and objections an interviewer might throw your way—especially a hostile interviewer.*

To create your talking points, identify two or three messages you'd like to deliver. Next, distill these into sound-bites (i.e., a succinct, catchy phrase that sums up your position on the issue quickly and effectively). A good sound-bite immediately connects with the audience. Sound-bites are short and catchy, and stay with the audience far better than long or detailed comments.

Your message should fit into one of three categories:

- A personal story
- An affirmative general message
- Facts and data to support your claims

Share personal stories to show how the issue relates to real people. Intellectual points about legislative processes or legal battles may leave your audience cold. However, a personal story about your struggle to adopt or the friend who was unjustly fired will resonate. Be sure to tie the personal story to a broader message. Finally, while facts and figures can add credibility, don't make them the focus. Remember that statistics and numbers aren't nearly as persuasive in changing hearts and minds as concrete examples or messages that resonate with core values.

### Practice Saying It

Have you ever played Whack-A-Mole? Media interviews are similar. Every time you whack your message across, the interviewer pops up with a completely different angle. Even the most seasoned media professionals practice before interviews. Try delivering your messages to friends and colleagues to fine-tune any potential problems. Better yet, speak to your skeptical brother-in-law or someone outside your immediate circle and see how they respond to your messages. If your messages confuse, offend, or take too long to articulate, go back and rework them.

Also, anticipate the angle the interviewer might take. Ask someone to role-play the types of questions, language, and objections an interviewer might throw your way—especially a hostile interviewer. Practice responding to interruptions, provocative questions, and attempts to throw you off message.

### Say It

Successful interviews don't follow ordinary rules of polite conversation. To stay on message, don't feel compelled to answer the question that was asked.



You may need to be more assertive than usual to prevent a talkative host from railroading you. There are several different techniques that you can use. All require some practice before they'll feel natural.

- **Stay on message.** Don't talk about anything unrelated to your message points. Redirect the conversation back to your message whenever the interviewer strays from it. Don't feel obligated to answer the question exactly as it was asked.
- **Say only what you want to say.** Don't ever let someone make you say things you don't want to say, or answer questions you don't want to answer.
- **Correcting misrepresentations and factual errors.** While you want to stick to your talking points as much as possible, don't be afraid to dispel myths or inaccurate information. Simply say, "A lot of people have that misconception but..." You won't put your interviewer or audience on the defensive, since the language acknowledges a misconception and invites them to rethink it.
- **Bridging.** This technique links the question asked to the message you want to convey. Example: "What I really want to talk about is..."
- **Flagging.** Highlight a particular sound-bite to increase its importance. For example: "The most important thing to remember is..."
- **Hooking.** Try to "dangle a hook" that leads the interviewer to the next question. Example: "But that isn't the only important issue..."
- **Don't repeat negative frames.** Never repeat an opponent's loaded or slanted language. Answer the question in the positive, using your message points.
- **Don't nod at everything that's said.** It's natural to nod to denote understanding, but on television, it looks like you're agreeing.
- **Smile.** If the interview lends itself to a smile, flash one once in awhile. It makes you look likeable and sympathetic.
- **Breathe.** Don't forget to breathe. Taking a deep breath while listening to the next question can help you stay focused and calm.

*Don't feel obligated to answer the question exactly as it was asked.*



## Case Study: Marriage Interview

### Situation

You're going on TV to talk about marriage.

### Talking Points

1. "This is about committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of each other."
2. "Marriage helps people fulfill this promise—emotionally, financially, in sickness, and even in death. It's wrong to stand in the way of giving committed couples the legal benefits they need to take care of each other."

### The Evil Host

You think your host is going to be nice, but suddenly he turns into Lord Voldemort.

#### Host Question

#### Bad Response

#### Good Response

"We're here today to talk about gay marriage. So my question to you is, where is this going to stop? Today it's gay marriage. Are you going to be on my show next year talking about polygamy? Isn't this just part of a larger agenda to erode American values?"

"Of course this isn't about polygamy or some secret gay agenda, this is about..."

"This is about committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of the person they love. Marriage helps people fulfill that promise—emotionally, financially, in sickness, and even in death..."

*Mistake: repeating your opponent's frame; answering the question he asked*

*Kept to key talking points; substituted a new frame instead of addressing your opponent's frame*

"But homosexuals don't really want to commit to each other, do they? I mean, aren't they pretty promiscuous?"

"Most gay people aren't promiscuous at all, in fact..."

"That's a common misconception, but I've been with my partner Betty, for 17 years. You know, when she was laid off last year, I couldn't even get her on my health insurance plan. Can you imagine not being able to take care of the person you love? That's just wrong. And there are hundreds of thousands of couples like Betty and myself."

*Mistake: repeating your opponent's frame; answering the question he asked*

*Didn't answer question that was asked; kept to key talking points; used personal example*

"Look, it's simple. If you want to marry, marry a man. Why should Americans have to pay the cost of supporting a lifestyle they don't agree with?"

"Americans don't have to pay to support marriage equality, in fact..."

"Marriage is about love and commitment, but it also provides certain legal protections that allow couples to take care of each other emotionally, financially, in sickness, and in health. To say no to marriage is to tell me, no, I don't want you to be able to take care of Betty. I don't want you to be able to get her on your health insurance. I don't want you to be able to visit her in the hospital. I don't want you to be able to provide for her if you die. And that's just wrong."

*Mistake: repeating your opponent's frame; getting off topic with what Americans do and don't have to pay for*

*Substituted a new frame against your opponent's frame; kept to key talking points; used personal example*

"Just yesterday I was watching footage of the gay pride parade last month. There were topless women and men in all sorts of outrageous outfits doing things I can't even repeat on my show. And now you're trying to tell me you have mainstream values?"

"You and I both know that there is a fringe element to every community. Are you telling me that straight men don't ever..."

"We're here today to talk about couples who want to make lifelong commitments to take care of each other, and about why it doesn't make sense to stand in the way of that..."

*Mistake: allowing your opponent to change the topic; attacking straight people (aka the target audience)*

*Bridged question in order to stick to key talking points*

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