Working with the Media: Staying in Control

Interviews can be challenging for even the most experienced spokespeople. The following techniques can help you stay focused and in control of your message. They are particularly useful with broadcast media, but also work with print reporters and other question-and-answer situations.

- **Ask questions** before you answer them. Clarify in advance the topics to be discussed and the type of audience. Ask if there are specific questions the interviewer wants answered. If you don’t feel qualified to address the issue or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other approaches. Refer them to the ALA Public Information Office or other sources of information.

- **Take time to prepare.** Tell the reporter you will call back at a given time (even five minutes if the reporter is on deadline). Use this time to review the key message and anticipate questions. Be sure to call back at the agreed upon time.

- **Never answer** a question you don’t fully understand. Say, "I'm not sure I understand the question. Are you asking...?"

- **Think first.** Don’t rush. A pause can make you appear more thoughtful. You also can buy time by saying, "That’s a good question." Or, "Let me think about that and come back to it."

- **Beware** of leading questions. Some reporters may attempt to influence your answer by asking something like "Wouldn’t you say..." followed by an idea for your agreement. Answer the questions briefly followed by your own statement.

  **Q. Isn’t it true that many colleges are closing their library buildings in favor of online collections?**

  **A.** I don’t think it’s likely. Libraries are the heart of the campus. One of the most important things librarians do is teach students how to find and use information.

- **Never repeat a negative.** Keep your answers positive.

  **Q. Why do librarians allow children to view pornography?**

  **A.** We don’t. Our job is to help children learn to use the Internet wisely and guide them to all the great Web sites out there.
• Avoid one-word answers such as "yes" or "no." Use every opportunity to make your point.

Q. Since everything is electronic, shouldn’t the library need less money?

A. Technology offers many advantages, but saving money isn’t necessarily one of them. Computers must be maintained, updated and staffed. Also, everything is far from electronic. Our library has a large print collection and many other resources that aren’t on the Internet.

• "Flag" or emphasize key thoughts with phrases like "That’s an excellent question" or "The important thing to remember is..." or "The real issue here is...."

• Stay "on message." Use every question as an opportunity to "bridge" to your message.

Q. How was the weather when you left Chicago?

A. The weather was terrible. But I’m not nearly as concerned about that as I am about some very serious threats to our freedom to read.

• "Hook" the interviewer into listening to your key points by saying, "There are three things your listeners should know" or "There are a couple ways to answer that question. First . . ." The interviewer can’t cut you off without frustrating his/her audience.

• Practice. Practice. Practice . . .with your staff, your family and friends. The more you do it, the better and more comfortable you’ll be.

ANSWERING TOUGH QUESTIONS

When speaking to reporters, groups or even your neighbors, you may be faced with challenging questions. The best way to deal with them is to anticipate and prepare answers ahead of time. Knowing the answers will help you to feel—and appear—more confident, as well as give better answers. Remember, it’s not just what you say, but how you say it. Speak simply, sincerely and with conviction.

• Anticipate difficult questions and prepare answers ahead of time. If you know you’ll be facing hostile questioning, role-play beforehand with a colleague. Answer the worst questions you can imagine. Also practice some easy ones so you won’t be caught off guard.

• Listen. Really listen. Don’t judge. Try to identify and address the real concern, fear or issue being expressed.

• Acknowledge. Pause to show you’ve given the question serious consideration. Frame your answer with a positive. For example, "You evidently have strong feelings about this" or "I respect your views, but let me give you another perspective." "We share your concern for children, but our approach is..."

• Always answer with a positive. Don’t repeat negative or inflammatory words. Strip away the loaded words and rephrase the question.

Q. Won’t the Internet put the library out of business?

A. I think what you’re really asking is: "Will people still need libraries?" The answer is, of course, we’ll need them more than ever...

• Don’t "over talk" your answers. Giving too much information may provoke more challenging questions.
• **Be truthful.** Speak from your own experience. "In our library, we have not..." Or "My experience is..." If you are asked a question you can’t answer or are surprised with an unfavorable statistic or claim, simply say, "I hadn’t heard that. What I do know is..." (bridge to positive statement).

• **Don’t assume anything you say is "off the record."** It can and may be used.

• **Feel free to say,** "I’d like to finish answering your last question" if you are interrupted. Also correct any factual misstatements you feel are critical to the discussion.

• **Never say "No comment."** Maintain an open, positive attitude. If you are waiting for direction from your board or need time to study the issue, say so.

• **Correct** any factual misstatements you feel are critical to the discussion.

• **Remember,** it’s not just what you say, but how you say it. Keep your voice and body language calm and open (no crossed arms, tapping feet).

It may be appropriate to sound indignant or concerned. You do not want to appear defensive or out of control. A smile at the right moment can be disarming.

**DEALING WITH BAD NEWS**

Bad news, although never pleasant, creates opportunities for delivering a positive message and building support. For example, when a teenage hacker crashed the King County (Wash.) Library System’s computer system, closing the library down for three days, the story focused on the marvels of the technology rather than its failure, thanks to the library’s quick and thorough media response.

Some potential crises, such as organized attempts to force use of Internet filters or a branch closing, can be anticipated and planned for in advance. Others, such as crime or natural disaster, cannot. Every library should have a basic crisis communications plan for dealing with potentially negative situations. Anticipate and prepare key messages in advance whenever possible. While it’s important to mobilize quickly, be careful not to overreact. If only one small newspaper carries the story about an upset mother, respond only to that newspaper rather than issue a press release to every newspaper, radio and TV station in town. On the other hand, you should be prepared with a statement and briefing materials should you get media calls.

Be strategic in your use of media. If there has been a major disaster, you may want to hold a press briefing to communicate the facts, any new developments and the library’s response as quickly as possible to a large number of media. A letter to the editor or op-ed clarifying the library’s position can be helpful, especially if it is to correct misrepresentations of fact.

Before you accept an appearance on a radio or TV talk show, make sure you understand the nature and format of the program.

Consider the size and nature of the audience and how receptive it is to your message. Will there be someone there from the opposition? Will there be call-ins? What is the host’s position? Is the host or producer willing to guarantee a fair and equal forum? If you feel you will not be given a fair hearing, it may not be in the library’s best interest to accept. A crisis is not the time to build good media relations. Your library should have established relationships with influential members of the media to call on at such times. If the library has a reputation for open and honest communication, journalists are more likely to be receptive and helpful in communicating the library’s message.
All the basic communications and advocacy techniques are necessary when dealing with a crisis or negative publicity. These include:

- Speaking with one voice.
- Having clearly identified, highly skilled spokespeople.
- Providing briefing materials to all staff and library advocates.
- Identifying internal and external audiences.
- Developing key messages.
- Anticipating difficult questions.
- Implementing communications strategies.
- Identifying opinion leaders who can help support your position.

**Tips**

- **Focus on the solution**, not the problem. Explain what the library is doing to address the situation or say the library is looking for a speedy solution.

- **Apologize if appropriate.** “We apologize for any inconvenience to our users. We are doing our best to rectify it as soon as possible.”

- **Make sure** you have all the facts before issuing a response. Emphasize to staff and advocates the importance of being forthcoming with relevant information.

- **Prepare briefing materials** as quickly as possible. Present the facts, as you know them. If a branch closing was forced by a potential deficit, say so.

- **Let lawyers review** any public statement on issues with legal implications but avoid legalese and jargon.

- **Avoid reading** official statements, which can sound cold. Have spokespeople memorize and speak your key messages and talking points.

- **Prepare** one-page message sheets that include key messages, talking points and answers to the most difficult questions.

- **Offer special briefing** sessions and media training for spokespeople who will be on the frontlines dealing with this issue.

- **Stick to the high road.** Do not criticize or get personal with your opponent. Do not be defensive. Stay focused on your key message.