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Preparing for Media Interviews

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PREPARING FOR MEDIA INTERVIEWS

David Angerer, Municipal Management Consultant

January 2007

MTAS
Municipal Technical Advisory Service
In cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE

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By sharing information, responding to client requests, and anticipating the ever-changing municipal government environment, MTAS promotes better local government and helps cities develop and sustain effective management and leadership.

MTAS offers assistance in areas such as accounting and finance, administration and personnel, fire, public works, law, ordinance codification, and water and wastewater management. MTAS houses a comprehensive library and publishes scores of documents annually.

MTAS provides one copy of our publications free of charge to each Tennessee municipality, county and department of state and federal government. There is a $10 charge for additional copies of "Preparing for Media Interviews."

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PREPARING FOR MEDIA INTERVIEWS

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Part I: Know What You're Getting Into

> *Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.*
>
> —*Thomas Jefferson*

Sooner or later, almost every municipal official will have a bad experience resulting from an interview with a news reporter. There are standard complaints: The reporter asked unfair or "loaded" questions, good responses were deleted from the story, or the reporter blew minor points out of all proportion.

A critical factor leading to unsuccessful news media interviews is often the failure of public officials to understand the role of the news media in a free, democratic society. The news media do not serve as the local government's public relations arm, and it is not a reporter's job to polish the city's image or that of any individual municipal official. Quite to the contrary, journalists are trained to question authority, to be wary of the official explanations of government, and to pick apart proposals made by public officials. They are under no obligation to be "fair" to the government officials they interview and are especially leery of officials whom they may suspect want to slant the news in their favor.

This means the relationship between city hall and the news media is, almost by definition, an adversarial one. While this does not mean the relationship cannot be friendly and satisfying, a smart city official understands and accepts the obligation of the news media to ask tough questions, to probe into areas the government may find embarrassing, and to expose city problems.

Perhaps the single most critical factor leading to a bad news media interview, however, is lack of adequate preparation by the interviewee. Football coaches know that the "big game" is actually won on the practice field. Actors must attend rehearsals in order to deliver award-winning performances. And municipal officials wanting to give winning interviews to the press must plan and prepare for them. Successful interviews do not just happen—they are designed.

The fact that you may have mastered the subject of the interview does not, by itself, assure a successful outcome. There are many examples of bad media interviews given by intelligent public officials who are experts in their field. Similarly, the fact that you may have a cordial relationship with the interviewer

does not guarantee a successful performance. This is especially true in radio and television interviews, where the microphone or the camera is all that stands between you and the audience.

However unfair it may be, most of the responsibility for a successful media interview rests with the person being interviewed. True, the reporter or interviewer *should* be fair and professional, ask the "right" questions, and otherwise lead the interview to a successful conclusion. But if the reporter fails in this regard, it is usually the interviewee who looks bad. For this reason, the public official who truly understands the importance of successful media interviews will take responsibility for making them successful.

This publication will help municipal officials prepare for news media interviews and provide strategies for successful outcomes.

BEFORE AGREEING TO AN INTERVIEW REQUEST

Municipalities have an obligation to provide requested information to the news media. This does not mean, however, that city officials have to submit themselves for every interview request they receive. Before agreeing to give an interview, you have a right to know what you're getting into and how the interview will be used. Here's a checklist of questions for which you should know the answers before you agree to sit down and talk to a reporter:

1. **Who is conducting the interview? At what media source do they work?**
   You have a right to know with whom you'll be talking and for whom they work.

2. **What topics are to be discussed in the interview? Will the interview be limited to these topics or will others be introduced?**
   It is generally a good idea to limit the topics of an interview to one or two subjects. This will let you better prepare for the interview and avoid discussions of subjects for which you may not be fully prepared.

3. **Why was this particular topic chosen? What prompted the request for an interview?**
   You should be aware of the context in which the interview will be taking place, the incidents or developments that may have prompted the interview request. This will let you address these specific incidents or developments and avoid speaking in more general or hypothetical terms.

4. **Am I the right person for this interview? Are there other city officials who could more properly respond to the interviewer's questions?**
   You should give interviews only on those subjects with which you have considerable familiarity. When dealing with technical information, legal issues, or other complicated subjects, it may be best to refer the reporter to someone on the city staff having special expertise on the subject. Alternately, you may ask the reporter if you can have one of these staff members sit with you during the interview. Be careful if the reporter is reluctant to allow you this opportunity.

5. **Who else will be present at the interview?**
   You should always know the names of other people who will join you in the interview. While it is normal for a reporter to interview others for a story, having a third party present during your interview could lead to on-camera debates, confrontations, etc. If a reporter wants to bring a third party to your interview, find out what the purpose is—and be careful.

6. **When will the interview take place?**
   You are entitled to be interviewed at a reasonably convenient time. Try to be flexible and take into account the reporter's availability and deadlines, but avoid giving late-night interviews. Keeping in mind the subject matter to be discussed, insist on having sufficient time to prepare for the interview.

7. **Is the interview going to be conducted in person or over the telephone? If the interview is to be in person, where will it occur?**
   Try to hold the interview on your turf: in your office or in some other area of city hall offering a friendly, dignified environment. It may be appropriate at times to meet on the reporter's turf—in the studio or at the newspaper office—depending upon your comfort level with the environment. It is generally a good idea to avoid giving interviews in public places (i.e., restaurants, coffee shops, and other locations where onlookers cannot be controlled) or where the surroundings could be misinterpreted or misleading.

8. **Will the interview be live or on tape?**
   A live interview is like tightrope walking without a net. The opportunity to pause before responding to a question is limited, as are the chances to glance at notes. This is not to say that you should avoid live interviews at all costs, but understand that a live interview requires more preparation than one that is taped. For live interviews, some reporters may give you the questions in advance to avoid delays in answers on camera.

9. **How much time is thought to be needed for the interview?**
   Is the reporter asking for 15 minutes of your time? Or several hours?

10. **When will the story run?**
    News stories usually run within a day or two of your interview meaning information you provide to the reporter is likely to be relatively fresh when the story appears. However, you should realize magazine articles and certain newspaper and television feature stories might not be released for weeks or even months after the interview. By the time the story appears, the facts surrounding your story may have changed making it appear you are either poorly informed or, worse, lying. Be careful about accepting interviews that will not be aired or printed until far into the future. Ask that your interview be conducted closer to the release date. Or, request a brief follow-up interview close to the release date so you can verify that the information is still up to date.

Sometimes you may be called by a reporter who wants an immediate interview with you by telephone with no other warning or appointment. If you are familiar with the reporter, it may be best to ask for a few minutes to prepare yourself, returning his call a short time later after you have had time to prepare. If you are not familiar with the reporter, explain that you will be busy for a few minutes and that you will call back. Not only will this give you a few minutes to prepare, but your call back will help determine if the "reporter" is legitimate.

To help maintain good relations with the news media, and as a matter of courtesy, city officials should respond promptly to a reporter's request for an interview. If any of the answers to the above questions are not satisfactory, it may be best to decline the request or to suggest changes.

Part II: Practice Makes Perfect

> *And by the way, when you're telling these little stories, here's a good idea. Have a POINT. It makes it SO much more interesting for the listener!*
>
> *—Steve Martin to John Candy in "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles"*

The most important part of your preparation is to set clearly stated goals for the interview. What is it you want to say? What information do you want to convey? What is your point? It is not a good idea to sit for an interview without first defining your purposes for granting it in the first place.

It is usually best to limit your interview to no more than two or three important points, and summarize each of these points in a single sentence. It may be helpful to make a list of the points you want to make in your interview, along with the single sentence summation of each. Have something you can take with you and occasionally glance at during the interview. The key here is to take control of the interview and stay "on message." Otherwise, the reporter may take you into areas where you don't wish to go.

We see this concern for staying on message at the highest levels of government today. The president, cabinet members, and other political speakers frequently have their message printed on the backdrop behind the stages from which they are making speeches or giving interviews. The message is always short and simple ("Fiscal Responsibility" or "Helping Our Kids" or some such slogan), and the speaker is careful not to deviate from this message.

Municipal officials do not need a backdrop with their daily message stenciled on it in order to give effective interviews. However, good interviews result when you have a point and stick to it.

Additionally, your interview preparation should include the following:

1. **Anticipate the hardest questions you might be asked by the reporter.**
   It is not likely the reporter is going to ask you a lot of cream-puff questions. Ask yourself what questions you would least like to answer during the interview, then develop good responses to each of them. Maybe the reporter won't pose these questions to you during the interview, but you'll be ready for them if they come up. Can't think of any hard questions you might be asked? Talk to your staff or other people you trust who may be willing to play "devil's advocate."

2. **Develop a list of questions you are likely to be asked, then have someone pose these questions to you out loud.**
   Practice giving your answers out loud. Sometimes a tape recorder can be helpful in this phase of the preparation. Listen to your voice as well as to the words in your answers.

Are you staying on message? Talking too fast (or too slow)? Pay attention to your choice of words, and weed out technical jargon, poor use of English, and statements that may be offensive to people you do not wish to offend. Have your friends critique your answers and pay attention to their suggestions for improvements.

3. **Identify rumors and be prepared to deal with them.**
It is a good idea to use some of your interview time to dispel rumors that are circulating in the community and that may have a negative impact on your agency. Don't wait for the reporter to raise these issues. It's OK for you to raise them on your own and then refute them.

4. **To the maximum extent possible, try developing answers that are inclusive and are likely to expand the number of citizens who will agree with you. Avoid confrontation.**
It is better to use words like "we need" rather than "I want" or "our residents" rather than "my advisers." Your answers should reflect that you are in contact with your constituents and that you have paid attention to their concerns. Most important, avoid making personal attacks on other people in your community. You can point out where other ideas or proposals may not be as good as yours, but avoid criticizing the motives or characters of your opponents. However good it may feel to "zing" your opponents, it will not advance your perception in the community as a reasonable person.

5. **Develop a background information package to be given to the reporter at the interview.**
An information package, containing pertinent information and quotations, can help assure that the reporter "gets the story" and does not misquote or otherwise misunderstand the points you want to make. The package allows you to explain your proposals in more detail than is usually possible in most media interviews and can contain statistics, charts, photographs, and other documents that may not come up in the interview. The media are under no obligation to use this material, but many reporters will appreciate the value of this assistance and will refer to it in their story.

6. **Develop examples or analogies that underscore the point you want to make.**
An analogy ("This problem is very similar to ...") can help simplify complex issues for the public. Similarly, you should try to use real life examples that serve to highlight your points.

7. **Determine the need for props.**
It may help you make your point to have a prop available during the interview; use an object or device that illustrates the point you are trying to make. If you are trying to convince the public of the need to purchase more modern fire trucks, for example, it might be best to conduct the interview in front of the old fire trucks in the fire hall letting the interviewer (and television viewers) see for themselves why new trucks are needed.

8. **Have a decent photograph of yourself available to the newspapers.**
Look at your driver's license photograph. Is it a good one? Now imagine this photograph will accompany the article. Newspapers are notorious for taking snapshots that are very unflattering; bad camera angles and poor lighting can make a city official look like an ogre. It is best to avoid letting the newspaper's photographer take your portrait, a picture you are not likely to review before it appears in the press. Instead, provide a recent photo of yourself to the

reporter for use in the story, one taken by a professional photographer or at least a snapshot that does not make you look too scary.

SPECIAL PREPARATIONS FOR TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

Preparing for TV interviews is especially crucial. With television, not only will your constituents be judging the answers you give to the reporter, but they will also be assessing your appearance. Unless you are careful, a television camera can be very unkind to an interviewee.

1. **Pay attention to your clothing.**
   On TV, mayors should look like mayors and council members should look like council members: professional. It is usually best to appear on camera in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. Shirts and ties for the men, business dresses for the women. No baseball caps or T-shirts. TV cameras are not friendly to the color white or to patterned materials, so select solid color clothing if possible.

2. **Pay attention to your grooming.**
   Television lights tend to exaggerate certain facial features. For this reason, unless they are growing a beard, men should shave before appearing on TV. Shortly before the interview, check your hair in the mirror. If the interview is taking place right after lunch, use a mirror to check your teeth. Perspiration seems to show up well on TV cameras so have a handkerchief handy to dry your face prior to going on camera.

3. **Pay attention to your body language.**
   If you will be standing for your interview, practice talking with your arms relaxed at your side. If you will be seated, plan to sit upright with your hands in your lap or on the armrest of your chair. Avoid reclining. Never cross your arms in front of your chest (it looks defensive or combative). Unless the subject is gravely serious, try to smile.

4. **Pay attention to the background.**
   Especially if the interview is taking place on your turf, try to select a site that will improve your appearance. Avoid standing near a bare, light-colored wall, which might cause shadows that exaggerate the size of your head or your hair. Similarly, standing near or against a window is likely to put your face in an unflattering shadow. Good backdrops include flags, bookcases, flowers, and other nonreflective materials. In good weather, it may be advisable to conduct your interview outdoors, not in the direct light of the sun but under overcast skies or in shaded areas.

5. **Pay attention to camera angles.**
   In a TV studio, this is not usually something you will need to be concerned with. The studio crew will know how to set up the camera shots for your interview. Outside the studio, you'll want to pay attention to this important factor.

   In the minutes before the interview, as the camera is being set up, try to assure that your face and the camera will be on the same level. Do not allow the camera to be placed higher than your face. You'll look small. Similarly, try to avoid having the camera placed so low that you'll look like a giant.

   Camera angles that are "straight on" are usually not very flattering (again, think of your driver's license photo). If possible, try to position yourself at a slight angle to the camera (keeping your "best side" to the camera, of course).

Part III: During the Interview

> *[You reporters] should have printed what he meant, not what he said.*
> *—Earl Bush, press aid to Mayor Richard Daley*

The first rule when dealing with any reporter on any subject is to never, never, never lie. Never.

The careers and reputations of innumerable public servants have been permanently destroyed when they told a lie to a news reporter. Once a reporter realizes he or she has been lied to, you will have no peace. It is always better to admit to a painful truth on a one-time basis than to have the news media discover a lie and spend the next several months exposing it, slowly extracting the truth. Remember, tell the truth and tell it first.

The second rule for dealing with reporters is to clearly understand the meaning of the term "off the record." Simply stated, *nothing* you say to a reporter is ever off the record. The term has no legal definition and means only as much as the reporter wants it to. For all practical purposes, you should assume that every word you say to a reporter is going to appear in their story and carefully watch your words.

Sometimes public officials will make the mistake of giving a reporter "confidential" information, telling the reporter only afterward that his remarks were "off the record." This approach does not obligate the reporter in any way. Instead, it alerts the reporter that the comments may be especially controversial and worthy of further investigation.

In other instances, a reporter may attempt to extract information from a public official by offering to keep the information "off the record." Again, "off the record" is a vague term that can mean many things. The offer may mean the reporter will not print (or broadcast) the remarks made by the speaker, or it might simply mean that the remarks will be broadcast but not attributed to the speaker. Either way, this can have embarrassing results for the public servant.

The best strategy during a media interview is to tell the truth and insist to the reporter that every question and answer is *on* the record.

Here are some other techniques that will improve the quality of your media interviews:

1. **Stay in control of the interview.**
   You don't have to wait until the reporter brings up a subject you wish to discuss. You can raise the issue on your own. This is especially important if the reporter is not asking questions that are "on message." It's OK to politely change the subject to the points that you have decided to make. Don't let the interviewer take you into areas that are not important or not what you want to discuss. Remember, you should know the discussion topics beforehand. If the questions veer from the predetermined subjects, stay "on message" and remind the interviewer of the topics you agreed to discuss.

2. **Repeat yourself.**
   Keep making your major points over and over. Emphasize your message numerous times so your points won't be missed or misinterpreted by the viewer or reader. Reiterate the things you want the public to understand about your topic. When

a message is told repeatedly, citizens tend to remember and accept what they have heard.

3. **Keep your answers short and avoid talking too much.**
With radio and television news media in particular, an hour-long interview is likely to result in a story that lasts no more than a couple of minutes on the air. Most of your answers will be reduced to sound bites lasting no more than five or 10 seconds. A two-minute answer is not going to be included in the final cut of the story. Keep your answers brief and to the point. Otherwise, your comments may be used out of context or in a damaging way.

4. **It is also risky to keep talking after providing a brief answer during an interview.**
Intentionally or not, some reporters have a habit of arranging periods of silence between their questions during which time some interviewees feel the need to keep talking. It is during these periods that the speaker can get off message, blurting out things never intended to be said. It is not your responsibility to keep the discussion moving during an interview; let the reporter do that for you.

5. **Do not read your prepared remarks—especially on television.**
Your answers should appear natural and not as if you are reading from a script. This is true especially in television interviews, where reading a prepared statement almost always looks forced and unnatural.

6. **Do not accept a reporter's characterizations of your remarks.**
Sometimes a reporter will attempt to summarize the answers you made to a particular question, and the characterization may not be consistent with what you said. It is OK to disagree with the reporter in these instances and you should immediately correct any mischaracterizations of your remarks. This can be done politely, but there should be no doubt left that the reporter's characterizations are wrong. Don't let the reporter put words in your mouth.

7. **Beware of false choices offered by reporters.**
"If you aren't going to raise taxes, which city programs will you be cutting?" Be careful not to take the bait in this trap. The question assumes only two possible choices. There may be numerous alternatives to raising taxes or cutting programs. Politely explain to the reporter what those other alternatives might be.

8. **Avoid making jokes when the subject is serious.**
The public expects its public servants to be serious and businesslike. Attempts at humor detract from a serious image. Worse, if the joke falls flat, the speaker will look foolish. There are occasions when humor may be called for, but such instances are rare.

9. **Avoid the use of jargon and technical terms.**
The public is not always familiar with the various acronyms associated with government. Do not assume people listening to your interview on the radio will know what TDEC, OSHA, FOIA, EPA, FLSA, FMLA, or MTAS mean. Speak to the average citizen, not to bureaucrats and technicians.

10. **Don't guess at the answers.**
Never attempt to guess the answer to a question. Unless your guess is correct, your answer may appear to be untruthful. It's OK to tell the reporter that you don't have the information needed to provide an accurate answer, along with the offer to provide the

answer shortly after the interview. It's OK to say you are not qualified to answer a question if the subject is outside your area of expertise or responsibility.

11. **Don't answer hypothetical questions.**
This is dangerous territory. Avoid answering "what if" questions. Months (or hours) after the interview, the question may no longer be theoretical and your answer may not fit the situation. Do not make predictions or assumptions.

12. **Don't lose your temper.**
This is especially true for television interviews where your temper will be shown in tight close-up shots of your face. But it is true for other media, as well. Keep your cool and don't let them see you sweat.

13. **Eliminate distractions.**
Turn off your cell phone and pager. If the interview is in your office, have your calls answered by a secretary. Radios (including police radios) and televisions should be turned off.

14. **In television interviews, keep your eyes on the reporter.**
It is not good to look at the microphone during a TV interview, nor will you look very good if you look directly into the camera. Instead, it is best to focus on the person conducting the interview.

15. **During television and radio interviews, avoid being overly familiar with the reporter.**
When dealing with local reporters with whom you are familiar, it may be OK to call the reporter by his or her first name while on the air. When dealing with reporters you do not know well, especially celebrity journalists, it is more professional to call the reporter "Mr. Brokaw" rather than "Tom." Otherwise, the public may think you're showing off. Worse, the viewer may see the interview as biased or as a publicity piece.

16. **Always be positive and never attack or ridicule anyone.**
If your message is a good one, the public can be sold on it with a positive, clearly articulated interview. Attacking or ridiculing opponents often backfires and can detract from the message you want to convey. Sell yourself *and your ideas* rather than tearing down another person.

17. **Deal with hostile questions.**
The reporter may ask a question that challenges your intelligence or your integrity, perhaps hoping that you'll respond in kind. Don't take the bait. Try to rephrase the reporter's question in a more positive way before answering it. Explain why your proposal or your position is good for the community, and avoid explaining why it's not bad. Emphasize the positive.

18. **Assume that every microphone is on.**
From the moment you enter the presence of a reporter, watch your words carefully. Assume all microphones are on and recording your every word. Just because you do not see a microphone does not mean one is not present.

19. **Show compassion.**
When dealing with bad news, make an effort to express your concern for the victims (for example, people laid off when a factory closes, people hurt in accidents, people denied public benefits, etc.) Let the public see that you have a heart and that you care about the people in your community.

Part IV: Know the Things You Cannot Change

> *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*
>
> *—The Serenity Prayer*

Regardless of the relationship you have with the local news media, there is one fact that will always be true: The news media will *always* have the last word about you. You will never have the audience that newspapers, radio, and television (and now, the Internet) have available to them, nor will you ever meet as many of your constituents in person during your lifetime as the news media will reach in a single day.

If for no other reason, therefore, it is best to try to get along with the news media in your community. You don't have to like reporters, nor must you allow them to be abusive or rude. But because they will always have the last word and because they speak to every person in your town, it is in your best interest to try to cultivate a professional relationship with the news media. Treat them as you would want to be treated and perhaps they will do the same, although there is no guarantee.

While you cannot change them, here's a short list of simple truths about news reporters of which you should be aware:

1. **Reporters usually already know the answers to the questions they ask.**
   The fact that a reporter asks you questions does not mean he or she does not already know the answers. Reporters often ask questions about things they already know. In these instances, the point of the question is not to learn new information, but to determine what *you* know—and to assess your truthfulness.

2. **Your opponents, rivals, and enemies will also be interviewed.**
   You cannot reasonably expect reporters to ignore differences of opinion that may exist in your community. In most cases, reporters will actually seek out the opinions of your opponents in an effort to present a balanced news story. When interviewing these rivals, the reporter may use your responses in an attempt to provoke a reaction that will be interesting on camera or in the next day's newspaper.

3. **Your friends, supporters and teammates will also be interviewed—and may damage your position.**
   You may be the only person in city government authorized to give interviews to the press, but reporters are not obliged to respect this policy. Before or after your interview, reporters are likely to talk with other city officials and employees about any particular subject, and they will be quick to note any inconsistencies or conflicts in the story. This can be especially unnerving for mayors, city managers, and public information officers who have worked hard to deliver the city's message, only to hear it contradicted by other, usually anonymous, city employees.

4. **The interview is not over until the reporter leaves your presence.**
   Just because the reporter has tuned off his tape recorder and is packing up to leave your office, do not assume the interview is over. Anything you say to the reporter as he or she is walking out the door may be added to the interview. Avoid making post-interview remarks.

5. **The headlines are not written by the reporter.**
   A reporter may make every effort to accurately quote and describe his interview with you. Once the article is written, however, the story is handed over to various editors who attach a headline designed to attract the readers' attention. It sometimes happens that the headline does not accurately reflect the content of the reporter's story.

6. **The reporter's story will be edited by others at the paper.**
   Just as the headlines are written by others, a reporter's story is reviewed and amended by various supervisors, editors, and the like. Articles often are shortened to fit the available newspaper space or air time. Oftentimes, the deleted parts of the story are precisely those parts containing your best material.

7. **Giving interviews to student newspapers is not a guarantee of safety.**
   High school and college newspapers will often call local government offices to arrange interviews with various city officials. Do not assume such "minor league" publications will not require adequate preparation and care. Young, inexperienced, apprentice reporters are much more likely to misquote and mischaracterize your remarks than the full-time professionals from the "real" newspaper in town. Furthermore, a lot of people read these school papers.

When you speak to a reporter, you are speaking to the citizens in your community. You may not like or trust the reporter, but do not be confused about who you are really speaking to during an interview. The public can figure out who is being a professional during an interview and who is not. The best way to deal with a tough reporter is simply to let the public see you at your best.

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