MEDIA TRAINING 101 GUIDEBOOK

A basic guide to media training that covers key concepts and skills to help you effectively communicate with the media.

NJ STATE LIBRARY
An affiliate of Thomas Edison State University

NEW JERSEY NJLA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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There's a journalist on the phone. They want to talk to you.

They might want to talk about that new program you've been promoting. Or information literacy and library funding. Or maybe they want your comments on hot topics like censorship and intellectual freedom, Artificial Intelligence, or Naloxone. They might have questions about how libraries are helping people who need jobs. They could even want to talk about something that's happening at a neighboring library.

Are you ready to take the call?

We want you to be ready.

That's why we have prepared this guide.

We hope that you will not only review the guide now, but we encourage you to check it once or twice each year, to brush up on your skills. We want this to be the resource that you consult when a journalist reaches out to you.

Working with the media, whether to promote an event or communicate about a crisis, is art and science.

It is an art in the sense that no one is perfect or ever will be. You learn as you go, by reading guides like this one and ALA's *Library Advocate's Handbook*. You learn through practice.

It is a science in the sense that some practices work better than others. We have summarized many of them in this guide.

The New Jersey State Library and New Jersey Library Association want to help you succeed. That means ensuring you have the resources you need when you need them. We hope you will review this guide, ask us questions, call on us for help, and keep the guide handy. When you succeed, your colleagues and community members benefit.

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The Media Training Checklist

This guide is a starting point to help you navigate media interactions with confidence. If you're preparing for a specific media event or interview, tailor these strategies to your situation. Consult the FAQ section of this guide for more information on these topics.

Understand the Media Landscape

Gain a comprehensive understanding of the various media channels available.

- ☐ Identify local reporters who cover your library or subject matter areas of interest.
- ☐ Develop a plan to stay updated on current trends and issues that are being covered locally, so that you are prepared to discuss them from a library perspective.

Craft Your Message

Develop clear, concise, and consistent key messages. These should encapsulate your core points and be memorable. Ensure your messages align with your library's overall objectives and values.

- ☐ Prepare facts, statistics, examples and short, illustrative stories or anecdotes.
- ☐ Develop talking points for each of your key messages. Aim for one or two talking points that capture the essence of your message.
- ☐ Think about the questions you might be asked and prepare responses for each. Consider both straightforward and challenging questions.
- ☐ Prepare bridging statements, to bridge or transition from difficult questions back to your key messages smoothly.

Prepare for Interviews

Find out the interviewer's background and make sure you understand the scope and nature of the interview.

- ☐ Research the outlet's audience, the reporter's writing style, what topics they cover, and if they have written about similar issues before.
- ☐ Ask for the questions, interview format, and how the information will be used.
- ☐ Understand the main topic of the interview, and the specific aspects of the topic the reporter is likely to focus on.
- ☐ Conduct mock interviews to practice delivering your messages and answering potential questions.

Conduct Effective Interviews

Media interviews are an opportunity to connect with your target audience and influence public opinion. Effective communication during media interviews is crucial for reputation management and crisis response.

- ☐ It's always important to stay on message. Keep steering the conversation back to your key messages, even if the questions stray.
- ☐ Provide clear, straightforward answers and avoid jargon.
- ☐ Use anecdotes or examples to make your responses more engaging and relatable.
- ☐ When dealing with difficult questions, remain calm, acknowledge the question, and pivot to your key messages if needed.
- ☐ Maintain good posture, make eye contact, and use positive body language to reinforce your confidence and credibility.

Pay Attention to Visual Details

Presenting yourself effectively on TV or Zoom requires a combination of good preparation, clear communication, and attention to visual details.

- ☐ Choose a clean, uncluttered background. If you're on Zoom, you can also use a generic or branded virtual background if needed, but ensure it looks professional.
- ☐ Position the light in front of you, slightly above eye level, to avoid harsh shadows. Don't sit with a bright window or light source directly behind you, as it can make your face difficult to see.
- ☐ Before going live, test your camera, microphone, and internet connection. Have a backup plan in case of technical issues, including a secondary device and backup internet connection.

Engage with the Media

Cultivate and maintain ongoing relationships with local journalists. Keep them up to date on what's happening at the library.

- ☐ Write clear, newsworthy press releases and follow up with reporters.
- ☐ If reporters contact you via social media, address media inquiries privately in direct messages or move to email.

Prepare for Crisis Communications

Have a crisis communication plan in place. Your plan helps you respond quickly and transparently to crises. Focus on accurate information and reassurance.

- ☐ Designate spokespeople.
- ☐ Refine key messages.
- ☐ Decide who will write, approve, and distribute a press holding statement. This statement is your response to a breaking story and includes only what you know for certain and what actions you are taking.
- ☐ Be sure to track media coverage and public sentiment during a crisis.

Evaluate Your Interview Performance

Analyze and reflect on your interview performance.

- ☐ Did your messages come across clearly in the resulting media coverage?
- ☐ Seek feedback from colleagues to identify areas for improvement.
- ☐ Adjust your messaging and media strategy based on the feedback and outcomes.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. When should you accept an interview and when should you decline?

Deciding whether to say "yes" or "no" to a media interview depends on several factors. Ultimately, the decision should be based on how well the interview aligns with your goals, your readiness to engage on the topic, and the potential impact on your reputation.

Here's a framework to help guide your decision:

When to Say Yes

Relevance to Your Expertise
If the interview aligns with your expertise or area of knowledge, it may be a good opportunity to share your insights and reinforce your credibility.

Positive Exposure
If the media outlet has a good reputation and the interview will be in a context that portrays you or the library positively, it can be beneficial.

Strategic Goals
If the interview aligns with your strategic goals, such as promoting a new project, reaching a specific audience, or building relationships, it's worth considering.

Preparedness
If you feel well-prepared to handle the questions and represent your views effectively, and if you have key messages you want to communicate, it may be a good time to participate.

Controlled Environment
If you can ensure the interview will be conducted in a controlled environment, this is a positive factor. Most reporters are willing to send you their interview questions in advance. You may even be able to review the final piece before it airs or is published.

When Not to Take the Interview

Lack of Control
If you can't control the content or the context of the interview, such as not knowing how the information will be used or presented, it's important to be cautious.

Sensitive Topics
If the topic is sensitive, controversial, or could potentially harm your reputation or that of your organization, consider whether it's worth participating. If you're unsure, consult with colleagues to get their perspective. These consultations may include your supervisor (either library administration or its board), a public relations or media advisor, the library's attorney, or your contacts at a statewide library agency or consortium.

Inadequate Preparation
If you don't have enough time to prepare or if you're unsure about how to handle the subject matter, it's better to decline.

Potential for Misrepresentation
If there's a high risk that your words might be taken out of context or misrepresented, it might be wise to decline.

Timing
If it's a time of crisis or when other priorities demand your attention, participating in an interview might not be the best choice. There are times where simply making a formal statement to the media will suffice.

2. How do you turn down an interview?

Turning down a media interview should be done tactfully and professionally to maintain good relations with the media and protect your reputation.

Here are some steps to consider:

Respond Promptly
Reply as soon as possible to avoid leaving the media outlet in a difficult position. Delays might affect their schedule and create unnecessary inconvenience.

Provide a Brief Reason
You don't need to go into extensive detail, but providing a brief reason helps the reporter understand your position. Express appreciation for the opportunity extended to you.

Offer Alternatives
If possible, suggest an alternative spokesperson or expert who might be available and suited for the interview. This shows you support their efforts.

Keep the Door Open
Express your willingness to consider future opportunities. This helps maintain a positive relationship

Sample Email Response

"Thank you for considering me for this interview. I appreciate your interest in my perspective on [specific topic].

Unfortunately, I am unable to participate in the interview at this time due to [brief reason, e.g., prior commitments, scheduling conflicts, etc.]. I regret that I can't contribute to this discussion.

If there is a possibility for future engagement or if you need recommendations for other experts on this topic, please feel free to reach out.

Thank you again for your understanding."

3. When to go “On Background” vs. “Off the Record”?

In media interviews, “on background” and “off the record” are two terms that denote different levels of confidentiality and usage of the information shared. Understanding these terms is crucial for managing how your statements are used and attributed.

On Background

Definition

Usually, information provided “on background” can be used by the journalist but is not attributed directly to you. Instead, the journalist can use the information to inform their reporting and might cite it with a general attribution such as “a source close to the matter” or “an industry expert.” However, the phrase "on background" means different things to different people, so make sure you clearly state your intention when you request to speak "on background."

Purpose

This allows you to provide useful information to the journalist while avoiding having it attributed to you. It helps in shaping the story without putting your name directly on the record. It’s useful when you want to provide context or insight that might help the journalist understand the story better but don’t want to be publicly associated with that specific piece of information.

Example Statement

"I can provide some context on this topic, but I can only provide the information on background. That means I do not want the information attributed directly to me, but you can cite an anonymous source. Can we continue under those terms?"

Off the Record

Definition

Information shared “off the record” should not be used for publication at all. It’s intended to be a confidential exchange where the journalist cannot report or attribute any of the details shared. If the reporter agrees to an off the record request, the ethical thing to do is not report or even repeat that information. Off the record comments are supposed to remain strictly between the source and the reporter.

Purpose

This allows you to share sensitive information that you do not want to be used publicly. It can be useful for providing context, clarification, or background that helps the journalist understand the bigger picture but is not meant to be included in the final report. This is often used when discussing highly sensitive or confidential details that you do not want to be disclosed in any form.

Example Statement

“I’d like to share some information with you, but only if we can continue the conversation off the record. This means you cannot use any of the details I provide for publication or share them with anyone. Do you agree to those terms before we continue?"

Key considerations for going “on background” or “off the record”:

- Always clearly specify whether the information is “on background” or “off the record” before sharing it. This prevents misunderstandings and ensures that your wishes regarding the use of the information are respected.
- Ensure that the journalist understands what you mean by "on background" or "off the record" and agrees to the terms. If there’s any confusion or disagreement, it’s better to clarify or reconsider sharing sensitive information.
- It can be helpful to follow up in writing to confirm the terms of the conversation, especially if the discussion involves sensitive information. Do not put the sensitive information itself in writing.
- New Jersey is a one-party consent state, meaning it is legal to record a conversation as long as one party agrees to the recording. A journalist can record you without your permission and is not obligated to tell you that you are being recorded, as long as you are both in New Jersey.
- Before sharing sensitive information, consider the potential consequences if the journalist does not honor your agreement to speak on background or off the record. While it is considered unethical for a journalist to violate an agreement, it is possible, so only share sensitive information with journalists you trust and only when necessary.

4. How to phrase your responses to interview questions?

Lead with Impact

Begin your response with the most important part of your message. This ensures that even if you are cut short, your key point is communicated.

Avoid Tangents

If a question is off-topic or potentially leading you away from your main points, gently steer the conversation back to your prepared talking points.

Bridge Techniques

Use bridging techniques to redirect the conversation. For example, “That’s an interesting point, but what’s really important here is…” If a question is poorly phrased or leading, you can give the answer you would have given if the question were clearly stated. For instance, “Is spending money on the library the best use of taxes?” can be answered the same way as, “What did you emphasize in this year’s library budget?”

Simplicity is Key

Avoid complex sentences or technical jargon unless necessary, and if you do use technical terms, explain them briefly. Keep your responses short. The less you say, the less likely you are to be misquoted or quoted out of context.

Be Authentic and Confident

Speak in a natural and authentic manner. Being genuine helps build trust with the audience. Project confidence through your tone and body language. Even if you’re unsure of an answer, maintain a composed and professional demeanor.

5. How to prepare for different types of interview questions?

Fact-Based Questions
Ensure you have accurate and up-to-date data, statistics, and reference information so that you are prepared to offer clear, factual answers.

Opinion-Based Questions
Take the time to really think through and formulate your viewpoints in a way that aligns with your key messages and is backed by evidence. You can take a moment to breathe and form your answer. You don't need to fill the air space.

Hypothetical Questions
Think about how you would handle hypothetical scenarios related to the topic and prepare responses that reflect your strategic perspective.

Difficult Questions
Are you prepared for tough or controversial questions? How will you handle questions that challenge your position or delve into sensitive areas? Be prepared for this, don't get caught off guard.

Follow-Up Questions
Be ready to elaborate on your initial responses if asked. Prepare additional details or examples that reinforce your key messages. If a question is unclear or seems to misinterpret your position, be prepared to clarify your points and guide the discussion back to your key messages.

6. How to answer the questions that don't get asked?

Be prepared to address questions that don't get asked during your media interview, especially if there are important points or issues you want to communicate.

Here's an approach to ensure you cover all necessary information, even if certain questions don't come up.

Anticipate Unasked Questions
Think about the relevant questions that may not be directly asked but are important for your audience to know. Consider topics that might be overlooked or areas where the interviewer might not probe deeply.

Draft Add-On Points
Prepare a list of important points or additional information you want to convey. Be ready to weave these into your answers or bring them up if there is an opportunity.

Stay Attuned
Pay close attention to the flow of the interview. Be prepared to pivot and address your important points if the conversation shifts in a way that gives you a chance to bring them up.

Engage with Follow-Ups
If the reporter asks follow-up questions or if there's a chance for you to offer additional comments, use this opportunity to bring up any unaddressed issues

7. Who to consult during a crisis?

Before discussing polarizing issues with the media, it's crucial to consult with several key individuals to ensure a coordinated and strategically sound approach. This ensures that your approach to discussing polarizing issues is well-informed and consistent, minimizing risks and enhancing the effectiveness of your communication.

Public Relations or Communications Staff or Consultant

They manage your organization's public image, so they can provide guidance on messaging strategy, media training, and risks. They can help with your talking points and ensure consistency in communication.

Legal Staff or Consultant

They handle legal risks and compliance issues, so they can assess potential legal implications of discussing the issue, review statements for accuracy, and ensure that your comments do not expose the library to legal liability. This includes reaching out to your library association, consortium, or State Library for guidance.

Subject Matter Experts

They possess deep knowledge about the specific polarizing issue, so they are uniquely positioned to offer insights and data to back up your statements and ensure that your communication is accurate and well-informed.

8. How to prepare a holding statement?

This is a short statement you issue in the event of a crisis, when the library is suddenly in the media spotlight. Giving a brief account of what you currently know, and the actions you're taking to face the crisis is crucial. It allows you to respond with speed and credibility as a situation is developing, even if you don't have all the facts to reply to media questions in full.

Don't Say "No Comment"

You might be tempted to say "no comment" to press enquiries, but this can be interpreted as evasive, so it's always best to issue a statement. Sharing what you know and what you're doing buys you time until you have gathered all the facts.

Don't Delay

A fast response to a developing situation is an effective way of letting your stakeholders know that you're aware of the issue and are taking steps behind the scenes to investigate and address it.

Create Canned Responses for Staff

If you're facing questions from the media, having prepared lines means you and your colleagues will avoid any unintended dialogue or other scenarios. It can be useful to have a template ready in case of an emergency, with blanks that you can fill in and adapt to the current situation.

Additional Resources

Check out these additional resources for further reading on the topics covered in this guidebook.

- ALA Media Relations Handbook for Librarians: https://bit.ly/ALA-handbook
- Public Relations Society of America's Blog: https://prsay.prsa.org/
- Goodman Center's monthly newsletter: https://bit.ly/the-goodman-center
- Libraries Are Essential Resources: https://bit.ly/Libraries-Are-Essential
- Institute for Public Relations: https://instituteforpr.org/
- Public Relations and Communications Association's Blog: https://bit.ly/prca-blog



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