

What the media wants

New and different: News hounds want to break a story first. Others will go for a different angle or greater depth.

Benefits: Journalists want to inform, educate or entertain their audiences. Ask, "What's in it for them?"

Bad news: Even bad news can deliver benefits. "Emails titled 'Rude photo of you' contain a virus. Do not open."

Anecdotes: Anecdotes bring a subject to life. Analogies help readers see things in more familiar terms.

Quotes: Readers love 'em. A computer virus hunter said, "It was like trying to catch smoke in a butterfly net."

Get on the right path

You're well on the way to a successful interview if you have a clear idea of:

- your ultimate audience.
- what value you can deliver to them.
- a mutually acceptable outcome.

Tebbo's Tips for Media Spokespeople takes you through all the stages of a successful media encounter.

If you'd like to take things further, I'd be delighted to run a media skills training workshop for you. Please visit www.tebbo.com for more. See you there?

Media coverage can make or break you

Are you confident that your people who deal with the media are aware of the tricks and traps that face them? News journalists and sharp-eyed bloggers are always looking for an indiscretion or disclosure; it's how they build their reputations.

Interviewers will use a variety of techniques to extract information (sometimes with great subtlety).

I'd like to help you improve your handling of the media. I've worked both sides of the fence, but concentrated mainly on media skills training and writing for magazines, newspapers, websites and social media.

Tebbo's Tips for Media Spokespeople

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What the media doesn't want

It isn't interested in anything that its audience already knows. If it misses a story, it will try to compensate with the first picture, video, interview or analysis.

A few aversions

Journalists hate words like 'mission', 'committed', 'corporate policy', 'excited' or 'awesome'.

The first three are corporate-speak. "We're committed to customer satisfaction." Who wouldn't be? The other two are just ridiculous. Let the announcement speak for itself

The right approach

Always be prepared. Know how to get encounters off to a good start and bring the journalist to your agenda. Keep in mind that handling the media is a game in which the best outcome is when you both feel you've 'won'.

Structure your stories

Journalists work in a pyramidal structure – the point, the proof, further detail. Work the same way. If you meander, the journalist may write about the wrong points. Make one major point to news writers. You can usually make more to feature writers. Choose each point and its angle based on the audience and the type of journalist.

Deliver your point(s)

Identify the benefit and the evidence to support it. If you can find an anecdote or analogy to go with it, all the better.

Regardless of where a journalist starts, you want to get them to the best of your (usually three) main points.

Once you've delivered it, a knowledgeable journalist will winkle out your supporting evidence, otherwise explain.

With a knowledgeable feature writer, you can raise other points. Otherwise wrap up the interview.

Follow up asap on any promises that you made during the interview. It's great for building relationships.

Stay safe

Think of what you know as an egg being fried:

- **Safe (yolk):** What you want to say.
- **Secret (white):** What you know but can't share.
- **Speculation (frying pan):** Your opinions.

Keep the journalist in the yolk. Avoid the white and the pan. You will know the journalist, the audience and the topic, so invoke one of them to get back to safety:

- "Does this really interest your readers?"
- "Your readers might be more interested in ..."
- "I thought we were focusing on ..."

Sidestep danger

If the journalist persists, block them by saying:

- "I can't talk about that..."
- "I'm sorry, that's not my area..."

And, in each case follow with:

- "...but, your audience may be interested in..."

Confident interviewees will reposition the discussion with:

- "Another, more important, concern is..."
- "The real issue is..."

If the journalist won't follow, suggest closing the interview. Few journalists would want to leave empty-handed. 9

Journalistic behaviour

Journalists range along two axes – behaviour and knowledge. News journalists may play tricks (to anger, depress or please you – an emotional reaction is a warning) while features can be gentle. Expect tough questions from experienced journalists and easy ones from novices.

If they move from these default positions, something's up. A news journalist being gentle means they have a story. But is it yours? An experienced journalist asking easier questions means you're okay. A feature journalist getting stopy means you've moved away from their audience's interest. Ask them what they'd prefer you to talk about. 10

What do they think of you?

Job titles trigger these (possibly unjustified) thoughts:

- **Boss:** A 'name'. Will quote, regardless of quality.
- **Techie:** (And ex-techie.) A truth-teller. Will quote.
- **Sales:** Possibly good. Knows, and may tell, secrets.
- **Marketing:** Unlikely to reveal anything juicy.
- **PR:** A good facilitator. Can't be a named source.

The journalist's perception of marketing could be wrong. If your business card says 'marketing', you may need to say something like, "In our organisation marketing people know exactly what's going on. How can I help you?" 11

Off duty

If you are genuinely off duty – on holiday, out with the family etc. – then you have no obligation to talk with the journalist. Say, "I'll call when I'm at my desk." However, a lot of people get caught out in these situations:

- **Press conference:** Journalists get their stories before or after the presentations. Not during.
- **Exhibition:** Be alert round the clock. Anywhere.
- **Press party:** They might have fun but they're out for whatever they can get. Even if (apparently) drunk.
- **Travelling:** Trains, planes, lounges are public places. Don't discuss or show confidential information. 12

Tricks of the trade

As mentioned earlier, journalists will try to invoke your emotions to winkle out what you're thinking:

- **Pleasure:** "They really like me." They may not, they just figure that flattery will work on you.
- **Depression:** "They say nothing I say is interesting." They're just trying to get at the hidden stories.
- **Anger:** "They're flustering me by going too fast/asking too many questions." They're winding you up.

In all cases, treat the emotion as a signal that they're playing tricks. Don't let on. Make sure you react with your stories. If you're good, they'll think the trick worked. 13

Keep a sense of perspective

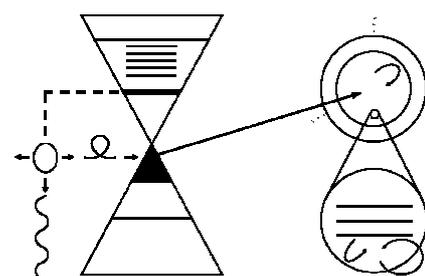
Many journalists aren't horrible, they just want a decent story. All interviews are an opportunity for you. You need three key messages for your part of the business at all times, together with proof points, analogies and anecdotes, as appropriate. These need to be kept fresh. It's no good wheeling out the same messages month after month.

You are also likely to have a couple more (ordained from above) for the business as a whole.

With these as the arrows in your quiver, you can defend yourself against deliberate or accidental attacks from a journalist, ensuring that you both leave feeling that you've gained something from the encounter. 14

Interactive quick tips

View my 'Architecture for Handling the Media' at tebbo.com/a. Slide your pointer around for tips at each step of the process. It works in any browser and will probably work on your tablet and smartphone too.



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And finally...

If you feel an emotional reaction, good or bad, it's likely the journalist has provoked this deliberately, in the hope of provoking an indiscretion. Make sure you respond with what you want to say, rather than what they're hoping for.

Even with this small amount of knowledge, you can stay safe, well away from blurting secrets or speculating. You can be in control of the interview. You can lead the outcome to a win-win. The perfect result.

If you feel I can help you further, please email me. I'm david@tebbo.com. I look forward to hearing from you.