



# A COMPLETE GUIDE TO MEDIA INTERVIEW PREPARATION

**mediafirst**  
specialists in communication training

# INTRODUCTION

Media interviews can be daunting.

Even seasoned spokespeople can come unstuck when they appear in the media spotlight.

But interviews also present a great opportunity to get your message to a wider audience and shape the story.

So we have put together a handy interview checklist from our [media training courses](#) to help spokespeople ensure they are properly prepared, know what to do both during an interview before and after they have been in the media spotlight.

Of course, this is no replacement for taking part in realistic [media training](#). But we believe it is a beneficial guide to help spokespeople know what to expect from an interview, identify pitfalls and ensure their message is heard.

This guide is split in to three key sections: What you need to do before, during and after a media interview.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

## Objectives

Before agreeing to an interview it is important to consider what you are trying to achieve, and what the aim is of doing the media interview.

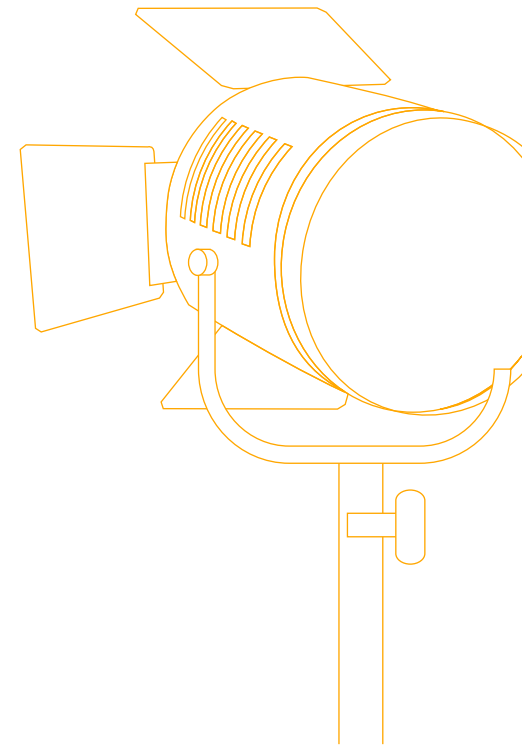
Objectives like 'raise awareness' are too vague. Think about what it is you want the audience to do, or how you want them to feel, as a result of hearing the interview.

If you are in a crisis situation, for example, it is likely you want the audience to feel that you are genuinely sorry for what has happened.

## Logistics

Checking the details may seem a bit dull and obvious, but it is important they are correct.

Last minute panics about the location or the format of an interview can impact on performance.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

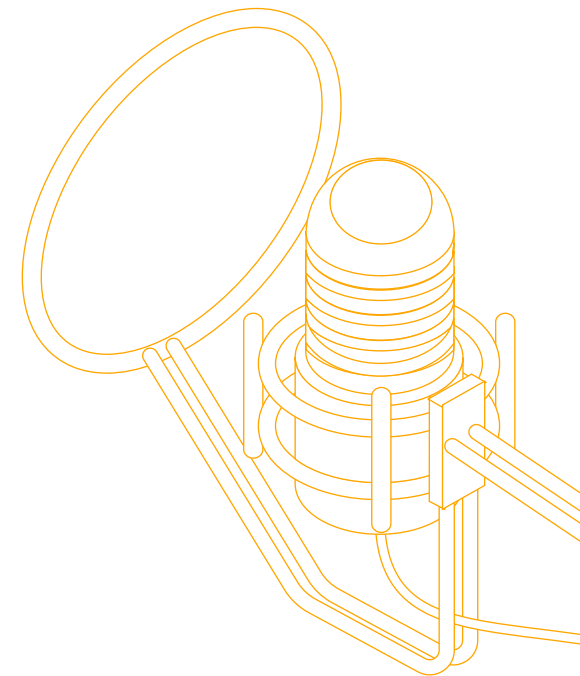
Make sure the spokesperson understands the type of interview they are being asked to give. For example, a down-the-line interview is a different experience to appearing in a studio. And a sound bite interview has different requirements to a typical broadcast interview.

Without this knowledge, a spokesperson won't know whether they have achieved their goals or missed an opportunity.

## Background on the interviewer

It is important for spokespeople to have an understanding of the person who is going to be asking the questions. Do they specialise in your sector? What do they normally cover? How much experience do they have?

Different journalists have different styles and approaches. An interview on the Today programme is likely to differ from the type of interview you may get from big personality journalists on stations like LBC and Talk Radio. And this can have an impact on the way they shape the story.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

It's also worth checking the reporter's social media profile to see what they have been discussing.

Similarly, a brief overview of the media outlet they work for (and most importantly their audience) would also be helpful.

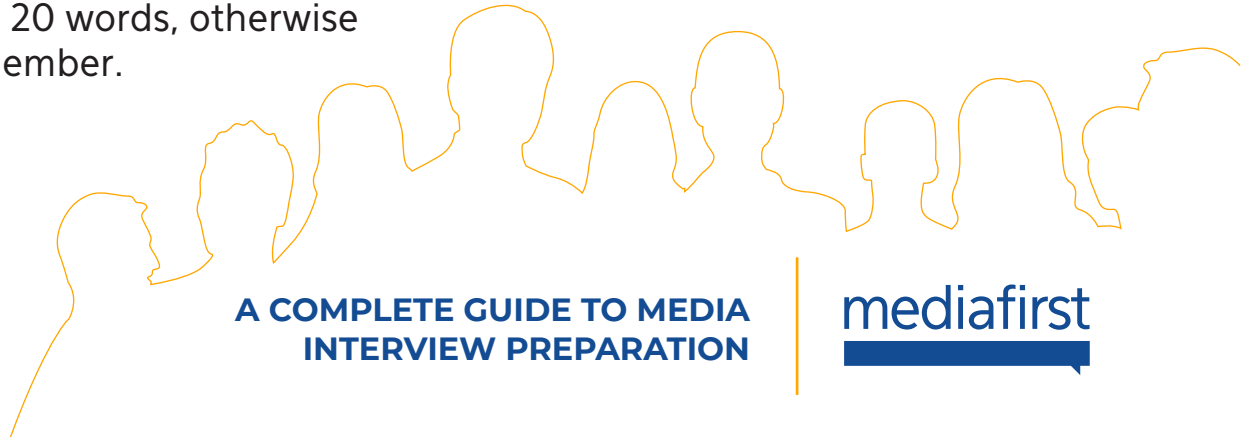
## Message

Once you are sure of what you want to achieve from the interview, you need to be clear on the one key message you want to get across.

That doesn't sound a lot and other media trainers will tell you to aim for three (I recently read an article from one which said that five key messages should be prepared).

But we believe that few people watching or listening to an interview will remember more than one major point.

The message should be simple and brief. It must be capable of being summarised in a single sentence of no more than 20 words, otherwise it is likely to be too complicated for people to remember.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

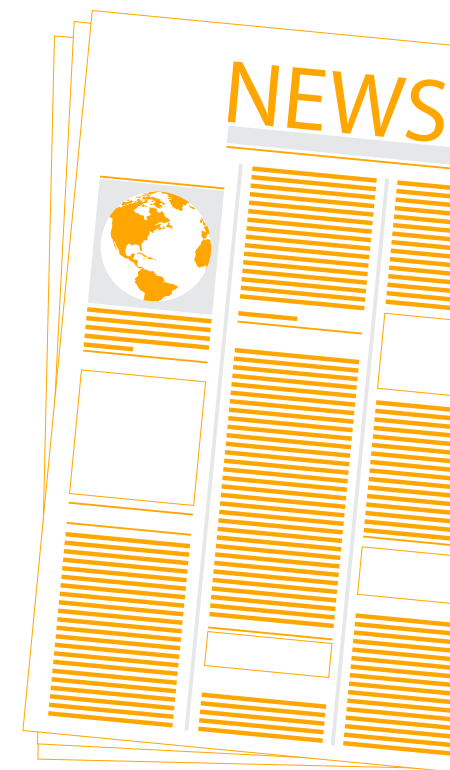
## The 'so what?' test

If you think you have settled on your message, put it through the 'so what?' test. Journalists can be a cynical bunch and are always asking 'so what?' when it comes to potential stories.

To pass that test, your message needs to include something which is either topical, relevant, unusual, human or contain an element of conflict or trouble. On our media training courses we use the acronym TRUTH to describe this:

- T** topical: of the moment, timely, new and something people are talking about
- R** relevant: to a specific audience
- U** unusual: not what people already know or expect. Something which will surprise the audience. Is it the first? The biggest? The smallest? In the world of social media it is something which will make people click through to the story.
- T** trouble: Show how you are solving a problem. If your story is not strong enough a journalist will look for the conflict angle.
- H** human interest: What is in it for people? What impact will it have on your customers?

The human element of your story is crucial because journalists know that people are fascinated by stories about other people.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

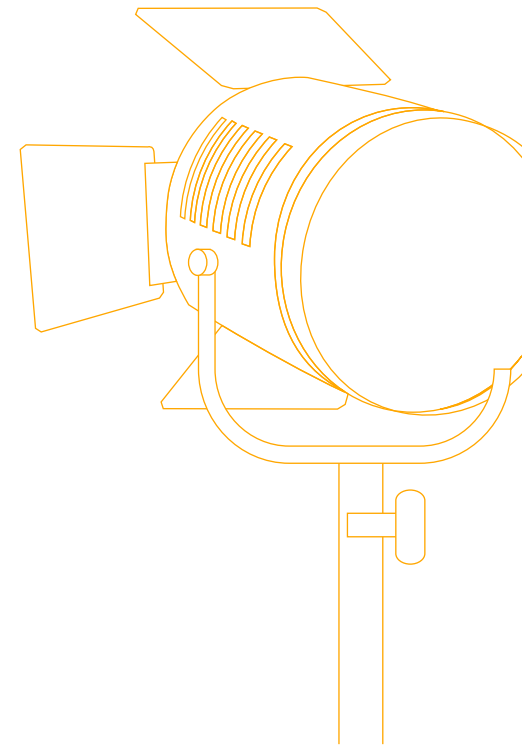
## Examples

Planning the examples you are going to use in a media interview is a key part of effective preparation.

Without them, messages are just empty statements. To be effective, examples need to be relatable and have a human element.

The most powerful examples are those which are personal to the spokesperson and that connect with the audience and take them on a journey.

Personal stories and anecdotes help make the brand relevant, provide a human side to the organisation and help spokespeople speak with confidence and sound more fluent.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

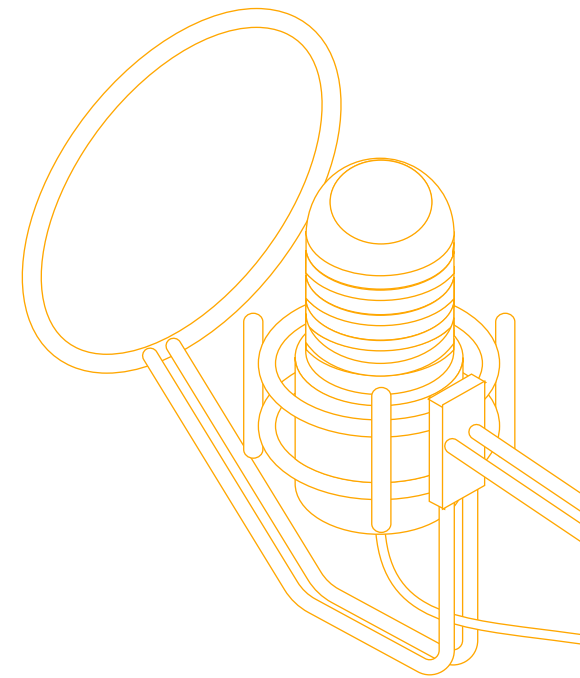
## Tough questions

It's a journalist's job to ask questions. Typically a spokesperson will encounter some they are happy to answer and others which they would prefer not to be asked.

The key to handling those tough questions is preparation. It is crucial that pre-interview preparation tries to anticipate the difficult questions which could come up in an interview.

For example, if your organisation had a period of negative coverage a few months ago, that could be brought into the interview. If the CEO's pay or bonus has attracted controversy in the past, then that too is likely to become a line of questioning.

Once you have anticipated the potential negative questions then you can plan how you would respond to them.





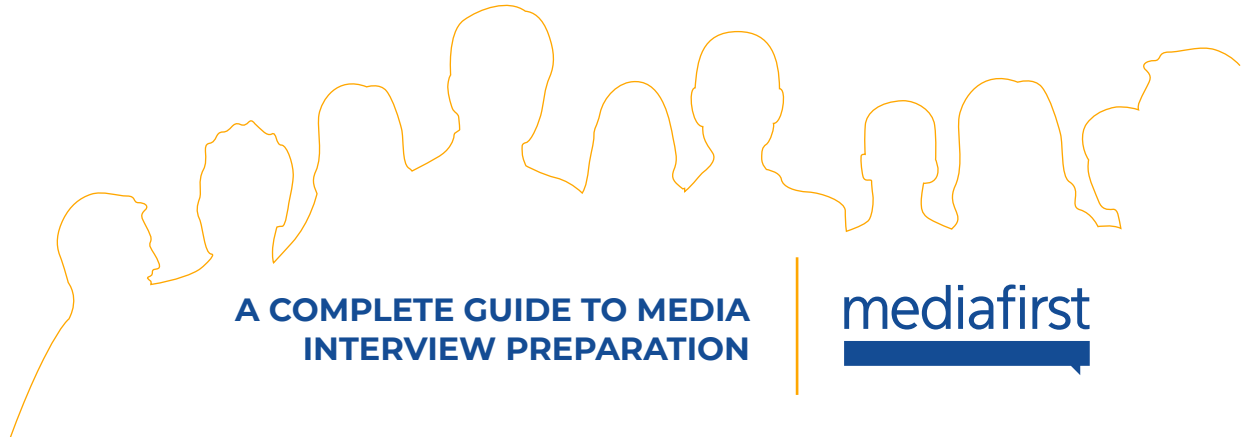
# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

## Wider issues

All too often we see interviews where a spokesperson has clearly prepared for the tough questions they are likely to face, but who are thrown by wider issues being brought in to the conversation.

This typically happens at the end of the interview and is often introduced through a phrase like 'while you are here' or 'and finally'. It typically focuses on broader newsworthy issues in the sector, the country or perhaps some new government policy. You may have noticed, recently that a lot of interviews with business leaders currently tend to end with a Brexit question.

The danger of failing to prepare for this is that a spokesperson could say something controversial which ruins the interview, or which creates a new angle and takes the focus away from the main message.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

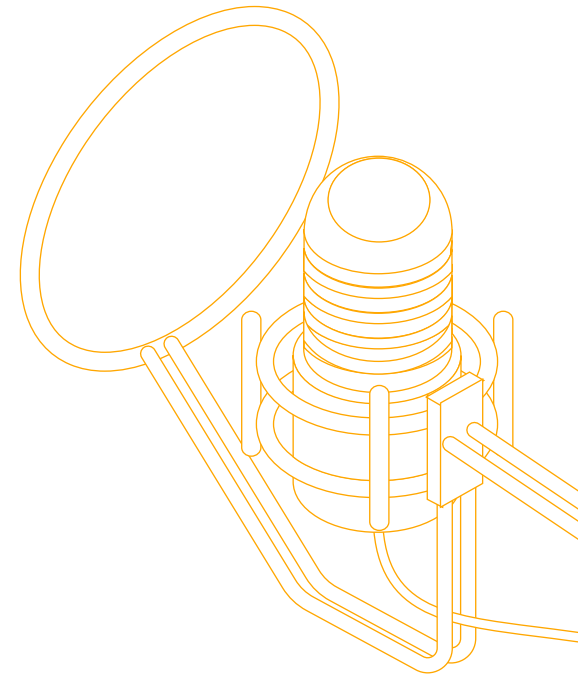
## Rehearse

Before an interview, you or your spokesperson should have a rehearsal.

Ask a colleague to put you through your paces with a mock interview and encourage them to ask difficult questions.

It may turn out differently to the real thing, but it will give you a feel for responding to questions under pressure and trying to steer the conversation.

But you must carry out the rehearsal with someone who is prepared to give honest, constructive feedback on your performance.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

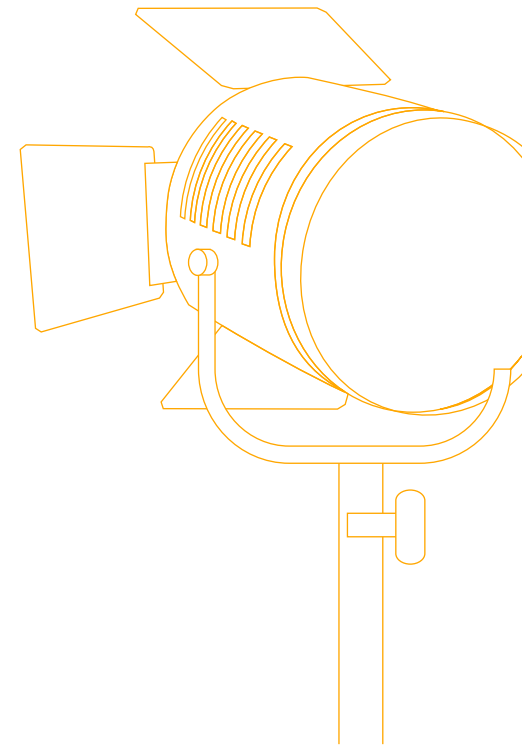
## Don't over prepare

This sounds pretty contradictory coming at the end of a section on all the things you should consider before a media interview, but preparing too much can also be risky.

Present a spokesperson with a huge briefing document and it is only going to add to any nerves or feelings of dread they may have. And it will be almost impossible for them to recall much of that information under pressure.

Another danger is that it can turn spokespeople into corporate talking robots, unable to create a natural sounding conversation.

In our view, the preparation we have outlined in this eBook – aside from the rehearsal – should take around 20 minutes to half an hour.



# BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

## Just before the interview

Rather than taking another look at your briefing notes in the final few minutes before an interview, instead focus on warming up your vocal chords.

A good way to do this is to read aloud a children's book. As well as warming up the voice, it is also a good way to practice varying the tone and adding pauses for emphasis.

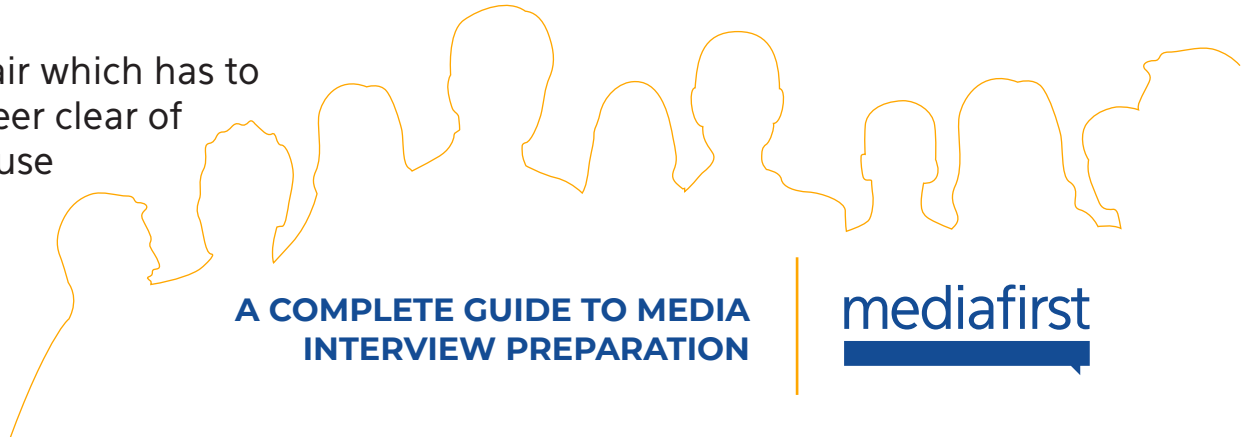
## Lose the distractions

It may sound obvious, but it is worth remembering as it still seems to catch people out ([remember Lord Bell on Newsnight](#)) – make sure your mobile is turned off.

Also remove any keys and change from your pockets.

Narrow stripes, checks and small patterns can cause a strobe effect and appear to the viewer as if you are moving – something which can prove hugely distracting.

Other distractions include dangly earrings and hair which has to be regularly flicked from the eyes. Men should steer clear of shiny suits and those of us with little hair should use powder on their heads.



# IN THE INTERVIEW

## Don't wait

Look to get to your message early in the interview – ideally in the first answer. If it is for print, you can set out at the start, before a question has been asked, the key point you want to get across.

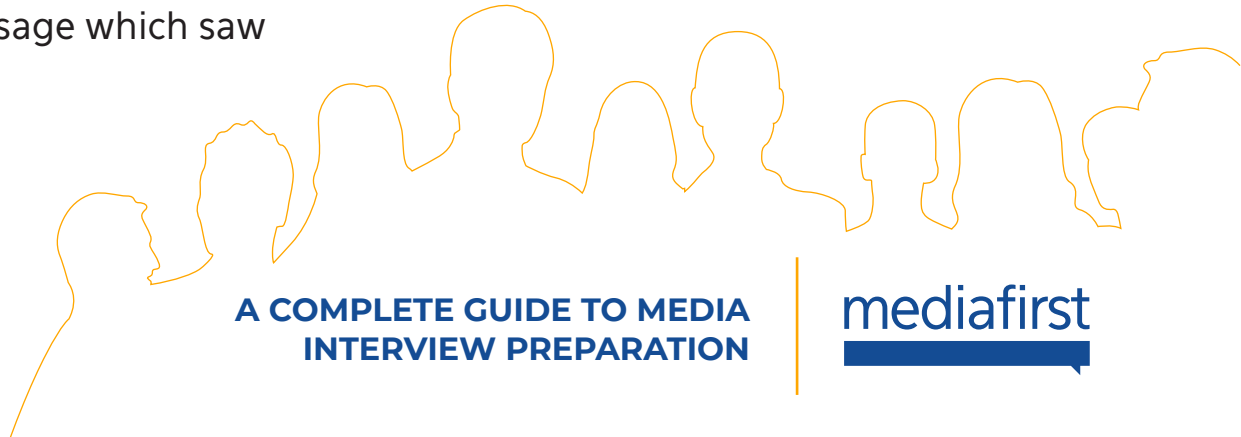
If it is a broadcast interview, try to steer the conversation early towards what you want to get across.

Don't wait for the right question to come up – it probably won't and the opportunity the interview presents will be lost.

## Repeat

Don't be afraid to repeat your key message as the interview goes along. Repetition will help the audience remember what you are trying to get across.

Just change the language a little or use different examples to illustrate the point so that it does not sound annoyingly robotic. You or your spokesperson do not want to sound like Theresa May and her 'strong and stable' message which saw her dubbed the Maybot.



# IN THE INTERVIEW

## Media training techniques

Using [media training](#) techniques like bridging and signposting will help you take control of the interview.

**Bridging** will help spokespeople steer the conversation away from the tough, challenging questions and back to what they want to discuss. And when it is used well, most people won't even notice. The spokesperson needs to answer or briefly acknowledge the question asked and then use a bridging phrase to steer the conversation away.

Examples of good bridging phrases include:

*"That's how /not how I see it – going back to..."*

*"That is a concern, but what our customers tell me is more important, is..."*

*"That's not my experience. When I talk to our customers..."*

*"People have said that, but the key thing to remember is..."*

*"I can't speculate on that, but what I can confirm is..."*

**Signposting** is a way of making it clear to the journalist what they should ask next. For example, if you finish a response by saying 'and that's not even the most exciting thing', it is unlikely the journalist will move the interview on to something else. They know that their audience will want to know what the 'most exciting thing' is.

# IN THE INTERVIEW

## Tone

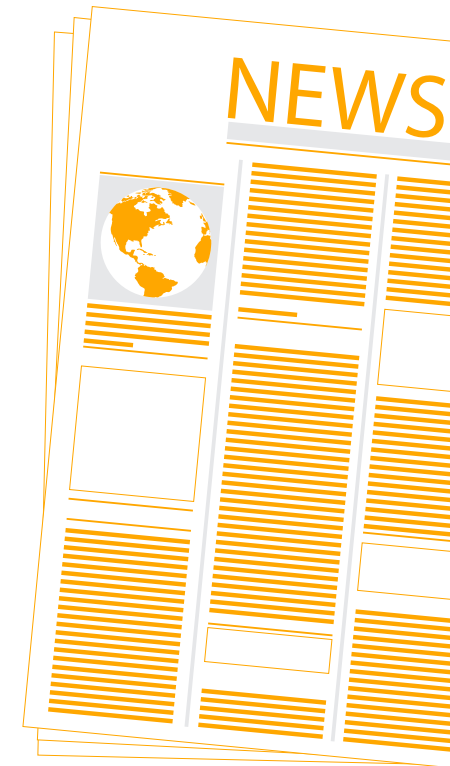
You should have a strong message, but if you deliver it in a dull, flat, monotone way the audience is unlikely to really hear what you have to say. If the interview is on a proactive subject, you need to inject passion, energy and enthusiasm into your voice to engage viewers.

If it is an interview during a crisis, a warm, authoritative tone is required.

## Key things to avoid

**Jargon** – the language used in your industry or sector may be meaningless to those who do not work in that area. Avoid in-house phrases and acronyms. Keep it simple. Think about how you would tell the story if you were talking to a friend or family member in a pub or coffee shop, and use the same language. Try to be conversational.

**Speculation** – some questions may encourage a spokesperson to speculate. 'What would happen if...' is a question you may well face. The key is to not get drawn in to making bold predictions about what may or may not happen in the future, which could leave you and your organisation a hostage to fortune.



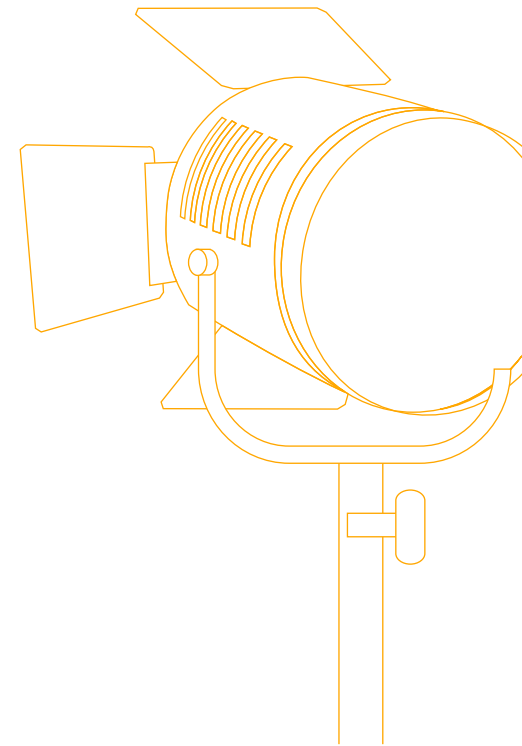
# IN THE INTERVIEW

**Negatives** – don't be drawn into repeating the negative words and phrases a journalist may use in their question, even if you are trying to rebut it. When you repeat this language in your response the reporter gains a neat sound bite with the spokesperson using the negative phrase, such as the infamous Richard Nixon 'I am not a crook' quote.

**Short answers** – short answers need to be avoided. They make spokespeople sound defensive and they also surrender the control of the interview to the journalist. You are simply encouraging the reporter to ask more questions. But you also need to avoid going too far the other way and giving long rambling answers. These will be hard for the audience to follow and will ensure the key message is lost.

**No comment** – this is simply not an acceptable response.

**Off-the-record** – don't be tempted to go off-the-record. It is a term which means different things to different people and it is fraught with danger. Assume that what you tell a journalist could appear in the news and be attributed to you.





# IN THE INTERVIEW

## Key things to remember

**Microphone** – always assume that any microphone or camera is turned on – remember what happened to the [boss of Sainsbury's](#) when he was caught on camera singing 'We're in the money' while he waited for a down-the-line interview. And remember that an interview starts as soon as you are in the room.

**Eye contact** – maintaining good eye contact with the reporter is important to stop you looking shifty and defensive. In a [down-the-line interview](#), look directly 'down the barrel' of the camera.

**Embrace the pause** – instead of jumping straight into a response to a question and doing your thinking while you talk, briefly pause and plan your answer in your head. This will reduce the chances of you saying something you later regret and it is a better option than using filler words to buy thinking time. It also helps to make spokespeople appear thoughtful.

**Remain calm** – even if the pressure ramps up and the interview becomes hostile, a spokesperson must retain their composure. If you get angry, you will appear defensive and the audience may feel you have something to hide. Additionally, angry comments are often reported without any mention of the provocation which triggered the response. However, if you remain calm you are more likely to retain the sympathy of the audience.

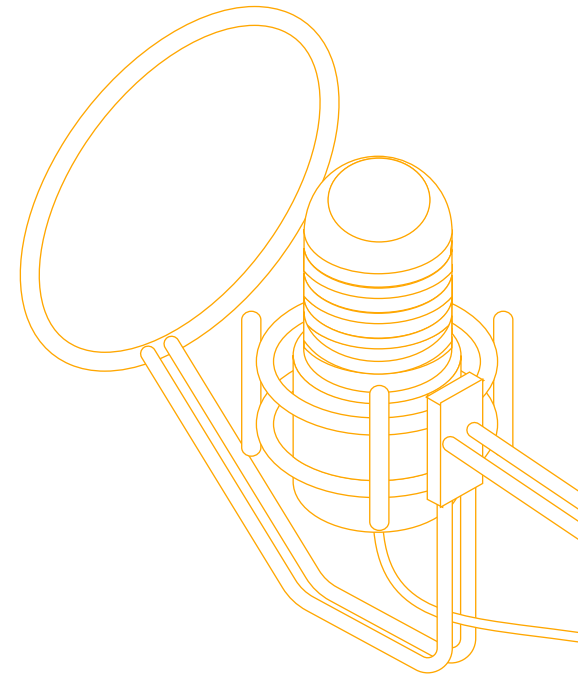
# IN THE INTERVIEW

## Don't expect perfection

Mistakes happen in media interviews. Even a polished performance is likely to have a couple of areas which could have gone better and in 35 years of providing media training we don't think we have ever seen a perfect interview.

If you make a mistake it is unlikely to gain much attention – or impact upon your career – unless it is a real foot-in-mouth moment (like the infamous interview where the [CEO of Permisson Homes](#) walked away when faced with questions about his bonus).

We find that those who volunteer to be media spokespeople tend to climb the corporate ladder faster than those who don't. Why? Because they are brave, ambitious and willing to speak out.



# AFTER THE INTERVIEW

## Review

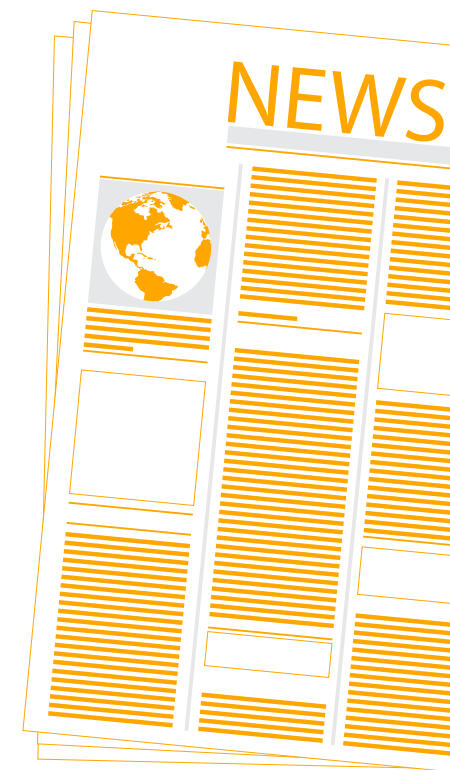
Every interview is different but there are things that can be learnt from all of them.

Look back at the interview and identify what went well and areas where you or your spokesperson could have improved.

If the interview is part of a full media day, try to find a way to factor in a brief review between each one. This could prevent the same mistakes from happening again. Or a few simple tweaks could help find a way of adding real emphasis to the key message.

## Share

If a media interview has gone well, why not share it on social media? Being seen as a spokesperson will help to raise your profile and ensure you are seen as an expert in your field. Additionally, a journalist is likely to appreciate any additional likes or shares of their finished product.



# AFTER THE INTERVIEW

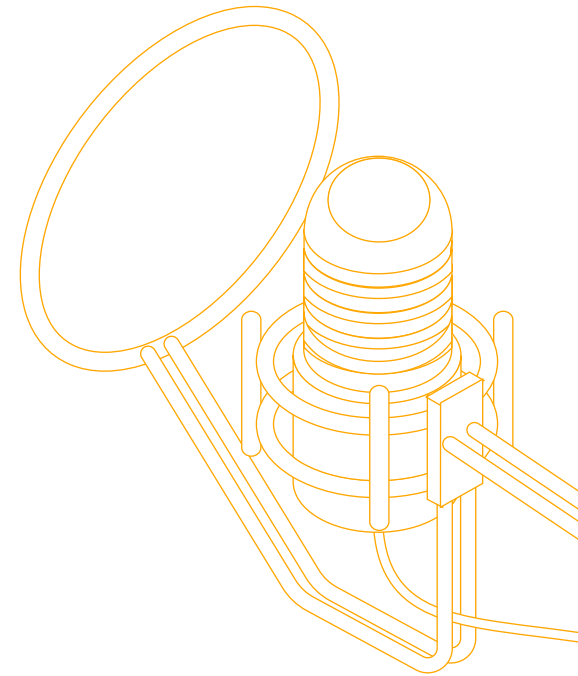
## Conclusion

The aim of this eBook has been to show you everything you need to do to be best prepared for a media interview.

It may feel like there is a lot to take in, but we believe taking these necessary steps will ensure you make the right impact.

And there is an added bonus.

These tips don't just work for media interviews. Many of them can also work well in presentations and meetings, allowing you to stay in control of your message and communicate with clarity.



# ABOUT US

Media First has been delivering bespoke media training for 35 years and currently works with 40 of the FTSE 100.

Our practical and realistic journalist-led training courses will give you and your organisation the best possible preparation for the media spotlight.

We have worked with press and communication teams alongside their spokespeople in over 40 different sectors.

Our [media training courses](#) work because they are realistic and authentic.

If you would like to find out more about our media training courses, please get in touch on 0118 918 0530, [hello@mediafirst.co.uk](mailto:hello@mediafirst.co.uk) or visit [www.mediafirst.co.uk](http://www.mediafirst.co.uk).