
Managing the Conversation

A resource from



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- When your and the reporter's agendas don't match, remember the formula:
$$Q = A + 1^1$$
 (Answer the question, but bridge to the key message that you want to emphasize)
- For difficult questions, prepare three tiers of response.²
 1. One-two sentence summary of your position.
 2. Concrete example with additional detail, if necessary.
 3. Further elaboration using another supporting statement. If pressed further, return to number 1.
- If you get a question you don't want to answer, use a "bridge" back to one of your messages.
- Stay positive. Don't repeat the negative framework of a question in your answer.
- Don't speculate, conjecture or guess. If you don't know, say so.
- Less is more. Keep your answers brief and to the point. This is not a conversation; this is communication. (One good rule of thumb: the tougher the question, the shorter the answer.)
- If possible, repeat your main messages several times (don't be dull, but better to be dull than off message).
- Remember, the reporter needs you. He or she needs the information you have and your credibility to build a good story. The terms of your interview, therefore, are usually negotiable.

¹ Ailes, R. and Kraushar, J. *You Are the Message: Getting What You Want by Being Who You Are*. Doubleday: New York 1995.

² Ibid.

Example of Question=Answer + 1

Question

Isn't caring for the growing number of older people going to bankrupt our nation?

Answer + 1

Caring for a rapidly aging population will be expensive and will likely require some difficult choices like raising taxes or "rationing" services in some form.

+

But there may be some unforeseen economic benefits as well. For example, the health care industry is an economic engine; it pays good salaries and produces new innovations and products. And healthy older adults are a powerful consumer force.

Example of a Three-Tier Response

Question

Isn't the growing number of older people going to bankrupt our nation?

First Tier Response

Paying for the cost of caring for the Baby Boom generation will likely require some difficult choices.

Follow-up Question

You mean new taxes. Won't these drain our economic productivity?

Second Tier Response

Paying for the care of our growing older adult population will certainly create a serious economic challenge. But the growing number of older adults poses some economic benefits as well. Remember, the health care industry is an economic engine itself. It pays good salaries, produces new innovations and products, and creates new markets for these products here and abroad. And healthy older adults are a powerful consumer force.

Second Follow-up Question

But there simply will not be enough workers and taxes to support this "raging Silver Wave."

Third Tier Response

As I said, the growing older population will require tough choices. Still many of the economic models can't predict the growing health and productivity of older people in 2030, 2050 or beyond. Since 1980, the disability rate among older people has dropped 20%. With new drugs, interventions and lifestyle knowledge, it may drop even faster. Our expectations for what older can and should accomplish—both economically and socially—will likely be radically different when we reach the middle of the 21st Century.

Examples of Bridges

- “That’s an interesting question, but what’s really at issue is...”
- “I can’t address that topic, but I can tell you...”
- “(So and so) might have a more informed answer to that question, what I can say is...”
- “That’s a good question, but a better question is...”
- “That answer to that question is quite broad. I can say that...”

Example of Responding Positively

Negative question

Given the need for more geriatricians, haven’t academic medical centers been slow to respond?

Positive answer

As our society ages, we are going to have to train not only more geriatricians, but more general practitioners, specialists, nurses, social workers and health workers to care for older adults. At the John A. Hartford Foundation, we are working with a variety of academic medical centers, the disciplines themselves and professional societies to promote this training. There has been progress, but of course there is much more work to be done.

Tips for Working with the Media

Prepare for the interview.

- Before the interview, ask the reporter: what's the story, what do you want to know, how much do you already know and who else is being interviewed?
- Review your messages and toolbox. Identify the main messages/points you want the public/audience (not the interviewer) to remember.
- Do a practice interview or two with a colleague, friend or family member.
- Prepare the answers to 2-3 tough questions (you hope you won't get).
- Prepare 2-3 sound bytes.
- **Don't** do the interview when the reporter calls if you are not comfortable. Check his or her deadline and call them back.

Think “thinking points,” not just messages or talking points.

- “Think” through the points you want to make, not just replay your messages.
- In the interview, this will help you “show” genuine concern, answer questions deliberately, and build credibility and rapport with the reporter.
- Listen carefully so you can respond appropriately to all questions.

Be a good interview.

- Show your enthusiasm. You do this work for a reason, let that energy show.
- Use humor where appropriate.
- Use colorful words and dramatic language when possible.
- Vary your speech rate and volume.
- Keep your answers concise.
- Identify helpful resources/people.
- Try to humanize your key messages, such as a personal story that illustrates your findings.

Avoid jargon and technical language.

- Clearly explain all terms, abbreviations and acronyms.
- Use analogies and metaphors to describe your work.
- Don't talk down or patronize.

Give credit.

- Try to remember others who are responsible for the work you are talking about.
- Same goes for your funders. Plug them, where possible.

Understand what “On Background,” “Not for Attribution,” and “Off the Record” mean.

- Generally speaking, everything is “on the record.”
- “On Background” is used to provide information to educate reporters, and is not meant to be attributed as a quote, but will likely still appear in print.
- “Not For Attribution” means that information can be quoted, anonymously.
- “Off The Record” is never supposed to be published. Very little is “off the record” today.
- If you don’t want a statement quoted, don’t make it.

Specific tips for radio

- Speak slowly & clearly and take your time.
- If necessary, restate the question to buy yourself more time to think about the answer.
- If you are being taped for future broadcast and stumble while answering, simply start your answer again. The best version will be used after editing.
- Memorize the interviewer’s name and start the interview by thanking them for inviting you. Repeat at the end of interview.

Specific tips for TV

- Again, be prepared. Know your key points and rehearse them. Think headlines, not explication.
- Get to the studio early. You’ll need to go through make-up and get pre-interviewed.
- Look at the interviewer, not the camera.
- Image matters. Wear colors that don’t clash: dark solid colors & blue shirts are best. Avoid clothing, jewelry or makeup that attracts attention.
- Watch your gesturing. Try to keep your hands folded and under control. If you gesture with each sentence, viewers will be watching you and not listening to you.

It could never happen, but in a crisis (from Hart Media, Inc.) ...

- Gather information
- Identify a single (preferably well-trained) spokesperson and give an initial briefing as soon as possible
- Be concise and precise.
- Show concern and empathy. Offer reassurance.
- Monitor media reports and correct errors immediately.
- Avoid “no comment” responses.
- Avoid fixing blame.
- Update frequently and regularly.
- Tell the truth.