

Deal Effectively with the Media

It's important that every library have a policy on how to deal with media calls, whether they come through the library's public information office or directly to a staff member, trustee, Friend or advocate leader. There should be a clear understanding of who speaks for the library and when. Designated spokespeople should know or have copies of the library's key messages on various topics. They should be prepared to answer hard questions and give short, punchy quotes, known as "sound bites," that reporters need for their stories, both in print and on the air. "Kids who read succeed," "Libraries change lives" and "In a world that's information rich, librarians are information smart" are examples of sound bites that ALA spokespeople have used successfully with the media.

If you are being interviewed, remember that you are the expert. You are being interviewed because you have an important story to tell. This section contains helpful techniques that can help you deliver the message successfully in a variety of settings.

Feel free to contact the ALA Public Information Office or the Office for Library Advocacy if you have questions, need additional briefing material or there is an issue that you feel merits comment from ALA.

Tips

- **Be clear** about who you represent—yourself, your library or library association. If a host misstates your name or affiliation, gently but firmly correct him or her immediately.
- **Know your key message.** Don't feel you have to reinvent the message for every interview. You may have heard the message many times before, but chances are your audience hasn't. The goal is to give a consistent message.
- **Aim to deliver** the key message at least three times to help ensure your audience will hear and remember it.
- **Know your audience.** Find out the name and type of the publication, station or program and the type of readers or listeners it has. Ask the reporter or producer what the "angle" is. Tailor your remarks accordingly.
- **Be prepared** to answer hard questions and develop answers ahead of time. Also be prepared to answer the standard "Who- What-Where-When-Why and How" questions. Identify three talking points, a pertinent statistic, story or example to support your message. Use statistics sparingly.
- **Write your key messages,** talking points and tough questions on note cards. Review them before you do an interview. Keep them in front of you when doing radio or telephone interviews.

- **Talk in “sound bites.”** This is especially important with broadcast media when you may have only about 12 seconds to respond. Your key message should be short and pithy. Practice limiting your answers to 25 words or less. If reporters want more, they will ask more questions.
- **Stay in control.** Keep your answers focused and “on message.” Learn to use the techniques in the Staying in Control section.
- **Don’t be afraid** to say “I don’t know.” Do not give inaccurate information. If you are unsure, it’s better to simply say, “I’m sorry I don’t know that. I’ll be glad to check and get back to you.”
- **Help** the reporter or interviewer help the audience understand. Provide fact sheets and other background materials. Suggest other spokespeople to contact.
- **Practice. Practice. Practice.** Practice talking in sound bites and staying in control at staff and board meetings and in daily conversation. The more you do it, the better and more comfortable you’ll be.
- **Remember to smile.** It’s important to come across as friendly and likable as well as professional.
- **Stay focused.** An interview is not a conversation. It’s conversational. The interviewer has a job to do. Do not let down your guard.

Staying in Control

The best way to make sure your message is heard is for you to be in control. Your goal should be to deliver your key message at least three times so your audience will understand and remember it. Skilled spokespeople can take almost any question, answer it and “bridge” back to their key central message—in 25 words or less. The following techniques are particularly useful with broadcast media. They also can be used effectively with print reporters and in other question-and-answer situations. The best way to feel in control is to practice these techniques whenever possible until they come naturally.

Tips

Ask questions before you answer them. Clarify in advance the topics to be discussed and the type of audience. Ask if there are specific questions the interviewer wants answered. If you don’t feel qualified to address the issue or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other approaches. Refer them to the ALA Public Information Office, the ALA Office for Library Advocacy or other sources.

Take time to prepare. Tell the reporter you will call back at a given time (even five minutes if the reporter is on deadline). Use this time to review the key message and anticipate questions. Be sure to call back at the agreed upon time.

Never answer a question you don’t fully understand. Say, “I’m not sure I understand the question. Are you asking...?”

Think before you answer. Don’t rush. A pause can make you appear more thoughtful. You also can buy time by saying, “That’s a good question.” Or, “Let me think about that and

come back to it.”

Beware of leading questions. Some reporters may attempt to influence your answer by asking something like “Wouldn’t you say...” followed by an idea for your agreement. Answer the questions briefly followed by your own statement.

For example:

Q. Isn’t it true that many colleges are closing their library buildings in favor of providing digital collections?

A. I don’t think it’s likely. Libraries are as much a part of campus life as the student union. One of the most important things librarians do is teach students how to be critical consumers of information.

Never repeat a negative. Keep your answers positive.

For example:

Q. Why do librarians allow children to view pornography?

A. We don’t. Our job is to help children learn to use the Internet wisely and guide them to all the great websites out there.

Avoid one-word answers such as “yes” or “no.” Use every opportunity to make your point.

For example:

Q. Is it true that librarians spend money on DVDs that could be spent on books?

A. That depends on how you look at it. In some cases, DVDs may be more helpful than books. Many things like learning a language or how to repair your car are easier to learn from a DVD than a book. Librarians believe people need information in all forms.

Focus the reporter or listener by flagging main ideas with phrases such as “That’s an excellent question” or “The important thing to remember is...” or “The real issue here is . . .” or “Here are three important points . . .”

Stay “on message.” Use every question as an opportunity to “bridge” to your message.

For example:

Q. How was the weather when you left Chicago?

A. The weather was terrible. But I’m not nearly as concerned about that as I am about some very serious threats to our freedom to read.

“Hook” the interviewer into listening to your most important points by saying, “There are three things your listeners should know” or “There are a couple of ways to answer that question. First...” The interviewer can’t cut you off without frustrating his or her audience.