

# How to Speak Effectively With the Media

## I. Why Speak Effectively With the Media?

There are many reasons for citizen groups to speak effectively with the media, as follows:

- speaking effectively will result in more media coverage because the media generally like to talk to effective spokespeople;
- effective media coverage is a great way to increase public awareness of the issue/problem you are working on (for example, one appearance on CTV or CBC National TV News reaches 1.5 million Canadians);
- speaking effectively with the media coverage will help convince the public that your issue/problem is important, and that your solutions are needed and the best way to solve the problem;
- speaking effectively with the media decreases the chance that the media can distort your message; and
- politicians and the heads of corporations watch the news closely, so speaking effectively with the media will deliver your message clearly to them.

## II. How to Speak Effectively With the Media

The following are key steps for speaking effectively with the media:

1. **Make it new** - Most reporters and editors are looking for news -- new things that have happened that day. You may not be speaking about something new that you have done that day (for example, releasing a report or announcing an event or activity) but you can always present your proposals in a new way, with a new angle, or tying your proposals into something new that has happened.
2. **Practise what you are going to say** - For any interview, you should have 2-3 lines that contain your message that you will repeat again and again during the interview. Practise these lines again and again until you can say them with confidence and conviction. Also, anticipate questions that the media will ask and have 1-2 lines to respond to each question that also contain your message.
3. **Keep it simple** - The media, especially TV news, generally do not handle complex stories or issues well, and they want simple statements to use in articles or TV or radio pieces. The public who are reading, watching and listening are generally at a level of grade 8 literacy and can only pay attention for a short period of time (80% of Canadians only read news headlines in newspapers or on TV, or listen only to headline radio news). So keep your statements short (less than 15 seconds each) and simple. Don't use big words or technical words or technical arguments or short-forms (say the "North American Free Trade Agreement" instead of "NAFTA"). Practise what you are going to say with a 14-year-old (and not with a super-smart 14-year-old) -- if they don't understand you the first time, then simplify how you say what you are saying.
4. **Ask if they want details** - After you have said your 2-3 lines that contain your message,

and answered each media question with 1-2 lines, ask the reporter if they want more details before launching into a long background explanation. Reporters usually only have a few hours to produce a complete article, TV or radio story, and you are very likely not the only person they want to talk to about the story. Ask before giving details so you don't keep the media on the line longer than they need to complete the story.

5. **Use words that provoke a response** - Some words are well understood by most people, and so using these clear words will ensure a greater response. For example, it is clearer to say something is "dangerous" than to say it "could cause harm". Other clear words and phrases include: won, lost, successful, failed, good, bad, best, worst, corrupt, greedy, open, secret, democratic, undemocratic, ethical, unethical, risky, natural, like a machine, sick, criminal, crisis, gouging, rip-off, lying, hiding, the right to choose, the right to know.
6. **Use comparisons that are easy to understand** - Even if you are talking about health care or education, and definitely if you are talking about other issues, many people will not know what you are talking about. Use clear examples and comparisons to things that most people do know about (for example, popular TV shows, famous people, famous things) and more people will understand what you are saying.
7. **Talk positively or negatively, but not both at the same time** - Mixing positives and negatives is very confusing for the person listening. Either make all your statements positive (for example, "The government should do this, and this and this") or negative (for example, "The government should *not* do this, and should *not* do this or this").
8. **Have an appropriate tone** - This is especially important when speaking to TV and radio. Practise what you are going to say, but not to the point that you sound like a machine or seem bored when you say it. If you say something is "outrageous" without any emotion in your voice, people watching or listening will think you are just saying it, not that you believe it. At the same time, if you say with emotion that something is "the worst thing ever" when, in fact, it is not even close to the worst thing ever, then people watching or listening will think you are out of touch with reality and you will lose credibility. Always use an appropriate tone.
9. **Repeat your main points again and again** - Most people listening to you, including the reporter interviewing you, are likely doing something else while they listen. As a result, most people will likely miss what you said the first time. Repeat your main points again and again and more people will understand, and remember, your message.
10. **Make sure to have contact information** - After you are finished speaking to the media, make sure they have your full and correct contact information (in case they want to follow-up with you) and that you have their full contact information (so you can contact them after you see or hear the story in case you want to correct anything).