

# How to prepare your executive for a media interview

A step-by-step guide for prepping an executive for their next media interview. Learn techniques for pitching an interview to your executive, tips for research and preparation and more, with worksheets to help you get started.



## How to prepare your executive for a media interview

You've done your part—you landed an interview for your boss with a key reporter. But now those flashes of uncertainty are creeping into your brain. Is she really ready? Will he make the best use of this opportunity by adequately preparing? Sure, she knows her stuff, but what if she gets hit with a curveball? What if the line of questioning takes off in an unpredicted fashion? All of those questions have you asking yourself whether setting up this interview was a good idea after all.

### The truth is, your part is actually not over.

It's up to you to make sure that the folks in your organization who are talking to the media are adequately prepared. Granted, that's not always easy. There are those whose self-confidence can contribute to the tendency of not taking the interview seriously enough. Others may not appreciate the potential impact that can come from a positive interview, or worse, a negative one. Then there are the company execs who make no distinction between talking to a reporter or chatting up the person next to them on a cross-country flight. Danger, Will Robinson.

Ideally, you'd like to put your folks through some formal media training, especially the hands-on kind that not only provides tips on messaging, delivery, bridging and the like, but that also gives them practical experience in an environment that closely simulates the real thing. But that's not always possible. In fact, many PR pros find that broaching media training with those in the C-suite is more than a bit uncomfortable.

**With that, we've prepared this guide with a series of handy worksheets designed to provide a primer of sorts to media training.** It's a strategy on dealing with a boss that likely needs more help than she realizes. Think of it as a way to get her a bit more focused on the task at hand than she might otherwise do.

**Read on for actionable steps you can take to prepare an executive—or anyone, really—for a media interview.**

## Step One: Broaching the Idea

Let's begin with getting your exec at least thinking about the interview. An email to him is likely the best way to start broaching the idea that some preparation may be in order. You might start by complimenting him on his knowledge of the topic at hand, but then you can pivot to introducing some questions that he may not have thought about. Perhaps send him some clips from the reporter as a reminder of some of the hard-hitting questions she has a reputation for asking. Introduce the idea of sitting down with other internal resources to go over some of the newsworthy topics that are likely to come up.

And see if he's interested in either getting some sample questions from you or sitting down with you in person to go over them. Even if he doesn't take you up on any of these nudges, you've likely got him thinking about the need to prepare.

### **Here are some tips and to-dos when making the initial outreach to your boss about the interview.**

- Start by summarizing the context of the interview.
- Remind her of trending or related issues.
- Offer some sample questions, including some tough ones that will get him thinking that perhaps he is not as prepared as he thinks.
- Identify internal resources that can provide relevant information and details.
- Offer to set up a briefing with you and/or others as a walk through.

## Step Two: The Big Picture

Okay, let's say that you successfully got the boss's attention, and she's receptive to some counsel on how to best get ready for the interview. Don't just jump into the prospective Q's and A's. Think about the bigger picture: what are the key messages that you want to convey in this interview? What would you like to see the headline or lead say? What's the enduring sentiment or fact that you want readers to remember? Meanwhile, be thinking about which readers are the most important.

Discerning the answers to these questions should be the first step in media preparation. As the PR person, you can begin fleshing out what you think are the key messages, then have them on hand at a working session with the boss. Ask her what she thinks the most important 2-3 points are, and work with her on language that she feels comfortable with and, ideally, sounds natural. Consider how those messages will be received by the various audiences that will be reading or tuning in for them.

You'll also want to go over some secondary messaging. This is where you can add color and personality and history into your key points – i.e. examples of what makes you think the way you do, case studies on how your work impacted clients, personal anecdotes that give your messaging a narrative flow. After the meeting, recap the key and supportive messages with an email back to the C-Suite to reinforce where you landed. The boss will be able to refer to that email in free moments leading up to the interview.

### **Here are some tips and to-dos when having the initial briefing session with your boss.**

- Don't jump into sample Q's and A's but start by discussing key messages.
- Talk about 2-3 takeaways you want the reader/viewer of the interview to have. Come to the meeting with your own ideas on core messaging, but challenge your boss to come up with what she thinks they are. Prioritize the most important and distill those messages so that your boss is comfortable with them, especially in her own words.
- Take a minute to discuss your target audiences and how they likely will react to these messages.
- Prod her on stories that support the messaging. Get her to think about past experiences that relate. Unearth anecdotes that are both interesting and relevant.
- Send a recap of the meeting that summarizes where you landed.

## Step Three: Dig into It

Make sure your boss knows as much as he needs about the reporter and the kind of reporting he has done. It's easy to find out the kinds of subjects he has written about, and you can include some actual clips of some articles. But these days, it's also worth checking out the reporter on social platforms. Perhaps she just had a baby or went to the same college as your boss or likes the Orioles as much as you do. This kind of information can be great for establishing a rapport with the reporter. You also can get some real insights by checking out reporters' Twitter feeds where they often share some of their likes and pet peeves, sometimes in a more than passionate way. There could be some information there that helps you steer clear of potential land mines. But just the same, your boss will appreciate any intelligence you can share with him about who he is talking to.

### **Here are some tips and to-dos when providing background information for the boss.**

- Start by creating a dossier of sorts about the reporter. You can include general biographical information (e.g. where she has worked? What does she cover?).
- Then make sure to do some digging and find articles that are relevant. If you're preparing a briefing book, you might even go so far as to highlight parts of articles that could be useful.
- Check out the reporter's social platforms. Follow her on Twitter to see the kinds of things she tweets about, even if they are not work-related. Dive into her Facebook page to unearth interesting facts about what is going on with her life. You might find some relevant tidbits, but don't come across as creepy by digging too much. Respect the lines between her professional and personal lives. The point is to give your boss information that could avoid potential landmines or help foster a stronger relationship.

## Step Four: Managing Expectations

Chances are, you went over the prospective story angle when you pitched the interview. But it's often a good idea to review the line of questions with the reporter. Some reporters won't be comfortable with this, but many are happy to help you prepare the interviewee by sharing the kinds of questions they are interested in. Once you've had that exchange with the reporter, you can, of course, share the anticipated questions with the boss. Be sure to let her know that these are not all the questions that will be asked, only that they represent the line of questioning the reporter anticipates following. This is another part of the strategy of getting the boss thinking about the interview ahead of time.

### **Here are some tips and todos for managing your boss's expectations of the interview.**

- Make sure that you and the reporter are on the same page when it comes to the topic of the interview and the lines of questions. It typically doesn't hurt to drop him an email, letting him know that you want to properly brief the boss on what she can expect. Some reporters are reluctant to give away too much, while others will review what they expect to ask, either specifically or more generally.
- Let the boss know about this exchange with the reporter. Be certain that she feels comfortable and ask again if a review session is warranted.

## Step Five: Q's But Not A's

Come up with several questions that you think the reporter will ask, as well as some curveballs that could come up (or even those that likely won't). Forward these questions to the boss. Ask him to be thinking about the answers and ask him if he wants to review any of the answers with you. Resist the temptation to include draft answers to the questions. A key part of media preparation is to get the interviewee thinking about how he will answer the various questions, and ideally, begin crafting his answers ahead of time. So don't serve up answers on a platter. Get him ruminating over how he will address both easy and difficult questions.

### **Here are some tips and to-dos for preparing your boss for particular questions.**

- Putting together some sample Q's and A's is often a good idea, but don't make it so easy on the boss that he sees what you've prepared as a crutch. One of the best ways to start is simply by preparing questions without answers. That way, he can think about how he would answer them, and very often his answers are better than anything you could have devised on your own.
- Next, offer to sit down and go over the questions with him so you can get the benefit of his thinking, and conversely, so he can hear some of your ideas on how to best answer them.
- Take good notes of that conversation, and then forward the completed questions and answers to him for his review. Do your best to capture his words precisely, especially if you thought he articulated his answers well.



## Step Six: The Pivot

Watch any Sunday morning news show and you'll get a first-hand lesson in a useful skill for media interviews called "bridging." It's the talent of not directly answering the question but pivoting to an answer that is either more comfortable or more in keeping with what you came to say in the first place. Politicians are masters at it, and while some of them likely have it in their DNA, it is a skill that can be perfected with practice. Here are a few techniques that can be employed when it comes to bridging.

- Deflecting — as in, "I can't agree with your premise. What I believe the crux of the issue is...[key message]"
- Acknowledging — as in, "That may be true, but there are far more important considerations, including...[key message]"
- Repeating — as in, "What you are saying is X and Y, but there's also Z, and that is where our focus is...[key message]"
- Ignoring — as in, "This is the first I've heard that. What I know to be true is...[key message]"
- Summing up — as in, "We can talk about this all day, but what this comes down to is...[key message]"

The important element in bridging is not so much to avoid the question—you'll be able to get away with that only so much. The point is that it provides a comfortable transition for you to begin introducing some of the key messages that you think are essential for telling your story. And not to put too fine a point on this, but this is an area that requires a good bit of practice. Most people instinctively answer the questions put to them. It's an acquired skill to stay on message and amplify your most important points.

### **Here are some tips for getting your boss to practice interview techniques.**

- Being a good interviewee is as much an art as a skill. Some people are born with the ability to frame answers in ways that convey core messages, while others are more direct (i.e. they answer the question at face value). But anyone can learn to be more effective, especially in the technique known as "bridging," i.e. taking the elements of a question and pivoting toward a topic or answer that you are more inclined to talk about.
- Bridging doesn't always come naturally; it requires practice. Offer to have several practice sessions with your boss.
- If she declines a practice session, go ahead and send her one of the scores of articles on bridging that you can find online.



## Step Seven: Dress Rehearsal

Of course, the best way to prepare for a media interview is to have a mock session where you pose as the reporter asking the questions. This typically has the effect of convincing the boss that perhaps he was not as ready as he had thought, which usually means that he'll spend some time on his own boning up. But it also allows you to have some important back and forth so that you can discuss the best way to approach particularly thorny questions. Many answers come down to how much information can or should be shared, and these practice sessions allow you to go over the pros and cons of sharing this or that point. There are also occasions where you may find that your boss has over-prepared, and his answers are coming out as rote and memorized. It's important that you get him to reorient his thinking and add authentic extemporaneous verbiage to his answers.

### **Here are some tips for helping your boss feel as comfortable as possible.**

- The ultimate goal of preparing for any interview is holding a practice session in a setting that recreates to the extent possible the setting of the actual interview.
- Review key messages.
- Review bridging techniques to get to those messages.
- Review answers to difficult questions.
- Come to the mock session with a few surprises to catch the boss off guard, after all, you never know what kind of questions she will actually get.
- At the end of the day, give her the confidence that she's going to do absolutely great.

## Step One Worksheet – Broaching the Idea

What is the topic your boss will be speaking about?

What qualifies your boss as an expert in this subject?

Research three articles or interviews about trending or related issues to share with your boss and summarize the main points in each.

Brainstorm three questions around this subject that your boss might not be prepared to answer.

## Step Two Worksheet – The Big Picture

Who is the audience you are trying to target with this interview?

What is your goal, e.g. raise awareness or encourage the audience to take a call-to-action?

What are the three things you want the audience to take from this interview?

Now, in your words, write a concise key message for each.

Key message 1

Key message 2

Key message 3

# Step Three Worksheet – Dig into It, Media Backgrounder - Example

## Coast Live Interview: Backgrounder

Outlet

CBS's WTKR News 3



Date

Friday, February 24

Address

720 Boush Street, 23510

Time

Arrive by 9:40 a.m.

- Park near the front door.
- The receptionist will let you in and direct you.

## Background

Coast Live ([wtkr.com/coastlive](http://wtkr.com/coastlive)) is a new lifestyle and talk show live weekdays from 10-11 a.m. on WTKR News 3, the CBS affiliate in Coastal Virginia. The focus of the program is on the people, events and lifestyle across our coastal region. Hosted by broadcast veterans April Woodard and Cheryl Nelson, the show will be a breath of fresh air in each morning.

## Interviewer



Cheryl Nelson

Host at WTKR TV of Coast Live

Career:

- 2016(August) - Present - WTKR-TV, Lifestyle TV Show Host
- 2016(October) - Weather & Preparedness Advisor/Spokesperson
- 2015(October) - FEMA, Meteorologist & NDPTC Disaster Preparedness Instructor
- 2012(May) - Independent Contractor/Consultant - Spokesperson

Education:

- Penn State University - Bachelor of Science

Topics/Bio:

An Emmy-nominated and AP award-winning TV host, public speaker and certified broadcast meteorologist.

Social pages:

Twitter — @CherylNelsonTV

Facebook — Cheryl Nelson TV

Instagram — cherylnelsonstv

Personal notes:

- Owns cats and loves to travel
- Is on a gluten-free and vegetarian diet
- Received the "Preparedness Award for Awareness to Action" by FEMA
- Advocate for the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center

## Step Three Worksheet – Media Backgrounder Template

Name of show, publication, etc.

Outlet

Date

Address (include any special instructions) Time

### Background

*(Insert a brief description of the outlet or program that will run the interview.)*

### Interviewer

*(Include full name, title and headshot.)*

Career:

Topics covered:

Social pages:

Personal notes:

## Step Five Worksheet – Q's But Not A's

List your brainstormed questions from step one along with any questions the reporter sent you from step four. From those questions, come up with five additional questions you anticipate the interviewer might ask and use during a practice interview with your boss.