Mastering the Interview

Rachel L. Griffith USASMDC/ARSTRAT PAO

"It is always a risk to speak to the press: they are likely to report what you say." – **Hubert H. Humphrey**

Sitting in front of a camera can be a daunting place to be. Here's a little known fact: it can be just as daunting to sit behind it. The key things to remember when giving an interview are to stay relaxed, smile and keep things conversational. As both a civilian and military broadcast journalist, and now a public affairs specialist, I've seen it all. Here are a few tips and tricks I've compiled to make the interview process easier on everyone involved.

» KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Are you being interviewed for a technical article or by *People* magazine? It makes the difference in giving a detailed or surface-level answer.

If the interview is for the general public, explain technical terms in a simple fashion, so someone off the street can understand what you mean. Anything that can be termed jargon doesn't have a place in civilian interviews.

You don't need to "dumb down" an explanation, but keep your audience in mind. Would your mom understand what you're saying? She may very well be watching the newscast, reading the article or listening to the interview.

Try to keep this in the back of your mind: "Speak to the professor without offending the truck driver." Keep your answer intelligent, thorough and complete. If you use highly-technical terms, your words won't find solid ground with most of the audience.

For example, if you're a Joint Tactical Ground Station Individual Training Qualification Manager, that means absolutely nothing to most people. It's just a really long title. Instead, find a simpler way to explain your job. Perhaps by saying "I make sure our outlying units are up-to-date on their training."

» ANSWERING A REPEATED QUESTION

Reporters usually outline their story before coming to talk to you, and they're going to try to tailor what you say to fit into that outline. They may rephrase the same question a few times to get you to answer it in a different way. They do this to give themselves options when editing the interview. Stick to the facts, maintain your theme and try to come up with new ways to phrase your answer, if possible.

Keep your tone conversational, even if you're tired of repeating yourself. The one time you sound annoyed and roll your eyes, it will end up on air or in print.

» DEAD AIR

It's not your job to fill dead air. The more you say, the more likely you are to venture down a path of saying too much. If you've answered the question, but the reporter remains silent, you can simply say, "That's the main point. Any other questions I can answer for you?" Don't feel as if the silence means you need to elaborate further.

» YES OR NO QUESTIONS

Speak in complete thoughts if possible. Even if you're asked a yes or no question, if you can answer it in a complete sentence, do so.

EXAMPLE

Q: "Are you glad you joined the Army?"

A: "Yes, joining the Army has provided me with countless opportunities I wouldn't have otherwise gotten."

Saying "Uh -huh," nodding your head or shrugging your shoulders are not acceptable answers to any question.

"The questions don't do the damage. Only the answers do."

SAM DONALDSON –

» MASTERING THE SOUND BITE

Pause between thoughts. An easy way to do this is take a breath between your sentences. Television and radio reporters generally can use 10-15 second sound bites within their stories. By pausing to take a breath, it gives them an easy point to edit the sound bite. Pausing between thoughts and speaking in complete sentences is one way to make you easier to edit, and it helps to build a positive relationship with the reporter. *If you are easy to edit, reporters will love you for it.*

Never be afraid to ask the reporter to rephrase the question, or take a moment to gather your thoughts, especially if the interview isn't live. Pausing to gather your thoughts will ensure you say what you want to, and it allows you to answer in a well-thought out way. It also allows a reporter to finish asking a question that may have had two parts.

» REPRESENTING THE ARMY

If you are in front of a camera, assume it is recording. If a reporter has a recording device of any kind, assume it is recording (this includes a pencil). If you are in front of a reporter, assume anything you say to them can end up on air, in print, on the internet, in a blog, etc. Remember: when you're in uniform, you represent the Army.

Feel free to make small talk with a reporter while waiting for an interview to begin, but be aware of the person you're talking to and the setting you're in. Avoid office gossip or offhand, opinionated comments.

President Obama's comments about the Kanye West/Taylor Swift debacle ended up posted on Twitter by someone on the set. When people questioned the validity of the post, the audio recording was released. Even when you're not on the air, what you say can still be made public. At the end of the interview, do not be lulled into a comfort zone where you might say something you do not want quoted. Reporters are always reporters, and what you say is fair game.

If you aren't a country music fan, and a reporter asks you how you liked having Toby Keith come to the base, instead of saying "well, I hate country music" you can say "I appreciate any celebrity who takes the time to visit us while we're deployed." That way you've answered the question, you haven't lied about your opinion of the music and your comment can't be misconstrued.

Smile! You're on Camera

not really, but relax ... it's gonna be okay.

If you don't know the answer, or you aren't the one who should be answering the question, don't. If you are being interviewed live, an easy way to get around the question without saying "I don't know," is to say something such as:

Q: "Shouldn't the war in Iraq be over by now?"

A: "That's a good question, but there is no timeline for war. I am here to ensure the warfighters in theater are receiving all the support they need while we continue the fight."

If you're unsure of a particular statistic, don't guess. Ask the reporter if you can double check it and get back to them. If you guess, your guess can end up being used.

» APPEARING ON CAMERA

- Take a deep breath. Smile. Sit up straight.
- Check your uniform, and then have someone else check your uniform. If you appear on camera with ribbons out of order or your rank on upside down, it will probably end up on YouTube and be used as an example during military media training.
- Use a chair that doesn't have wheels and could move during the interview. Chairs that swivel are also not ideal. The urge to swivel your chair to ease nervous tension will overtake you.
- Keep both feet on the floor. Two feet on the floor helps to curb your desire to shift your position or move around during the interview.
- It's okay to suggest a better background or interview angle. The reporter and camera person will usually try to find the most visually pleasing background, but don't be afraid to give input. It's your face on the screen, not theirs.
- Remove your sunglasses. If the sun is in your eyes, ask to move the location or angle of the camera. Never put yourself in an uncomfortable position to be interviewed. Plus, squinting doesn't look good, period.
- Do not chew gum while being interviewed.
- Look at the reporter, not the camera. It helps keep a conversational tone to the interview and appears more natural on screen.
- Use your normal speaking voice. Shouting while you're wearing a microphone usually results in poor/unusable audio quality.
- Avoid crossing your arms. It feels like a natural way to stand, but it can make you appear uncomfortable or defensive to a viewer. Standing at parade rest may seem like a good alternative, but again, it can read as stiff and uncomfortable on camera. Instead, link your fingers or fold your hands and hold them slightly above your waist if you feel like you don't know what to do with them.
- Speak clearly and enunciate your words, you want to be sure nothing gets lost in translation.
- If you're talking to a print journalist, it's appropriate to pause or slow down so the reporter can get down your complete thought and you're not ahead of them.
- Feel free to have note cards with specific statistics or key points you want to make. Never write out complete answers.

» IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

Reporters will almost always ask you this at the end of the interview. This is your opportunity to answer a question the reporter might not have asked you, or to elaborate on a point you'd particularly like to see used.

While it may never feel natural to have a camera lens in your face, using the steps detailed in this article can make it much more comfortable. Talking to the media doesn't need to be a scary experience. Using the media is one of the best ways to tell the Army story, and make the military world less of a mystery to the general public.