

Media SURVIVAL TIPS

Helen Glanville has good advice on how to deal with
life in the spotlight

"So is this the worst disaster you have ever faced?" I asked the Communications Director as the cameraman adjusted the microphone. "Oh no," she said in a conspiratorial whisper. "Not at all, let me tell you...." The cameraman winked at me as the interviewee embarked on a confession to her new best friend – me! Naturally, her radio microphone picked up her story perfectly.

Happily for this interviewee this was just a media training session – and she was about to learn three of the most important tips for media survival: treat the camera as always live, never relax with journalists and don't volunteer information unnecessarily.

If she'd felt bad about her mistake,

she was in illustrious company. Prince Charles and Gordon Brown have both suffered red faces after muttering disparaging asides into their microphones. Their insults were broadcast around the world. And President Reagan risked an international incident when, testing a microphone, joked that he had signed legislation, "to outlaw Russia forever; we begin bombing in five minutes."

While carelessness in front of a microphone may cost careers or worse, the most common mistakes are more prosaic: lack of understanding about journalists, failure to appreciate the nature of the programme/paper and a failure to prepare.

As a producer on BBC's *Watchdog*

and other investigative programmes, I was often amazed by the lack of curiosity and insight shown by prospective interviewees. I remember an investigation into large inducements being paid to poor Northern girls to "donate" their eggs to wealthy clients of a UK fertility clinic. When we approached the clinic director requesting an on-camera interview, he agreed immediately – without asking a single pertinent question. He only found out the angle of our enquiry on camera. The perspiration dripped as the cameras rolled.

In retrospect, there are many questions that the clinic director should have asked. Journalists will usually only be interested in something →



"Treat the camera as always live, never relax with journalists and don't volunteer information unnecessarily"



that is new, topical or timely in some way. If there seems no apparent reason for an approach, the first question must be "why now?". The following questions should include "what is your angle?", "why our company?", "who else is being interviewed?", "what are the question areas?" and "what is your deadline?". Such questions would not have prevented the story from going ahead but would have enabled the clinic director to have given a proper account of his actions.

The British media is usually regarded as the toughest in the world. British journalists will often take a sceptical view of "success" stories and look critically at what lies beneath the press release. This can come as a shock to overseas interviewees.

The makers of Blackberry – Canada's Research in Motion (RIM) – have been stung twice in recent years by failing to appreciate and prepare for the British

"Understand the programme and the audience to ensure you can predict and prepare for the question areas"



media. In 2011, RIM's co-CEO Mike Lazardis abruptly terminated an interview on air with a BBC journalist when asked about security issues in India and the Middle East. Two years later, the company's European Managing Director was asked on four occasions about launch delays and loss of market share but was noticeably unprepared to depart from his rehearsed PR script.

Recently Quentin Tarantino was interviewed by Channel 4 news about his forthcoming film. He refused to respond to a predictable question line about the impact of screen violence and said, "I'm here to sell my movie. This is a commercial for the movie – make no mistake about it." As the interviewer persisted Tarantino lost his temper and said "I'm shutting your butt down." Whereas Hollywood PR may masquerade as news overseas, British news journalists will look beyond the PR script and the interviewee must be prepared.

The initial task in preparing for an interview is to understand the programme and the audience to ensure you can predict and prepare for the question areas.

For example, a local drive-time radio programme will be chatty, often friendly and focussed on the impact on the local community. An interview with the Radio 4's *Today* programme or BBC's *Newsnight* may have a political angle and the interviews may be challenging and confrontational. Interviews for news programmes will be brief and will be focused on the latest developments.

There is, of course, no obligation on you to be interviewed by the media. Interview requests can be turned down and statements written in their place. The main reason to agree to an interview is that you or your company will derive a benefit. To achieve this benefit, you must be entirely clear about the message or messages you wish to highlight and use examples to make these memorable. These may be stories about people you have helped or metaphors to bring to life dull or complicated information, for example, "We don't think twice about having an MOT every year on our cars, so why don't we have MOTs on our bodies? A check-up with a private doctor once a



Verbal and non-verbal skills

Radio and TV interviews are performances. Within seven seconds viewers will have formed an opinion of you. While you won't have had time to say anything, your voice and body language have been doing the talking. Before being interviewed, politicians will often rehearse out loud – not just what they will say but how they will say it. They will practice where they place emphasis and ensure gestures enforce their message.

When body language and delivery is inconsistent with the message, viewers will believe your body language rather than your words

As interviewees we need to make the right first impression through our body language, clothes and voice.

Here are some handy tips:

Radio interviews

- Modulate your voice using pitch, pace and pauses
- Smile – you can hear a smile

- Talk slowly and clearly
- Don't read from a prepared script
- Show your enthusiasm and passion

TV interviews

- Dress appropriately for the programme – unless you're a fashion designer, keep it simple and smart
- Avoid bold stripes, checks and clanking jewellery
- Don't rock or sway
- Maintain eye contact and smile (where appropriate)
- Use studio make-up if offered
- Take a colleague with you to check your appearance
- Ensure you are interviewed against an appropriate backdrop
- Be animated and enjoy!

Helen Glanville is a media training consultant with The Aziz Corporation
www.azizcorp.com

year can prolong life by X years..."

Most of a radio and TV audience will struggle to understand large figures – it is always better to paint a picture with words. Instead of talking about nine acres, say "an area the size of six football pitches".

Given that interview times are short – usually 2-3 minutes – it's important that you introduce your messages near the start of your interview. Unlike the man from RIM, you must at the very least acknowledge the question but once you have done so, move the interview on or bridge to your message.

As children we are taught a circular approach to answering questions, with the introduction, argument and conclusion relating directly back to the question. In media interviews, you need a linear approach – address the question and move on to what you would like to say even if it is a substantial departure from the question itself.

With experience, media interviews can be enjoyable, engaging and ultimately lucrative. But like marriage, the media is not something to be entered into inadvisably or lightly. You need media skills and the willingness to prepare. The journalist, however friendly, must not be underestimated. While you are not supping with the devil, you are engaging with a force that can make or break you.