

Media Toolkit

HOW TO BE A BETTER SPOKESPERSON FOR YOURSELF AND FOR THE PROFESSION



Health care, mental health, school social work, and social issues like child welfare and poverty are among a few of the most widely reported stories in the United States. As a professional social worker, it's likely that, at some point in your social work career, you will be considered an expert on a topic that is being heavily reported on in the news.

Local media or NASW may even call on you to appear on television or radio, or to do an interview for an article on that topic. **This is a very important opportunity, when you have the chance to educate the public about what social workers really do.** You can use this time to teach them about a specific practice area, to talk about new research, or to discuss legislation affecting social workers and, more often, their clients. You want to accurately represent your area of expertise and educate the public about the specifics, but where do you begin?

First, professional social workers need to have a voice. They need to accurately represent the work they do in communities, schools, hospitals, and other practice areas. The public doesn't necessarily understand the role of the social worker or what a social worker can do for them. This is **your** chance to explain what social workers in your area of expertise do, and why that is important.

These are just a few of the reasons that social workers should consider participating in media interviews, or even becoming media spokespersons. NASW is actively recruiting members to become part of the Media Referral Database, in order to respond to reporters' inquiries quickly and efficiently, matching the appropriate social worker to each reporter, so that the reporter's questions can best be answered. To join the Media Referral Database email media@naswdc.org.

We understand that many social workers have not been trained to be "media savvy." This is why we have provided the following tips, which can help you develop the skills to become

a good spokesperson. Remember, giving a good interview sheds a positive light on social work, and educates the public about what social workers and their various roles mean to the community.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA'S MOTIVES

Understanding the pros and cons of being interviewed by the media—print, radio, or television—is your first step to becoming media savvy. Members of the media know why they want you for an interview. Why do you want to be interviewed? Only you can answer that question, and you must be clear with your answer.

As a social worker, you are in the unique position of representing yourself, as well as your profession. Today's news media are a critical source of information and education for Americans. Being active and visible in the media is an important way to educate the public about the value of social work, and communicating through the media can create the opportunity for you to help solve pressing social needs by increasing public awareness. Interviewing can also give you the opportunity to voice your pride in your profession, as well as a chance to promote your own work or research.

Participating in media interviews will require considerable preparation. But, a good interview can reap the benefit of increased public awareness and understanding of a particular issue relevant to your work.

How to be a better spokesperson for yourself and for the profession

The most important thing to remember about a media interview is that you are the expert in the interview. The reporter has a role in gathering and reporting information and you are part of that role. They are looking to you as a source of information and expertise to add to their story.

UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

In working with the media, each of you has a job to do. The journalist needs to write or produce a compelling story that will illustrate a balanced look at the issue. Your job is to articulate the information you want the audience to understand. Each of you must work together to get your goals accomplished. And when it happens, it is a story that both of you can be proud of.

Each interview will be a different experience from which you can learn. It is important to understand that interviewing is a preparation and learning process, which never ends—even journalists must do their homework.

Finally, a journalist's job is to discover the truth and present both sides of an issue. Many times people are intimidated by the media because they feel like they are "out to get them." The honest answer is that the media are not out to shine a bad light on you or the profession. They are looking for honest and truthful answers to articulate a good story for their audience.

STEPS FOR THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interviews you should turn down

You do not have to accept every interview request you receive.

In the beginning, you will be tempted to say yes to any interview opportunity; however, you should choose wisely and carefully consider whether to participate in an interview that:

- A. Might compromise you in any way
- B. Is out of range of your expertise
- C. Is a multi-person interview where you are not familiar or comfortable with the other guests



Depending on the set up for a panel-style interview, you may or may not want to consider doing the interview. Most times, the producers gather experts with varying perspectives on an issue to discuss and debate. Occasionally though, shows are set up to be argumentative debates about a divisive topic. You need to decide whether or not you think that the other people in the interview are acceptable and if you think you can provide the unique social work perspective effectively.

KNOW YOUR MESSAGE

Before you start an interview, know exactly what you want to say. Prepare three to five talking points you want to make and integrate them into your answers during the interview. Write them down and practice a few comfortable ways of saying them.

It is particularly helpful to use stories or case studies to make a point. Be sure to keep them short and remember to state your conclusions *before* you use your supporting evidence. Most often, producers and editors are looking for that sound bite that quick thought that summarizes your points.

You can also use *Social Work Speaks* and other policy statements that your organization may have, as well as statistics that support your talking points.

Finally, as you are preparing your messages for the interview, it is also a good idea to consider potentially challenging questions that might get asked and how you would handle their response. If a challenging question is posed that you think you have prepared for and can answer, by all means do so. However, if you feel there is a question that you cannot answer, make a note of the question and tell the reporter that you will get back to them. You can head off these kinds of uncomfortable exchanges if you are able to anticipate hot button questions and craft a response.

SETTING LIMITS

Once you have decided that you want to pursue being interviewed by the media, you will need to set limits. First of all, say yes to a request for an interview *only if you want to give the interview*. This statement may seem obvious, but there are many people who agree to an interview when they are unsure and uneasy about doing it. Whatever your state of mind is during the interview, it will show. If you are enthusiastic, you will perform better. If you are uncomfortable, it will show. If you are preoccupied, you will come across as uninterested.

Examine your knowledge of and attitude toward the subject of the interview. Your answers to the following questions will help you to determine if you should do the interview:

- A. What do you want to accomplish with this interview?
- B. What do you want to say about this subject?
- C. What do you have to gain by doing it?
- D. Will there be more opportunities in the future?

If you decide not to accept, inform the media representative as soon as possible. All you need to say is "No, thank you." Don't worry that your decision will be used against you in the future. They will call again when they need you. Others will call too. If NASW Communications staff schedules the interview, please let them know immediately if you do not feel comfortable participating in it. You can reach them at 202-336-8228, or by e-mail at media@naswdc.org.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

If you receive the media call directly from the PR/ Communications staff at your organization or from NASW, you should always insist on having a few moments to gather your thoughts about the topic and check on statistics and stories that will illustrate your expertise.

If you receive a call from a media professional requesting your participation in an interview, they should have already vetted the reporter and media outlet. They should provide you with topical areas that will be covered or specific questions that will be asked. Many times these are not the only questions, but they will give you an opportunity to fully understand the interview topic.

If you receive the call directly from the media outlet, you should request topics that will be covered in the interview and/or questions that will be posed. Many times reporters are working on a deadline, but you should still have the opportunity to take a few minutes to gather your thoughts and supporting information.

Just as the journalist has come to the interview after preparation and research, you should be afforded that courtesy as well. They want you to be as prepared as possible for the interview.

Occasionally with radio and television interviews, there is an opportunity for a pre-interview. These interviews should not be taken lightly, as they allow you to practice some of your answers and identify areas where you might need more information. Usually the radio or television producer will phone you to discuss the interview and potential questions prior to the live or taped interview.

Off the record

Don't consider anything you say is "off the record" simply because you say it is. Say only what you want in print, and keep confidential information confidential!

While most journalists strive for accuracy in their reporting, it is possible to be misquoted. There are very rarely deliberate errors. **One important way to avoid being misquoted is to be concise in your responses to questions. The longer, more rambling you are in your response, the greater chance you will say something you didn't mean.** Your greatest concern should be that the meaning of what you said to the reporter is conveyed accurately, not so much the exact words you used. If the reporter completely missed the point, you should let the reporter know (in as helpful a manner as possible). In a case of serious misstating of your data or your views, you can certainly request a correction by way of letter or phone call to the editor.

HOW TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF

When talking with the representative, establish how you want to be identified. If you want to be identified as Dr. Smith, consistently refer to yourself as that. In most instances they will try to accommodate you. However, some publications (*Wall Street Journal*, for example) have their style rules and will not identify anyone with a PhD as "Dr." **NASW encourages you to ask the reporter to identify you as a professional social worker.**

THE PRINT INTERVIEW

Most print interviews will be conducted over the telephone or after a news conference, lecture, or presentation. It is typical to have one or maybe two conversations with a print journalist. Therefore, it is important to be very organized and confident about what you want to say and how you want to be quoted.

The journalist should identify himself or herself, and his or her affiliation, prior to any interview. If this is not done, you should ask before agreeing and proceeding with the interview.

Selecting your main points in advance and sticking to them is key to any successful interview. But the competent journalist, particularly the experienced health or social issues writer, also has an agenda to complete during your interview. Aggressively trying to steer the reporter away from his or her main line of questioning can dampen the overall outcome of your interview. **Whenever you can supply new facts, insightful information and a fresh perspective, you are in as much control of the interview as possible.**

It is always the best policy to simply say, "I don't know," when a question is out of the range of your expertise or knowledge base, and perhaps offer to find the answer and forward it to the reporter later.

Sometimes reporters may ask you to draw conclusions from research that is inconclusive or does not exist. It is important in this situation to explain the difference between preliminary research and "known" behavioral science; however, it is also important to remember that preliminary research is often more newsworthy than known science.

After the interview, you're rarely given the opportunity to read a story before it appears in print. Even more rare is the opportunity to edit any part of the story. Offering to read a story or to have portions or quotes read back to you to check for accuracy may be helpful, but the offer is seldom accepted unless a reporter is dealing with highly complex information. Demanding to read a story before it is published accomplishes little.

Take precautions

In lieu of "editing" power, there are precautions you can take. Before the interview, determine if there are any controversial or easily misinterpreted aspects of your work. Roughly frame your answers in these areas beforehand. During the interview, emphasize to the reporter how important such points are. Assert the fact that your information may be inaccurate if stated another way.

Keep a record

You should always keep a record listing the name of the journalist, his or her affiliation, the story idea, and a telephone number. After the interview, it is a good idea to ask the journalist if you can contact him or her with more information that you may think of later. Good journalists are interested in **all** the facts. However, don't follow up with a call unless your information is truly important.

For magazine or newspaper articles, you can request that copies be sent to you, but don't count on it. Make a note to buy the publication.

You can also contact NASW Communications to find copies of the story. Please have the date the story ran and the publication name for the staff to search.

THE RADIO INTERVIEW

Most large cities have a radio station with an all-news or all-talk format. These stations feature in-depth coverage of issues and present many interview opportunities. Other radio stations rely on “feeds” from network newscasts (like NBC, CBS, and ABC) and wire services.

Many news directors will accept interviews conducted by telephone, both live and taped. Many of the same rules from print interviews apply to a radio interview, particularly staying on message and answering with clear, concise responses.

THE TELEVISION INTERVIEW

A media representative will generally contact you to go over more details and/or to make travel arrangements. Often, they will conduct a pre-interview to confirm that you are the expert for whom they are looking. Many times to avoid travel expenses, the media outlet will either have a local affiliate come to your office to set up for the interview or they will ask you to come to a local network station to conduct the interview.

An interview cancellation is an occupational hazard. A late-breaking story or interview will replace a non-time sensitive interview every time. Don't take it personally, it happens often.

Live v. Taped

On-camera interviews can be some of the most nerve wracking moments. Keep in mind your main talking points and remember to look confident in your answer. If you have a taped interview, you will be able to answer a question and re-tape the answer if it did not come out the way you wanted it to. If you have a live interview, more off-camera preparation time will need to be taken so that you remember your points, but don't seem rehearsed.

Appearance

Wear conservative clothing and avoid large shiny jewelry. Stay away from checks, stripes, or other busy patterns that may take the attention away from you. Do not wear white clothing. Do not wear sunglasses or glasses that turn dark under lighting. If you don't normally wear make-up, don't start for this occasion. If you do wear make-up, don't over do it. Remember that you want to look as natural as possible. Applying powder to the forehead, cheeks, and chin will help you reduce the shiny spots on your skin that might result from the studio lighting.

The interview

It is important to arrive at the studio with sufficient time to acquaint yourself with your surroundings and review your talking points.

During the interview you will be most effective if you speak in short, succinct sentences, what are referred to as “sound bites” in the industry. An effective way of delivering your message is to

determine before the interview your overall message and the supporting points.

For instance, the subject of the interview might be, “How to prevent youth violence”:

Know your message—

Youth violence is preventable because it is a learned behavior.

Point 1:

It is important to recognize the early experiences that can lead to violence and confront them. For instance, exposure to violence in the media, effects of prejudice and hostility in the home or community, access to firearms.

Point 2:

Social workers are helping to develop school programs that reduce aggression and prevent violence.

Point 3:

Provide examples of successful programs that have been implemented in schools and communities around the country.

By keeping your statements short and to-the-point, you will effectively communicate your message.

Inject an appropriate level of emotion or passion into your voice to tell people you believe what you say. Use natural hand gestures and facial expressions to highlight your points. This applies to all interviews (even radio and print) because it shows enthusiasm, is reflected in your voice, and helps convince the audience and the interviewer.

For television, as in any conversation, maintain good eye contact with the interviewer; do not look directly into the camera or seek out the monitors. Your main focal point should be the person interviewing you.

CONTROLLING THE INTERVIEW

It is important that you control where the interview is headed. An effective way of doing this is by using a transition phrase such as:

- “That’s a good point, but what is really important is...”
- “I’d like to make this point before I continue...”
- “Let me give you the latest information on...that is really interesting.”

Using one of these phrases gives you an opportunity to direct the interview so that you can make one of your points.

Try not to interrupt the interviewer. However, if you are part of a discussion panel with other experts, each one will be competing for airtime. Do not wait until a question is directed to you before you respond. You were invited on the program because of your expertise, and you should participate and raise important points or clarify those made by another panelist, when appropriate.

Be assertive—most interview segments last no longer than a few minutes, so claim your airtime before the interview is over.

CORRECTING INACCURACIES

One common mistake made by television interviewees is allowing reporters' false or inaccurate statements to go unchallenged or uncorrected. If, in asking a question, a reporter creates a false premise, the interviewee should first correct the false premise, then answer or reframe the question.

Also, if a reporter cites information or statistics with which you are not familiar, do not assume that they are being reported accurately. Simply state that you are not familiar with the information being presented. If you have them on-hand, consider offering statistics with which you are familiar.

KNOW THE VALUE OF YOUR EXPERTISE

Remember, you are the expert who has been called to give information for a program. Your expertise and knowledge is what distinguishes you from other guests and the host of the program. The producer who calls you likely has limited knowledge about your field.

It is important, therefore, that you take control by shaping the interview in a professional, non-aggressive manner. Know your key points and say them consistently throughout the course of the interview. Do not wait to be asked the right questions, and do not expect the producer or the host to have the same amount of knowledge that you have about your field. You are the expert—the audience wants to hear your information.

More so than in interviews for publications, brevity and tightly constructed responses are critical during interviews for television shows, radio shows, and Web casts, which usually offer you less than 30 seconds to make your point. Preparation is the key to success.

WHAT TO DO AFTER A MEDIA INTERVIEW

Now that the interview is finished, you can breathe a sigh of relief...until the article or segment runs. Sometimes journalists are on deadline and the story will be running later that day or the next day. Other times, with more in-depth stories, you might have to wait days, weeks or months for a story to run.

Here's a quick checklist for you after you've finished with a media interview:

- Make sure you know from the reporter when the story is expected to run. Follow up if it doesn't run at the expected time.
- Did you promise to provide subsequent materials or information to the reporter? Make sure to do that in a timely fashion.
- Ask the journalist if you can call him or her if something changes about this story or if you have other stories that you think might be of interest to him or her.
- Post a link to the story or segment on your Web site or send it to interested people so they know that you were positioned as an expert.

MEDIA TRAINING



Training and practice will give you a good foundation and help you improve your interviewing skills. Take advantage of any media training opportunities that come your way. In each workshop or lecture you attend, you will learn something new and helpful.

It is also important to watch the television programs and read the publications for which you would like to be interviewed. Familiarizing yourself with various formats will help you better understand the target audience, as well as the kinds of news and type of interviews in which a publication or television show is most often interested.

For more information about these tips, or if you have specific questions about a media opportunity, contact NASW Communications at media@naswdc.org or (202) 336-8228.