

THIRTEEN

INTERVIEWS AND MEDIA APPEARANCES: HOW TO MAKE THEM PROFESSIONAL

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Thank you all very much for coming to this workshop. One fact is being underscored here today, we have a nation whose fortune it behoves us to protect, defend and make great. Public relations through effective and positive communications can help us and that is why we are here.

The techniques of public relations are numerous and varied depending on the users purpose and the target audiences. However, the specific aspects we would examine this morning are on interviews and media appearances. Indeed, if you permit me, a slight modification of this title to “**Media Interviews: The Public Relations Approach**” may enhance the delivery and appreciation of this very strategic public relations technique.

The modern media encompass the press, radio and television. One of the most important resources of the media is information; apart from its other roles of entertainment and education. The interview method is widely used in the media to elicit full information from the interviewee on any subject. To achieve this, an intimate understanding of the various media and the characteristics of their operation would be very useful.

Public relations is a strategic department in most organisations and institutions that are dependent on public support for their corporate existence and success. Indeed, the relationship between the media and public relations are complimentary as they need each other to achieve their set objectives. While the media depends on public relations sources for the substantial news and features they use, the media offer public relations the channel through which its messages get across to

its various audiences no matter how diverse and dispersed they may be.

The public relations executive as a credible source becomes influential over time as a result of the quality and quantum of useable materials he makes available to the media and he ultimately benefits by way of special and direct access to the media whenever such services are needed. The reporter on the other hand should show a deep understanding and willingness to master the organisation he wishes to relate with or he has jurisdiction to cover on a regular basis. He needs to constantly research and update his knowledge about the organisation in order to continue getting information from the sources. A mutual trust to use information in its proper content and context, shunning sensationalism and scoops, will guarantee continued co-operation on both sides. Indeed, a society where pandering, gossip, sleaze and bring-down syndrome has reached pandemic heights, no less a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship would be necessary to sustain the two parties in a deregulated and market-oriented economy. After all, the notion of public relations as the business of proffering images and getting ink in big circulation publications is a thing of the past. It no longer holds.

The target audiences to whom the various messages are directed are crucial to the journalist and the public relations executive. Their empathy and support, expressed in patronising the services and products of the organisation cannot be taken for granted. In other words, the journalist, public relations executive and the public are bound together in a joint enterprise of effective two-way communication for socio-political and economic development. Whatever freedom, rights and privileges that need be exercised, it should take all the various interest variables into consideration with each getting its due.

Interviews are conducted to obtain information from well identified sources. In spite of this, different techniques are needed to conduct interviews for the various types of media, depending on their characteristics, reach and target audiences. The following are briefs on interviewing for the print and electronic media. In the past, interviews were basically conducted face-to-face but technology has changed all

that, such that telephones, fax machines, video and satellite are now used for different situations across international boundaries.

Press Interviews

These are interviews conducted by the print media — Newspapers, Magazines, Journals, Annuals and Directories. The print media has grown in number, influence and status. It has also become more specialised. Yet, it is not readily accessible to the reading public. With the rapid development of sophisticated and ‘modern’ journalism, a lot of the papers now publish without minding the consequences especially the soft sell magazines. The accepted mode of interviewing and the use it ought to be put are thwarted to suit the sensationalism and profit motive of the owners. People are regularly quoted out of context. Even then, the print media is still elitist and selective in audience targeting, particularly because most people are illiterate and cannot understand the classy and stylistic language in use. This is why it is out of fashion for CEO’s to judge the performance of its public relations department by how much images and ink it can offer in the print media. If nothing else, people have learnt to look behind the object placed before them to get at the root of the matter!

Spot interviews aim at getting specific information to clarify issues while full length interviews of personalities and organisations border on wide ranging topics of public concern. In the days gone by, a good knowledge of shorthand was required to get accurate responses from the interviewees. Micro, mini and reel tapes are now available to record interviews verbatim. In addition, there are fast reporters who can scribble in longhand as the interview goes on. Both the interviewer and interviewee need to be very careful in using any of these methods as they are capable of being abused despite the accuracy and safety that they are intended to ensure.

For the purpose of this audience, there are a few salient points to note when you are faced with a press interview. They include:

- Discussing the issues the journalist would like to interview you on shortly before recording commences.
- Ensuring that the journalist understands the aims and objectives of your organisation or the subject matter with sufficient background knowledge for you to have a meaningful interview.

- Selecting the most suitably disposed person in appearance, diction and knowledge of the organisation's work to handle such interviews.
- Rehearsing the potential questions for appropriate answers but be prepared for likely follow-up questions. It is risky to restrict yourself to the supposed 'agreed' questions.
- Being frank, factual and giving full information as best as you can. If there are questions you do not wish to answer for good reasons say so and unequivocally.
- Understanding the audience of the newspaper, magazine or journal you are addressing.
- Avoiding to overtalk and being careful to weigh every word before it is uttered.
- Helping the reporter after the interview by peeping into the final draft before publication. The press may kick against this but we have got to the stage where this development should be considered.

Press interviews have the unique advantage of permanence of some sorts. Ideally, it should be near perfect as the interviewer and his guest have the opportunity to recast and restate their cases. It is the duty of the public relations executive of the organisation concerned to co-ordinate the proceedings to achieve the stated goals.

Radio Interview

The radio is by far the most accessible medium to most Nigerians today. Apart from its cost that is quite reasonable, most members of the public can afford its moderate maintenance costs. The radio successfully attempts to reach millions of its audience through the use of diverse languages and creative programme packaging. Interviewing is one of the special areas that the radio has become very dynamic and responsible to the needs of the news-starved public with the advent of commercialised news. There are live phone-in audience-participation interview programmes, news sandwiched with interviews and several others. The big advantage in radio is the audio effect which enable listeners to emphasise and follow the interviewee as closely as possible.

The effective use of the radio for interview purposes can be best achieved if the following steps are considered:

- Know the subject adequately to aid confident responses.
- Ensure the interviewer has adequate background knowledge about the organisation or the subject to be discussed.
- Discuss and agree at management level definite policy issues that may arise in the course of the interview.
- Off-record and off-the-cuff comments are better avoided on radio interviews as whatever has been said cannot be retrieved.
- The interviewee must exude some level of confidence, a mastery of the various issues to be discussed and reach out to the listeners by exercising the “imagineering” effect which enables the speaker to visualise audiences and their responses to his handling of the issues under discussion.
- Be simple. Communication on radio should be as simple as possible since there is no opportunity for a replay. Besides, the listeners’ attention can only be retained if they find it profitable to follow the programme.
- A good microphone voice will be an advantage. A deliberate attempt to be clear and audible can obviate for any other deficiency.

The radio interview is becoming more and more dynamic and professional. Live interviews, opinion polls and correspondent reports on the radio now use the interview techniques very effectively.

Television Interview

With the combination of audio and visuals, the television interviewee has a more daunting task before him. Indeed, what has been said of the print and radio interview techniques apply in some ways to that of television. The only difference is that there is no where to hide — your inflections, disposition, appearance and knowledge of the subject of discussion would be in the full glare of all the (over 30 million) viewers wherever they may be. Television is still a semi-elitist medium of information as efforts are being made to make the contents of the programmes mutually intelligible to the majority of the viewers.

Appearance is particularly strategic for a television interview, now that the viewers are beginning to have choices and could switch over to another station by the mere sight of an unappealing guest. In the words of Lionel Fisher, "dress for power .. usually in grey. Grey labels are solid, cautious, conservative, dependable, responsible, unfrivolous and trustworthy." Yet, good looks is not enough to get and retain peoples valued attention. A combination of brain, brawn and confidence will blend with the good appearance for total effect.

- Know your subject so well that little reference should be made to notes.
- Avoid non-specific answers to questions asked. Long winding sentences are seen as an attempt to evade the questions.
- Answer questions without hesitations as the television camera will bring you out live.
- Be prepared to last the stated time for the interview. Keep talking and make your points forcefully.

Ladies and gentlemen, hobnobbing with the media is a sweet affair but it can be very bitter when the honeymoon suddenly ends. The better your public relations practice is, the less you need the media. Let your products and services, if they are good, advertise your organisation. It is dangerous to run your organisation on the pages of newspapers, on radio and television. The less the noise an organisation makes about its routine operations, the more time it has to consolidate its effort and the better co-ordinated the result when it becomes public knowledge.

Rejoinders are very unnecessary if care is taken in the first instance to avoid unnecessary media exposure. Public relations executives of organisations should use it sparingly and the Chief Executive Officers may do well not to insist on replying every criticism they read about their organisations. One sure way of avoiding the pitfall of repair works all the time is to involve the public relations executive in all the process of policy formulation, execution and evaluation in order that the management would have the benefit of expert advise on all its actions.

The secret of corporate success is cohesion in public appearance and utterances. It is important that crucial policies are not countermanded and all efforts should be geared towards effective internal communication — horizontally, vertically and at peer levels. What all of these do for organisations is to gather tremendous strength in pulling towards the same direction for the ultimate achievement of the corporate goals.

Finally, interviewees are representatives of their organisations and whatever they say or do will have a lasting impact. When confronted with a media interview, there are a few basic ground rules to remember: sweet reason; logical presentation of facts, quietly, courteously and concisely expressed can disarm aggressive interviewers. Controversy may ensue but you will carry the day if you are calm and unruffled.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention.

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