

Meeting the Media



U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command

Victory Starts Here!

Meeting the Media

**U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's
Pocket Guide
to Meeting the Media in a
Culture of Engagement**

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“Why should I agree to give an interview?”

No doubt you’ve heard the expression, “Soldiers are the centerpiece of our Army.” It is an oft-stated assertion by our senior leaders in recognition of your importance to this nation in the global war on terrorism.

You also are aware that the media and the general public see you as the ablest spokesperson for the best-trained, best-equipped and most powerful military in the world.

Without the support of a well-informed American public, our military couldn’t accomplish its mission. We must all make every effort to inform the public — commanders and career field experts alike.

That’s where you come in. You tell the Army story best.

Your success during an interview is tied to the quality of your preparation and the level of control you exercise. Although you will probably be asked about your job, don’t think an interview is a casual conversation you can just “wing.”

For the unprepared, being questioned by the media can be stressful and embarrassing. But if you’re prepared, the interview will be an opportunity to make a presentation reflecting professionalism, knowledge and enthusiasm.

This booklet will help prepare you to do just that. It covers:

- composing messages

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- ground rules
- repeating messages
- answering difficult questions
- successful communication
- do's and don'ts
- categories of questions
- nonverbal communication

Your preparation and that of your public affairs officer will lead you to successful media interviews.

If you have questions about this booklet or would like to receive media training, contact TRADOC Public Affairs or your installation PAO.



Prepare to succeed

Preparation is the key to any interview, especially one in front of a camera. You'll have just seconds to professionally state your position while the cameras are rolling.

It isn't the time to formulate quick answers to serious questions. Public affairs can help you anticipate questions and develop messages.

Before the interview, work with your Public Affairs Officer (PAO) to know everything possible about the interview, what you want to say and how to say it.

Know about the interview

Get the answer to the who, what, when, where, why and how from public affairs.

Who will interview you? What is their background? Do they often interrupt? Do they have prior military service? Do they know much about the military? Who is the audience? Who are the other guests? Who is your point of contact?

What is the subject of the interview? What type of program are you appearing on? What is expected of you? What should you do specifically?

When is the interview? When will it air? When should you arrive?

Where will the interview take place? Where will you sit? Where should you look? Where will the interview air?

Why do they want you? Why are they interested in the subject?

How will the interview be conducted? How will it end? How should you dress?

Know what you want to say

You may know the subject well, the topic may even be your job, but don't assume every question you're asked will be easy to answer.

The public wants answers to the hard questions, so it's the reporter's job to ask them. With public affairs assistance, anticipate the hard questions and plan your answers.

Make a list of all the questions you could possibly be asked. Then attempt to answer the questions using messages — short sound-bites of key information you feel the public needs to know.

For Example: If you're being interviewed about Initial Military Training, you will want to stress that Soldiers Are Warriors First and explain the Army Values and Warrior ethos. This is one of your key messages. Also, go into an interview with something to say. Know the points you want to make, know what you want the headlines or lead to be. Don't rely on the reporter to steer the interview in the direction you'd like. Sure, answer the questions, but also have your own agenda.

For Example: You may want to talk about how the curriculum at the Quartermaster Basic Officer Leadership Course now includes more field exercise experience and increased emphasis on leader reaction exercises. The reporter may cover that lightly then steer the subject to the topic of increased construction activity at the training school. Answer the question, then steer back to the Army leadership training programs.

This is called bridging. You're bridging to what you want to talk about.

Finally, you need to practice. Have your public affairs office set up a mock interview or press conference. Or, if there is time, schedule yourself for media training provided by TRADOC Public Affairs.

At least have someone play the role of interviewer so you can rehearse your delivery.

Know how to say it

Never give simple yes or no answers. If you do, you're missing your opportunity to deliver a positive message about the Army and TRADOC.

For example: "Sir, at this time there are increased reports of sexual assaults in the Army. What is the Army doing about these increasing numbers?" Answer the question. "The Army does not tolerate this type of behavior. The Army's Sexual Assault Prevention policy encourages victims to report a sexual

assault to specified individuals without necessarily initiating an investigative process, while still giving them access to medical care, to counseling and to victim advocacy. Soldiers, civilians and contractors receive regular training emphasizing the Army's and this command's zero tolerance on sexual assault behavior." At this point, lead the interview back to your agenda - the Army's newest leadership training program, its importance to the Army, your installation and your mission.

Notice the admission of a problem. It's okay to admit a problem — just be sure to state the steps being taken to fix the problem.

Get your message across, but don't be long-winded. Your answers should be 15 to 30 seconds long, with your positive message up front. Any longer, and you'll lose your audience. But take a second or two before you respond to the question. Rapid answers sound rehearsed and perfunctory.

Be personable. Answer questions and deliver messages with interest, passion and conviction.

If you don't sound interested, the audience won't be, either.



Get your message across

Once again, before doing any interview, you should know what you want to say. In addition to being knowledgeable about Army issues and messages, you should also be prepared with a few messages of your own. Public affairs can help you with both.

Messages are your “commercials” for use throughout an interview. They can be about the interview subject or other issues.

Make sure your messages are short, memorable and positive. Think of them as sound bites. Use crisp, high-impact words in statements that emphasize the positive. Here are some examples of messages you can use for many occasions:

- The Army is prepared to respond to any crisis anywhere, anytime.
- Training in peacetime as we fight in war improves our readiness to respond to any threat to our nation’s security.
- The Army is committed to environmental responsibility.

Remember, positive messages can come out of negative events. If you’re getting to the bottom of an issue, or fixing the problem — that’s positive. Use it for the message.

Practice making messages using issues on your installation or in your unit.

Use the interview preparation outline at the end of this section to help organize your thoughts.

Nonverbal communication

Your nonverbals are also important in getting your message across. Research shows that the average audience remembers only 7 percent of the words you say. The audience perception of you and the Army depends on your voice, face, uniform, personal charm and credibility.

Also, television has a tendency to flatten your personality and animation, so you'll need to exaggerate your nonverbals a little.

Following are tips about appearance and nonverbal communication:

- Soldiers wear duty uniform; civilians wear business attire (check with PAO for situationally appropriate attire).
- Women shouldn't wear more than their usual amount of makeup and men shouldn't hesitate to ask for makeup at the studio — it helps control perspiration and glare.
- Wear over-the-calf socks so your shins don't show when you cross your legs.
- Keep jewelry simple.
- Shave just before you go to the studio.
- Pull the back of your jacket down and sit on it so you don't look like you're wearing shoulder pads.
- Wear your glasses if you need to, but tilt them downward very slightly to eliminate glare.

- Don't wear sunglasses.
- For civilians, wear solid, medium-tone colors; don't wear bright patterns or white — they make color adjustment difficult.
- Sit up straight and don't rock or swivel in the chair.
- Make frequent hand gestures and facial expressions, but make sure they're appropriate to the subject matter.
- Don't rest your elbows on the arms of the chair; you'll find them locked there and you won't be able to make natural gestures.
- Bring hand gestures up to your chest, not at your lap or in front of your face.
- Maintain eye contact with the reporter; looking at the floor, shifting your eyes back and forth, or avoiding eye contact will make you look dishonest.
- Show interest in the program, subject, reporter and interview — convey enthusiasm.
- Restrain from making nervous gestures such as looking at your watch or pulling your socks.

Interview Preparation Outline

Media event: One-on-One Interview?
Press conference?

Media outlet: List media, identify as print, electronic.

Editor/Producer/Reporter: Names and position.

Issue: Topic (for example "Every Soldier is a Sensor.")

Risks: Minefields.

Benefits: Positive expectations.

Synopsis Statement: The synopsis statement is provided to explain the basic position and updated information on the issue, the event, etc. It can be used as an opening statement in a press conference, or as the answer to the first question expected in an interview. The purpose is to establish the command's position early in the interview process.

Example:

The individual Soldier is the most capable, sophisticated collector of intelligence in today's Army. Every Soldier is a Sensor.

Messages: Messages are used as the basic points to communicate to the public the facts that the public needs to know. Each message is identified with a one-to-two-word "concept" followed by an

explanation. The purpose is to give the interviewee a small number (generally 3-5) of ideas to remember, rather than trying to remember a long sentence as a message. The messages are condensed into single, short “concepts” that serve as the outline of the interview.

Example:

Message 1: High Quality Feedback — TRADOC trains today’s Soldiers to actively observe details related to Commanders’ Critical Information Requirements (CCIR) in an area of operations. Today’s Soldiers are competent in reporting their experiences, perceptions and judgment in a concise, accurate manner.

Message 2: Soldier Technology — While technology will impact the future of the United States Army, its success will continue to be determined by our Army’s most important asset, weapon, and sensor, the Soldier.

Message 3: Changing Mindset — Today’s Soldiers are currently active in providing detailed information related to Commanders’ Critical Information Requirements (CCIR) in their area of expertise. Army leaders understand how to optimize the collection, process, and disseminate the information in their organization to enable the generation of timely intelligence.

Anticipated Questions and Responses:

Rather than using complete answers, the interviewee is keyed to respond to certain questions or issues by one of the command messages. Some questions may require more explanation, but the messages about the topic should be sufficient to explain the issue to the public.

Example:

1. How is today's Soldier a sensor for information for future operations? (Message 1)
2. What effect will current technology and Soldier information have in making improvements for future missions? (Message 2)
3. When will the Army start collecting the Soldiers' information on the operations and assignments they are performing? (Message 3)

Other issues/interesting angles: Current events. Related issues that could come into play at time of interview.



Ground Rules

An interview with the news media can be polite and conversational if you follow a few basic rules of engagement.

Set the ground rules

First, agree on the ground rules before the interview. Your public affairs adviser should talk to the reporter about the agenda and explain your area of expertise and interview parameters. If you can't talk about an issue because it is classified (truly classified, not just embarrassing), tell the reporter. You may still be asked about the issue on the air but at least now the reporter is prepared not to do an entire show on something you cannot discuss.

If you're asked a question on the air that you earlier told the reporter you couldn't talk about, don't get upset. Don't say "You said you wouldn't ask me about that." You will sound like you're hiding something. Instead, answer by saying "I'm not prepared to talk about details of the subject, because they're classified (or whatever), but I can discuss..."

The second part of the response is called a bridge. With practice, you'll find it easy to bridge from the reporter's question to your message.

Know the definitions

Here are the definitions of terms you'll hear often when working with the media:

On the record - The reporter can use everything you say and attribute it to you by name and title.

Off the record - The reporter can't use anything you say. Go "off the record" only if the information is vital to the reporter's full understanding of an issue.

Understand that nothing is off the record unless *both parties agree to it before the thing is said*. If you are giving an interview and need to tell the reporter something off the record, stop and ask his permission to go off the record. If he agrees, proceed. There also has to be agreement as to when you are back on the record. If you encounter a problem during the interview, let the PAO stop it and ask both parties if they want to go off the record.

Background - The reporter will use the information but won't directly attribute it to you. "An Army spokesperson" might be used - you and the reporter agree what is the best term.

It's best to always consider yourself "on the record." Don't say anything you wouldn't want to see on the evening news.

If you feel the reporter needs "background" or "off the record" information tell him before you're near a microphone. Make certain the reporter understands the information is "background" or "off the record" before you give him the information.

Speak their language

Avoid Army acronyms, jargon and technical terms. Use analogies to explain technical information in a way we can all understand. Your messages should be clear and understandable to every member of your audience.

Argument - don't lose your cool

If the reporters start arguing with you during the interview, keep your composure. You'll appear defensive if you argue. Instead, state your point again and bridge to one of your messages.

There are times, however, when you'll need to step up to a situation and maintain control of the interview. Don't be passive if the reporter is being confrontational.

Try to use personal experiences that the reporter can't argue with. If you say, "I've fired this weapon many times and it handles perfectly;" there's not much for the reporter to argue with — unless he has also fired it.

Honesty is the best policy

Always answer honestly. If you don't know the answer to a question, if the answer is classified, or would invade someone's privacy, say so. Then bridge to your message. Never say "no comment." To the public, "no comment" means you are hiding something.



Answering questions

There are several types of questions a reporter can ask. Some, like the easy “softball” question or the “tell me what you do” question, offer you time to stress messages and positive points. Others, like the “loaded” or “forced choice” questions, can be tougher to answer.

A technique you’ll find very useful is bridging. It’s a way of downplaying the question, then saying what you really want to talk about — your messages.

Watch the evening news to see how many of the reporters’ questions are answered.

You’ll also want to answer the question in the form of a news article. State the most important information first, then fill in the details. In case you’re interrupted by the reporter, you’ll have already stated the important information.

Following are common types of questions, techniques to answer them and examples. You and your public affairs officer should anticipate these types of questions when you’re preparing for an interview.

Softball

Q: *What’s it like to be a commander of an Army unit?*

This question gives you a great opportunity to expound on all your messages. Take advantage.

Answer with great enthusiasm. Smile! Use expressive hand gestures. Praise your people - officers, enlisted and civilians.

This is the only type of question where your answer could be more than 15 to 30 seconds. Don't ramble, but don't stop until you've covered all your positive points and messages.

A: *Commanding this unit is a fantastic job! It is wonderful to work with such talented people . . .*

Hypothetical

Q: *Do you think your unit will still be involved in this conflict in five years?*

Never speculate, and don't answer hypothetical questions. Discount the question and bridge to a message.

A: *I can't see into the future. But I can tell you all of our people — officers, enlisted and civilians — are working hard now and will continue to operate at full speed for as long as they're needed.*

False facts or assumptions

Q: *So, the Environmental Protection Agency has fined the installation for violating regulations?*

Don't repeat the false information in the question. For example, don't say "No, the EPA hasn't fined us for violating regulations."

Correct the record and bridge to a message.

A: *That's not correct. We did very well during the recent EPA inspection. The EPA inspector made a*

few suggestions on how we can better our programs, and, of course we are always interested in ways to improve.

Leading

Q: *In a recent news article you were quoted as saying it will be several months until all your mechanics are trained on the new Strykers. Are you saying that your unit isn't prepared to deploy?*

Again, don't repeat the question, set the record straight, then bridge to a message.

A: *Absolutely not. The unit is fully capable of deploying anywhere at a moment's notice. There are a few people who require training on the new system but we are still able to fulfill our mission.*

Forced choices

Q: *Did the accident occur because the soldiers involved had been drinking or because they were driving too fast?*

Obviously, don't agree if both the choices are incorrect or the answer is not known. Tell what you can, if the incident is still under investigation, then attempt a positive message.

A. *The incident is under investigation, so at this time we don't know the cause. We constantly remind our people of all aspects of driver safety.*

Factual about bad news

Q: *Can you confirm that two people were seriously injured in an accident?*

Don't try to hide or gloss over bad news. Admit to the accident, problem or mistake, state your concern, then say how you're going to fix it.

A: *Yes, right now two of our people are recovering in the hospital. We are doing all we can to help them and their families and to ensure this kind of accident doesn't happen again.*



Do's and Don'ts

Following are the most important points to remember:

Do —

- find out all you can about the interview
- anticipate questions you'll be asked
- determine your audience
- write out messages you want to convey
- practice answering the questions
- establish ground rules
- ask for makeup if needed
- wear glasses if you can't see without them
- use frequent but natural hand gestures
- sit up straight in the chair
- smile when appropriate
- convey enthusiasm
- talk about personal experiences
- use simple language your audience is sure to understand
- assume everything you say, even when off camera, will be broadcast or printed
- set the record straight
- stay calm
- always be honest
- bridge to your messages
- take every opportunity to tell the Army story
- relax

Don't —

- fail to prepare
- cover or gloss over the truth
- speculate
- smile or grin at inappropriate times
- make nervous gestures
- roll or shift your eyes
- say anything you don't want on the air or in print
- use acronyms or technical jargon
- answer hypothetical questions
- use no comment
- argue
- let the reporter put words in your mouth
- just answer yes or no
- assume you won't be asked about important issues
- assume the reporter knows nothing about



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