



# How to Prepare for a Media Interview

Every interview is different and the differences start with the setting. Here is what to expect in each type of interview. If you have questions, reach out to any member of the AILA Comms team!

- **Tips for the Phone Interview:** If you have agreed to do a phone interview, let the reporter know you will initiate the call at the *agreed-upon time*. Elementary as this may sound, double-check the time if different time zones are involved. Sound quality is of the utmost importance; don't use speakerphone or a phone of poor quality. \* *For radio interviews – speakerphones, cell phones and cordless phones are no-no's. You don't want listeners to have to work too hard to listen to your message.* Make sure you have your notes, talking points, and any studies that you might cite neatly in front of you. Do not use a phone interview as an opportunity to multi-task. Your full attention must be on the interview, not answering e-mails or sorting piles of paper. Try and monitor the conversation, make notations to yourself if you feel points need clarifying or further data to be gathered. If you are dealing with a particularly sensitive issue or complex topic, you may want to write up your notes, including key questions and answers, in case there are questions later about what was said or done.
- **Tips for the E-Mail Interview:** This type of interview is happening more and more often now, especially with the immense growth of blogs and news gathering web sites. Usually, reporters will only use e-mail when they need to check a fact with a source who has already been interviewed in person or on the phone. Occasionally, reporters e-mail a single question to sources when they are doing a round-up type of story, in which they are canvassing many people about their opinions on an issue. E-mail interviews must be treated with the highest level of care because once you click on the "send" button, it's out of your hands. \**It is advisable to follow-up a reporter's e-mail question with a phone call to that reporter to make sure he has received your reply.* Finally, remember that sometimes humorous e-mail doesn't translate well. You might think you are making a joke, but the reader could misinterpret your e-mailed comment.
- **Tips for the In-Person Interview:** When a reporter comes to your office, don't leave him waiting in the lobby. Go to the lobby and meet him in person. Giving a quick tour of the office is a good way to break the ice. Ask the reporter if he or she wants something to drink, and then find a quiet place to hold the interview. It says some positive things about you if the interview takes place in your office, not in a sterile conference room. By having the interview in your office, you're sending the message that you are open and friendly. However, if you take this route, make sure you clean it up. Throw out your old lunches, file any paper on your desk that you wouldn't want a reporter to read, and hold all calls. Before the interview is even scheduled, find out how much time the reporter needs. Add 15 to 30 minutes to the reporter's estimate. Don't rush the reporter, but when time is up, if you need to move on to another appointment, offer to follow up within 24 hours with a phone interview. If you don't need to stop the interview, then just let it flow for a while longer.
- **Tips for Editorial Board Meetings and Deskside Briefings:** As an AILA member, especially if you are a Chapter officer (i.e. Chair, Executive Committee Member, Media Liaison or Advocacy Liaison) you are in position to take an expert and insightful stance on an issue of

the day. Meeting with newspaper opinion editors and reporters at their offices or desks (hence the term *deskside*) is your opportunity to approach the major newspapers in your community and discuss with the editorial board staff important immigration topics that might be currently in the news either nationally or locally.

Editorial board meetings generally start with one of the senior newspaper staffers introducing everyone in the room. If the introductions don't happen, gracefully find a way to introduce yourself to those you don't know. Then the senior newspaper staffer will open the meeting with a broad question. Leap into the answer and take an active role in guiding the resulting conversation. Editorial page coverage is great if the newspaper's editorial board agrees with you. So be proactive and call your newspaper and ask for the Opinion Department and then request a meeting with the editorial board. When you attend the meeting, be prepared for tough questions and make sure you bring any supporting materials with you, such as Council reports and studies or AILA position papers that can strengthen your position. Everything you say in an editorial board meeting should be considered on the record and for attribution. Bring some leave-behind collateral, such as AILA's *Invisible Wall* or *Cogs in the Deportation Machine* reports, or a recent policy brief or two.

- **Tips for Radio Interviews:**

**(Call-In)** A radio interview has some unique characteristics. Unless it is a major news story, the station will use only a brief segment (10 to 20 seconds) of your interview—although it is likely to rebroadcast the item several times, perhaps using different sound bites each time. *So it is even more important that you make your key message points succinctly.* Also, radio rarely uses the reporter's questions on the air. Before you answer you should pause a moment to be sure the questioner is finished and you are not "stepping on that person's line." You should speak in a conversational tone as you would with a friend on the phone. During the interview you should gesture and smile as you would during a normal conversation; it will help both your voice and your body to relax. You can repeat your affiliation to AILA to emphasize your expertise several times during the interview. People listening on the radio have no visuals to remind them who you are and what you are talking about. So you need to paint repeated word pictures for your messages to be remembered.

**(In-Studio with a Host)** In this situation, you'll usually wear bulky headphones. There is so much equipment in radio studios that you might not even be able to see your host. If you can make eye contact, then do so. During lengthy commercials, you can take off your headphones but pay attention, so that you don't miss the signal to put them back on. If your host has to push buttons and adjust dials during your interview, don't let the action distract you from your key message points. Radio interviewers often ask you to stay on for an extra segment to take questions from callers. Callers can be unpredictable and because they are often anonymous, many will ask tough questions or display emotion. Don't let that throw you; remember to bridge back to a key message point and stay professional.

- **Television Interviews:** Always remember two things: First, television is a visual medium, so what the eye sees is more important than what the ear hears. And second, the camera magnifies whatever it sees. It sounds trite, but you should act naturally.
  - Do not smile when it is not appropriate—you will look phony, not friendly.
  - Do not gesture wildly or move suddenly—the camera may lose you altogether.
  - Do not stare upward into space when you are thinking—you will look like you are praying for guidance; don't look down either, that conveys you are ashamed.
  - Maintain eye contact with your interviewer or the camera if appropriate.

- If you are being videotaped in your office, you should suggest other attractive areas of your space for taping. Think visually. Television is an intimate medium. You will be speaking not to the “general public” but rather to individual people—mom and dad in the family room, a tired worker dozing off in the den, someone catching up with Twitter while watching the news.
- Normally the interview will be videotaped and then severely edited before being aired. Many times reporters will ask you the same question several times in different ways. They are giving their editors a variety of versions and lengths from which to choose. It may be disconcerting to have the reporter pay more attention to a stopwatch than to your words, and seem unnecessarily repetitive to be asked the same question. You should take the opportunity to sharpen your answer.
- No matter how often you are asked, you should ALWAYS include your key message point in each answer—right up front—said in different ways, of course. When the tape is edited, only one response will be left—and you and the reporter both want it to be a clear and concise statement.
- Try to avoid nodding as the reporter talks. It could be viewed on camera as acknowledgement of the premise behind the question. Similarly, be careful about saying, “That’s a good point” after a negative question. Tight editing could wipe out the rest of your response.
- Do not be intimidated by a reporter with a microphone during a fast-breaking “spot news” situation. An unnerving interview technique is to thrust the mike at you and then pull it back when the reporter has what he or she wants. You regain control of the interview with a smile and saying “I haven’t finished answering the last question yet,” and go back to making your point.
- **Television Interview via Satellite:** There are also situations where you’ll be interviewed in the studio, but the interviewer is located elsewhere. For example, perhaps the interview takes place in a studio in DC, and you are going to be interviewed by the anchor in New York.
  - Sit in the chair, look straight ahead at the camera, and talk to the camera while hearing the questions in your earpiece.
  - During the sound check, make sure to turn the volume up a little louder than you think you are going to need.
  - If the chair swivels or is on wheels, ask for a different chair, or at least ask how to lock it so that it doesn’t move.
  - If a television monitor is in your line of sight, ask the camera operator to turn the monitor so that you won’t see it and it won’t distract you.
  - During the interview, feel free to gesture with your hands from time to time if you are framed from the waist up. Otherwise, keep them clasped out of sight.
  - After the interview, don’t move out of your chair until the director or host gives you the all clear. Assume you are on the air all the time when being interviewed on television.
  - Also remember: ***You are always on the record.***

## How to Give a Great Interview

Good interviews are not an accident. They might look effortless, but people who consistently give strong interviews know that before you sit down for any interview, you have to do your homework. You have to go into the interview with a plan. Ask yourself: what is the most important point I want to make and how do I make my key message point heard? Here are the steps to take for ensuring that your interview is stellar.

- 1. Study up on your interviewer.** Do not agree to be on a show without knowing a bit about it and the outlet. Once you've agreed to be a guest, then you need to go online and search and view (or listen to) older segments of the program. If you are being interviewed by a local newspaper reporter, look through back issues, or go online and find articles written by that reporter so you can get a feel for his or her writing style. (If you feel you don't have the time or resources to do this, contact AILA's Communications Department for help). This exercise will also give you something to make small talk about before the interview begins.
- 2. Have a sense of what type of story this is going to be.** When you agree to the interview, you should have a pretty good idea about the story the reporter is working on. In other words, is it a feature story that focuses on business immigration? Are you just one of many people to be interviewed? Is it a "live" or taped interview? Make sure you ask all these questions before saying yes to doing the interview.
- 3. Review your key message points & bolster your argument with data.** Check out AILA.org for the latest position statements, talking points, and links to the American Immigration Council's research studies. Using statistics and facts will enhance your credibility and contextualize your key message points. Make sure you anticipate both tough and easy questions, double-check any facts you intend to use.
- 4. Warm yourself up, and project energy.** Before the interview begins, take a moment to prepare your voice by clearing your throat. When the interview begins, take an active role and be attentive. Get your messages out there. If the reporter doesn't ask you the specific question you would like to answer, find an opportunity to say what you want to say.
- 5. Remember your objective.** Is your purpose in doing the interview merely to inform the reporter's audience of some new immigration law? Or are you attempting to persuade people to adopt your point of view? Inspire them to change their belief? Motivate them to take some particular action – like contacting their Congressional representatives? Focusing on your ultimate objective should help guide what you say and how you say it.
- 6. Prepare and Practice.** Have in mind one key message that you want to get across in the finished story. Ask yourself, "If I could edit the article that will come out of this interview, what one sentence would I most like to see?" Write the key messages out well in advance of the interview. Practice saying them out loud so that they sound natural to the ear. Do not recite talking points verbatim because perfectly proper sentences in a written text are often too formal (and even cumbersome) when spoken out loud – USE YOUR OWN WORDS.
- 7. Simplify, simplify, simplify.** Keep your messaging simple. That is your best chance to have your message break through the clutter of competing messages and opinions for your target audience's time and attention. It is impossible to tell everyone everything – so simplify the message and deliver it with consistency and clarity.

8. **Place your most important message points at the beginning of each response where they will be clear and isolated.** In 15 words or less, what is the essence of your message for this interview? In TV or radio interviews this is especially important because broadcast journalists are looking for a very short “sound bite.” Try to get your key message point down to 9 or 10 seconds which, sadly, are too often all a spokesperson gets when the TV editing is complete.
9. **It is not only what you say but also how you say it.** The effective speaker is not necessarily polished and perfect. He/she is energetic, enthusiastic and direct. A forthright, enthusiastic response to a question portrays candor and confidence.
10. **You should not feel pressured to respond instantly.** When you are posed with a difficult

#### Interviewing Tricks to Remember:

- ✓ Don't let down your guard during any interview. You are most vulnerable when you let your mind wander. Stay focused, regardless of how long the interview might last.
- ✓ Whenever you hear “What if .....” From a reporter, know that your answer, however speculative, will be open to wide interpretation by readers, viewers, and listeners. It's best to refocus the question to a factual content and avoid all hypothetical situations.
- ✓ Respond to negatives with a positive. Aggressive reporters often use a negative line of questioning to put you on edge. Deflating that stance takes patience, focus and a steady supply of positive, supportive data on your issue.
- ✓ “For example.....” Are the words reporters most enjoy. They are *not* experts in immigration law so examples help bring focus to your information - examples are great!
- ✓ Use “bridging” to help move the interview in a positive direction, such as “Let's look at this issue from this perspective.....”
- ✓ Avoid: “As I said in my presentation.....”, “As explained in our position statement.....”, “As you know.....” The reporter may not have heard your presentation, read the position statement, and he or she doesn't know. That's why you're having the interview.

question or a complex issue, it is appropriate to take a moment to organize your thoughts. In a print interview you can verbalize the pause by saying something like “I hadn't thought of it from that viewpoint before.....”

11. **Think fast, but talk slowly.** If the reporter is taking notes, it will help the accuracy. If you are being taped for broadcast—audio or video—it will help your audience's comprehension.
12. **Never forget your ultimate audience.** You are talking to a reporter, but you are speaking to the people who read the publication or watch/listen to the program. Frame your answers from your target audience's point of view—meaning how this issue impacts them directly. For example, “Too many recipients of Temporary Protected Status in our community are faced with uncertainty as the administration rescinds protection for so many. Families in our community are facing removal or separation...,” rather than “AILA opposes this legislation because.....”
13. **Always include the “me factor.”** It is crucial to appreciate your audience's viewpoint in order to understand how they will react to your message. The key word is *benefit*. If you can articulate the benefit to each individual's life or family or career or wallet, you will turn a nod of agreement into a spark of interest—and ultimately, action. People listen and respond in terms of their own lives. What are you telling them that will make a difference in their lives? What can they do?
14. **Do not be embarrassed if a number or detail is not at hand and NEVER, EVER GUESS.** Simply tell the reporter that you will get that information to him/her as soon as the interview is over. Also, don't feel obliged to accept a figure or fact the reporter cites. Say you are not familiar with it and offer to have it checked. Never—repeat, never—guess at a statistic or fact if you don't know for sure.

- 15. Do not let a reporter put words in your mouth.** Whenever you hear the phrases, “Are you saying that.....?” or “Do you mean.....?” or “Isn’t it really....?” Alarm bells should go off in your head. Mishandling this type of question can result in your feeling your words were reflected back by a fun-house mirror when the final story appears. If you do not like the way a question is stated, do not repeat it back in your response—even to deny it. The reporter’s question will not appear in print. Your answer will. It is better to respond in a positive way, using your own words, not the reporter’s. For example, if a reporter asks you if AILA is against more border security, don’t say: “I wouldn’t want to use the term ‘against.’” Because, you just did! Instead, say what you would want to say: “We believe in smart enforcement. For example.....” And go on and detail what that means. This is particularly important in a television interview, when time constraints will force severe editing. You want to be sure your key message point is right up front in every answer, in case you are on the air with only one sentence. Look back at this example to see what a one-sentence edit would do to you.
- 16. Do not waste your brief time with a reporter by arguing against the other side.** You may want to refute their point of view but inadvertently end up giving valuable media exposure to their position. Instead stay on *your* message. State your case positively, without mentioning your opponents by name. If you are forced to refer to your adversaries, avoid emotional labels such as “radical.” Use the term “the other side” instead.
- 17. Do not answer hypothetical questions.** Instead, particularize them with: “That’s a hypothetical question so it is impossible to know what might happen. But let me tell you exactly what did happen in a similar case.....”
- 18. Avoid “frankly,” “to tell you the truth,” and “to be honest.”** These expressions serve no useful purpose. In fact, they may backfire on you by raising the question of how frank or truthful or honest you have been in all the rest of your interview if you suddenly say that you are going to be “frank” or “truthful” or “honest” with the reporter now.
- 19. Respond to a simple question with a simple answer and speak in the active voice.** Short, simple answers are better than long, complicated ones. A few sentences using everyday language (not jargon or “legalize”) and avoiding the passive voice give the interviewer less opportunity to misunderstand you. And on TV and radio (where time is measured in dollars), this is especially important. Remember you should be able to say your key message points in about 10 seconds.
- 20. Be yourself.** See this interview as an opportunity to educate and to demonstrate that you really care about immigration law. Remember the reporter asked you to do this interview because you are the expert—you are an authority in your area of expertise.