

# INTERVIEWS: Staying in Control & Answering Hard Questions<sup>1</sup>

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## Staying in Control

Interviews can be challenging for even the most experienced spokespeople. The following techniques can help you stay focused and in control of your message. They are particularly useful with broadcast media, but also work with print reporters and other question-and-answer situations.

- **Ask questions before you answer them.** Clarify in advance the topics to be discussed and the type of audience. Ask if there are specific questions the interviewer wants answered. If you don't feel qualified to address the issue or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other approaches. Refer them to the ALA Public Information Office or other sources of information.
- **Take time to prepare.** Tell the reporter you will call back at a given time (even five minutes if the reporter is on deadline). Use this time to review the key message and anticipate questions. Be sure to call back at the agreed upon time.
- **Never answer a question you don't fully understand.** Say, "I'm not sure I understand the question. Are you asking...?"
- **Think first. Don't rush.** A pause can make you appear more thoughtful. You also can buy time by saying, "That's a good question." Or, "Let me think about that and come back to it."
- **Beware of leading questions.** Some reporters may attempt to influence your answer by asking something like "Wouldn't you say..." followed by an idea for your agreement. Answer the questions briefly followed by your own statement.
- **Never repeat a negative.** Keep your answers positive.
- **Avoid one-word answers such as "yes" or "no."** Use every opportunity to make your point.
- **"Flag" or emphasize key thoughts** with phrases like "That's an excellent question" or "The important thing to remember is..." or "The real issue here is...."
- **Stay "on message."** Use every question as an opportunity to "bridge" to your message.
- **"Hook" the interviewer into listening to your key points** by saying, "There are three things your listeners should know" or "There are a couple ways to answer that question. First . . ." The interviewer can't cut you off without frustrating his/her audience.
- **Practice. Practice. Practice . . .**with your staff, your family and friends. The more you do it, the better and more comfortable you'll be.

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<sup>1</sup> This information is based on that found in the American Library Association's *Advocacy Action Plan Workbook*. January 14, 2005. Available online at: <http://www.ala.org/>

# Answering Hard Questions

When speaking to reporters, groups or even your neighbours, you may be faced with challenging questions. The best way to deal with them is to anticipate and prepare answers ahead of time. Knowing the answers will help you to feel—and appear—more confident, as well as give better answers. Remember, it's not just what you say, but how you say it. Speak simply, sincerely and with conviction.

**Anticipate difficult questions and prepare answers ahead of time.** If you know you'll be facing hostile questioning, role-play beforehand with a colleague. Answer the worst questions you can imagine. Also practice some easy ones so you won't be caught off guard.

**Listen. Really listen. Don't judge.** Try to identify and address the real concern, fear or issue being expressed.

**Acknowledge.** Pause to show you've given the question serious consideration. Frame your answer with a positive. For example, "You evidently have strong feelings about this" or "I respect your views, but let me give you another perspective." "We share your concern for children, but our approach is..."

**Always answer with a positive.** Don't repeat negative or inflammatory words. Strip away the loaded words and rephrase the question.

**Don't "over talk" your answers.** Giving too much information may provoke more challenging questions.

**Be truthful.** Speak from your own experience. "In my Association, we have not..." Or "My experience is..." If you are asked a question you can't answer or are surprised with an unfavourable statistic or claim, simply say, "I hadn't heard that. What I do know is..." (bridge to positive statement).

**Don't assume anything you say is "off the record."** It can and may be used.

**Feel free to say,** "I'd like to finish answering your last question" if you are interrupted. Also correct any factual misstatements you feel are critical to the discussion.

**Never say "No comment."** Maintain an open, positive attitude. If you are waiting for direction from your board or need time to study the issue, say so.