

COMMUNICATION ENGAGEMENT - EXECUTION

You have your data points. You know your messages. You've rehearsed responses with your public affairs team and done a final check in the mirror, looking for anything out of place. What now?

Establish interview expectations to facilitate a productive discussion. Your Public Affairs Office will coordinate interview expectations as part of setting up an engagement. It's good practice to reiterate expectations as part of the ground rules at the beginning of an interview. Be very clear about what you will or will not talk about, and remember Public Affairs can take questions outside of your area of expertise for future coordination. You have no control over the questions you are asked, but you have 100 percent control over how you respond.

Tell the truth—always. The truth may hurt, but lies are deadly. Give a direct answer when asked a direct question, even if the answer is, "I don't know," or "I'm sorry, I can't answer that question." In cases where you have information you can't provide, give a reason if possible: "I'm sorry, but I'm sure you understand we don't discuss all the specific capabilities of a given weapon system." You will come across as honest and forthright.

Ensure your audience receives the important information. An interview is not a passive affair where the subject merely responds to questions. Rather, it's a dialogue requiring the active participation of both parties. Even an experienced, professional reporter may come into an interview without a full or accurate understanding of the real issues at hand. When this happens, it will become apparent in the course of an interview. If you feel an interview is heading off course, there are several techniques you can use:

Hook. The reporter may not understand or know the entire story, whereas you likely have months or even years of experience. A hook grabs the reporter's (and the audience's) attention right from the start.

- "First, the focus needs to be...."
- "I need the public to understand...."

Bridge. Keep your communication objective in the forefront. Bridges can help you respond to a reporter's question and then transition to additional points the public needs to understand. Bridges may be implied, but most can be identified by the use of a conjunction:

- Response: "No, that information's not available yet, "(bridge) but I can tell you...."

- Response: “That question is outside my lane, so let me refer you to the judge advocate.” (bridge) “Now, let me explain.....”

Flag. Help the audience identify the key point (s) by emphasizing them with your tone of voice, facial expressions or physical gesture.

- “There are three new programs (vocal emphasis) we’ve started this year to enhance flight safety.” (said while also holding up three fingers)

These techniques will help you drive the interview towards the information you need your audience to know, but don’t forget to answer the reporter’s original question. Similar to providing messages without data, using these techniques without answering the actual question will appear evasive.