



Communicating with the Media Toolkit: Strategies and Tactics

- **The more you understand your position in an interview, the more you will feel in control. Your attitude with a reporter is often as important as what you say.**

The League here to help with:

- Talking points on topics like housing, land use, and more.
- Assisting you in preparing for talking to the media by thinking through your message and practicing tough questions.
- Amplifying your media outreach efforts through League platforms and channels - [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [League Website](#).

What to do if a reporter calls:

- First ask yourself if this interview is a good idea. Is this the right time? Are you the right spokesperson? Will this reporter give you a fair shake?
- If you decide yes, get back to the reporter as soon as possible.
- Be polite and respectful, setting the stage for a positive interaction.
- Ask what their deadline is and schedule the interview. Don't speak on the fly. If they contact you via text, don't reply with an answer they can quote. Schedule a time to talk or follow up with an email.
- Ask if they want to do a live interview or if you can communicate via email. Email allows more control over your answers, but some reporters prefer a live interview.
- Ask what topics the reporter wants to cover. You may think that one issue is the most important, but they may have other ideas.
- Find out if the reporter will share their questions with you. They may not tell you, but if they do, it helps you prepare.
- Ask who else the reporter is interviewing. This will help you understand whether the interview may be challenging or an easier piece.
- When scheduling the interview, select a quiet location and, for TV, think about what is behind you. This can help add to your message.

Prepping for the Interview:

Develop your message:

- Determine your primary talking point—the thing you want to convey the most and have others remember. It helps to write it down.
- Think about and/or write out potential questions you may get asked - including the tough ones - and your answers. Keep your responses short and quotable. Even if you are short on time, sketch some out. Take out all jargon, acronyms, and other language that makes you - and, therefore, your message, seem inaccessible or complicated.
- Practice your answers out loud if you can and revise if necessary. Sometimes how we write or practice in our head is not how we talk.

- Practice bridge answers - a statement that allows you to acknowledge the reporter's question and then transition (or bridge) back to your key message:
 - "What's important to remember..."
 - "What we're focused on..."
 - "And as a matter of fact ..."
 - "What we want people to know is..."

Research your reporter or outlet:

- Is the reporter hostile, sympathetic, or neither? Is this TV, radio, print, or podcast? How much do they know about the policy area? Is this reporter local or statewide?
- Read past stories the reporter produced.

Remember the rules:

- Assume all interviews are on the record. This means they will use your name, organization, quote, and anything else you say.
- You can go off the record, only with reporters you know and trust. You must say "this is off the record," before you start talking.
- Going off the record or "on background" is a great way to start an interview. You must ask to go on background before you start talking. On background is a way to provide background information, shape a story, and save your "quote" for something on message. This is also a time to gauge what questions they will ask and to clarify any nuances of the issue area to be discussed.

Interview tips:

- Arrive on time and dress appropriately.
- Start on background to get comfortable. Do not go on background if you have a mic on or are in front of a camera.
- Be respectful and friendly, both on the air and off, even if it's clear the reporter does not fully understand the issue they are reporting on.
- Think about where to pin the mic. It's helpful to have a jacket.
- Don't look directly into the camera.
- Stick to your script.
- Be honest.
- Don't answer questions you do not know the answer to.
 - It's ok to say I don't have that information right now-- let me look into it, and I'll get back to you ASAP.
- Don't fill the silence with words. Remember the old saying, "They can't print what you don't say." When in doubt, exercise caution and say you don't know. Reporters typically won't print this response if it's a small part of a larger interview. And if an interview is being taped or filmed, the sound bite or clip is unlikely to be used during the segment.

Stay on message:

- Don't take the bait – "I'm not prepared to talk about that" or "that's not an area in which I have expertise" are acceptable things to say.
- Don't dive into the details during your interview. This is best done before when on background.
- Avoid hypotheticals, predictions, and speaking to the motivation of others.
- For tough questions, answer, and bridge back to your main points. "I can't answer that, but what I do know is..." or "that's incorrect. Let me explain further," or "Yes, but more importantly ..."

- Remember that repetition is the key to reinforcing your point and getting the quote you want.
- When they ask you if you have anything else to add, repeat your key message.
- When questions are repeated, don't change answers.

Evaluate:

Even though it may be awkward, read or watch the story. It will help you learn how to improve and double-check the story's accuracy:

- If there are errors, email the reporter to clarify or correct them.
- If the story was good, email and tell the reporter thanks and that they did a good job.
- Make note if there are things you would have done differently. Were you speaking too fast/too slow? How was your body language, eye contact, or facial expressions?
- Examine your quote(s). Was it what I wanted? Was it clear? Was it on message?
- Examine the overall story. Was it a positive story for us? Did our message get across? Would we work with the reporter again?

If the story was a positive one:

- Share on social media and in newsletters.
- Flag the story for the League to share on their social media channels.
- Email your legislator in case they missed it.