

Unit Introduction

As public affairs practitioners you will be the first person, in most cases, to handle queries from varying publics. Your role in the organization is to be knowledgeable on almost everything within command. Practitioners are "the jack-of-all-trades but the master of none." There will be times, however, when our initial response to a query won't satisfy the public's need or right to know something. You will lack the expertise, technical or otherwise, to fulfill queries. This is when you must seek out a subject matter expert to respond to the public's request.

You must be able to identify a spokesperson who can speak with authority, credibility and conviction with the public. Most of this unit will talk specifically to coordinating interviews with the media, but these steps also apply when preparing a spokesperson to speak before varying publics.



Unit Introduction

In 1998, The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) released findings from a study conducted to gauge the public's response to individuals and communication methods they deem credible. *The National Credibility Index: Making Personal Investment Decisions* is provided by PRSA as a tool for practitioners' use to aide in selecting credible spokespersons and dissemination tools in communication efforts.

Click below to review PRSA findings.

[National Credibility Index.pdf](#)

The study found that of 44 professions surveyed from their population sample, members of the armed services ranked 4th overall behind Supreme Court Justices, Teachers and National Experts as being the most credible. Eighth on this list were local ranking military officers and ranked 42nd were public relations specialists.

This list demonstrates the importance of credibility when selecting a spokesperson from your service, who the public deems believable. Public affairs practitioners should strongly consider using the men and women who stand on the front lines, heave the lines over the side of the ship, repair the aircraft or fly the fighters, etc. They hold the most public credibility.

Practitioners rank low on the list because we are not the men and women who are on the front lines. It is important to note that this is more often the case when establishing service/organization/agency credibility and messages dissemination.

Objectives

Given a military-related scenario, facilitate the media interview of a military spokesperson in accordance with Department of Defense and service policies and regulations. Upon completion of this unit of instruction, the student will be able to:

- Select an appropriate spokesperson to discuss a given military-related scenario
- Identify six (6) preferred characteristics of a selected spokesperson
- Apply the nine (9) initial steps for preparing a selected spokesperson for an interview
- Write relevant Public Affairs Guidance to prepare a military spokesperson for an on-camera, stand-up interview
- Prepare a military spokesman for an on-camera, stand-up interview
- Facilitate a media interview of a military spokesperson
- Debrief a media reporter following an interview with a military spokesperson
- Debrief a military spokesperson following a media interview

Unit Overview

In this next unit of instruction, we are going to discuss what public affairs practitioners need to look for when selecting and facilitating interviews between a subject matter expert and varying publics.

1. Selecting the Spokesperson
2. Preparing the Spokesperson
3. Pre-Interview
4. Monitoring
5. Interview Follow-Up

Selecting the Spokesperson

Selecting the right person for the job can be challenging. However, the right person for the job depends on the interview request. Here is a quick "rule" to consider when identifying who is best to speak.

1. Strategic focus (the boss)
3. Technical focus (SME)
5. Human interest (the troop)

If the request is strategic in focus - such as mission, command priorities, outlook, etc. - then you want to select someone in command.

If the request is technical in focus - such as unclassified equipment, systems and weapons capabilities, and operational procedures – then you want to select a subject matter expert.

If the request is human interest in focus – such as troop and family stories – then you want to select troops and/or their families.



Now, this may seem simple enough, but it can be a challenge. You might identify someone who knows the subject well but may not be the best person to speak to the public. There are six preferred characteristics that you should look for when attempting to identify a spokesperson.

Six Preferred Characteristics of a spokesperson

According to *On Deadline, Managing Media Relations*, there are six preferred characteristics that you should look for when identifying a spokesperson. They are:

2. Knowledge of the topic. They must have a firm grounding in the facts to speak confidently and positively.
4. Understanding of overall objectives/strategies. They must be able to think quickly and walk gracefully between being responsive and giving away too much information.
6. Ability to tell and sell. They must be able to speak in plain everyday language and from the point of view of your publics.
8. Confidence of top management. They will be representing your service/organization/agency; therefore, they must be well respected within the organization.
10. Desire to do the interview. They must be willing and confident that they can meet the request. If they are not confident they can pull it off, find someone else.
12. Overall presentation style. They have presence and personality. They should also project the service/organization/agency personality.



Knowing these six preferred characteristics will enable you to make the right choice in selecting a well-prepared spokesperson.

Now that you've gone through the process of getting a spokesperson, the next step is getting him/her ready to do the interview. This is the beginning of you acting in the capacity of facilitating and monitoring the pre interview, interview, and post interview activities. First, let's take a few moments to discuss the steps necessary to prepare your spokesperson.

Preparing the Spokesperson

We've already discussed what qualities you want to look for when selecting a spokesperson. Once the decision is made, you need to get them prepared to speak. Even the most well prepared spokesperson needs and deserves to be prepped.

In doing so, there are nine points to keep in mind when preparing your spokesperson to meet the request. What the spokesperson needs to know is:



1. Date, time, location and scheduled length of the interview
2. What type of story the reporter is working on
3. What the reporter told you he or she wants from the interview
4. What you have already provided the reporter
5. Background on the reporter
6. Whether photography is involved
7. Suggested main messages, key points to stress
8. Interview techniques
9. Murder board (practice responding to anticipated questions)

*The same nine point preparation techniques can be used for requests to speak at press briefings or news conferences.

In addition, there are several other things to consider when preparing your spokesperson to speak with the media.

Preparing the Spokesperson

After you provide your spokesperson with the information they need to know to be successful during the interview, you also want to:

1. Explain your role as facilitator. Your job during the interview is to make sure everyone stays focused on the subject.
3. Provide supporting material so the spokesperson has all main messages and key points to stress. Make sure you explain it to your spokesperson.
5. Explain ground rules:
 - Topic of interview clarified. What the interview is about.
 - Attribution/on the record. EVERYTHING will be attributed to the spokesperson and is on the record. (DoD policy)
 - Time limit clarified. How much time the spokesperson can give for the interview.
 - Stay in lane. Talk about what they know. Your spokesperson is an expert in a certain area and should only talk about what they know.
7. Pay attention to the interview setting and the SME's appearance. Make sure the area is free of things that reporters should not see, such as classified and sensitive security information.
9. Address any concerns the SME might have about doing an interview.
11. Address SAPP restraints. Review security, accuracy, propriety, and policy issues related to the interview topic about which your spokesperson needs know.



You've prepared your spokesperson in advance to talk with the media/public about an issue, now you have to get yourself and everyone else ready for the interview.

Pre-Interview Facilitation

The interview facilitation process requires the same preparation you would do if you were the interview subject. We've discussed these in another unit of instruction, but let's review them again.

You want to prepare the reporter for the interview.



1. Meet and greet. Meet the reporter at a pre-determined location on your installation.
3. Determine reporter's knowledge level. Find out what they already know and what new information they may have obtained.
5. Correct/clarify information the reporter might have wrong based on the most recent and known facts.
7. Provide background on the spokesperson to the reporter. This will establish their credibility as a spokesperson.
9. Ground rules brief. Establish the rules and terms for the reporter, such as:
 - Clarifying the topic/subject the reporter is to talk about with your spokesperson.
 - Establishing attribution. EVERYTHING will be attributed to the spokesperson and is on the record. (DoD policy)
 - Identifying restrictions (S.A.P.P.)
 - Establishing the time limit. How much time the spokesperson can give for the interview.
10. Provide a press kit.
12. "Hook" the reporter. Tie the current story the reporter is working on to another related "good news" story the reporter can come back to cover. Editors and reporters are always interested in how much life they can get out of one story. Find a way to get the most out of telling your story.

The reporter is interested in covering the follow-up story, is planning to take notes and is ready to do the interview. You've escorted him/her to a pre-determined location to meet your spokesperson. The next step for you is...

Monitoring the Interview

You should continue your role as facilitator to assist with a smooth transition to start the interview. You want to make sure you establish a relaxed and comfortable environment to conduct the interview.

1. Make the introduction between your spokesperson and the report
- 2.
3. Establish a comfortable, professional climate. Set the stage for a relaxed and comfortable interview.
5. Restate and maintain the ground rules. Re-emphasize the ground rules with both the spokesperson and the reporter present so they both hear what they are together.
7. Facilitate the interview (keep on topic). Ensure spokesperson and reporter stay focused on the interview.
9. Keep time. Monitor the time so you stay within the limit set prior to the interview.
11. Record interview/take notes. Document the interview for your own records and so you can provide follow-up with the reporter.
13. Clear up any misunderstandings if any exist. However, only interrupt the interview if things get out of control.
15. Note any follow-up commitments. See number 6. If you take notes, you can follow-up on things the reporter doesn't get answered during the interview.



So the interview is completed. Now, you want to do a follow-up for you, your spokesperson and the reporter.

Interview Follow-up

Immediately following the interview, you want to escort the reporter away from the spokesperson. The reasons are: one, you want the spokesperson to get back to his or her job; two, you want to follow-up with the reporter.

2. Address error(s) in fact. Talk with the reporter to clarify any factual errors that may have occurred during the interview.
4. Ensure reporter's needs are met. They may have realized during the interview that they want to do an interview with someone else or get more information to enhance the story.
6. Confirm broadcast and/or publishing date and time – so you can track a story to see how it turns out.
8. Provide reporter with contact information. The reporter may need to get back in touch with you again. Provide him/her with your contact information.
10. Out-brief your interviewee/SME. Go back to your spokesperson and debrief him/her. Provide feedback on how they did, if things went good or bad, on what you predict the focus of the story is going to be about, on what corrections to any errors you made, etc.
12. Brief commander and higher headquarters on what happened. Provide him or her with the same information you debriefed your spokesperson with.
14. Track story. Monitor the news so you can follow the story. You have successfully completed the facilitation process between your spokesperson and a reporter/public. Following these steps will enable you to be successful in evaluating results.



Unit Summary



In this unit of instruction, we've discussed the three types of interviews and the types of spokespersons you want to select for each one.

We've discussed the six preferred characteristics for selecting a spokesperson.

We've discussed the nine points to remember when preparing a spokesperson for an interview, as well as the six conditions and ground rules your spokesperson should know.

And finally, we've discussed the three areas of concern PAOs need to consider during the pre-interview phase, when monitoring the interview and during the post-interview phase.

Knowing what to do when a request comes in will help you select the right person for the job and facilitate the interview with your spokesperson. It will take you several tries in the field before you become proficient at successfully executing this process. Don't be afraid to make a checklist with this information and use it so you can be successful whenever you have to facilitate an interview.

Unit Summary

Selecting and preparing military spokespersons is a vital part of a successful media relations program. A subject matter expert is an important resource to your service/organization/agency in establishing credibility with your varying publics.

