



Communicating with the Media

A guide for PBA Executives



PBA's Media Policy

PBA is an established statewide association. Through the years we have developed an excellent working relationship with the media and have become a respected resource. To maintain our excellent relations, we have a responsibility to be open and responsive to their requests. The media helps build perceptions about PBA, our members, and the locals we serve, and it is to our benefit to maintain this relationship.

[Read the entire PBA Media Policy here.](#)

Communicating with the Media

Supplying reliable information, up-to-date data, good reports and news will help build a long-lasting professional relationship with the media. This increases the chances of getting key organizational messages across as well. These relationships are mutually beneficial.

Whether you have been selected as a PBA spokesperson on a specific issue, or you are speaking on behalf of your own organization, this presentation provides practical suggestions to help you communicate with the media, and ultimately give a stronger interview.

What to Do When a Reporter Calls

- Make sure your office staff understand that nobody, except designated spokespersons may give info to the media.
- Make sure the person answering your phones takes down the necessary info: name of the journalist, name of the media outlet, a number or email, and deadline for reply.
- Never respond without assessing the situation. If a reporter calls asking for a “quick comment,” don’t accept the call immediately.
- Always ask what it is about. Don’t allow yourself to be rushed into an on-the-spot interview. You can always say that you are in a meeting or finishing up a meeting, and you’ll call back when you can take a few moments.
- Ask what their deadline is.

Preparing for the Interview

Know Your Material.

- Before the interview is scheduled, you should have an opportunity to identify in advance what it is the reporter wants to address. Understand the question or issue.
- Gather any support materials or talking points from PBA (contact PBA staff) and NAHB.

Develop Your Message.

- If you have been designated as a PBA spokesperson on the issue: Understand PBA's position on the issue and think about how to reinforce it in the interview. (PBA will provide talking points.)
- Identify one, two or (at the most), three key points you wish to emphasize during the interview.
- Your key points should be simple and easy to communicate. If they require more than a sentence or two to explain, keep working at them.

Your Message.

- Throughout the interview you should continue to direct the conversation back to those key points.
- The more you drive home your key points, the more likely it is that one of those key points will end up in a sound byte or quote.

The Interview

Do's for the ACTUAL Interview

- Keep it simple.
- Focus on your main points. REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT.
- Avoid jargon or “industry-speak”.
- Avoid too many facts & figures.
- Don't ramble. Stop talking when the question is answered. Some of the worst quotes happen when you keep talking to fill the silence.
- Avoid tangents.
- Prepare – even practice.
- Relax and be your authentic self.
- Be polite.
- Control your emotions. If you get frustrated or angry, you lose credibility. Stay relaxed, diplomatic and respectful.

DON'Ts for the ACTUAL Interview

- Don't be too salesy. Just present facts.
- Don't go "off the record." Assume everything is on the record.
- Don't get baited or take questions/comments personally.
- Never hang up or walk out.
- Don't rely on your memory. It is completely acceptable to have talking points/facts & figures handy.
- Don't be evasive. Honesty is important.
- Don't make guesses. It's ok to say you don't know the answer and offer to get back to them. Make sure you DO follow up if you say you will.
- Don't speculate or disparage.
- Don't give one-word answers – rely on your key points to add content.
- Never say "no comment." If you can't answer a question, explain why.

- Questions you shouldn't answer:
 - Questions of a confidential/proprietary nature – “That information is confidential and I'm not at liberty to discuss it.”
 - Litigation/negotiations – “I can't comment on questions involving pending litigation or ongoing negotiations.”
 - If you don't know the answers – “I don't have all of the facts right now and would like to get back to you on that.”
 - Speaking for someone else – “I can't speak on their behalf, but here is what I do know.”

The Interview

Specific Interview Techniques

- Be aware of the following:
 - Leading questions “isn’t it true that.... Or would you say..”
 - Negatively stated questions
 - Statements made by the interviewer that you disagree with
 - Questions you don’t understand, or
 - Questions or statements with statistics
- Don’t assume an interviewer is using correct statistics. If you are not familiar with statistics they are using, say so.
- If a question is unclear or complicated, ask for clarification.

- If you disagree with something the interviewer says, let him or her know immediately. Otherwise it could be assumed that you agree.
- When faced with negative questions or leading questions, it's important to stay positive and redirect the focus back onto your key messages.
- When replying to a question, **DO ANSWER THE QUESTION**. Don't avoid questions by changing the subject. This makes you appear evasive and unreliable. Provide the answer and then shift the focus back to your key messages.

Phrases to help shift the focus back to your key messages

- “What we really need to address...”
- “The important thing to remember...”
- “The real issue here is...”
- “Let me clarify...”
- “What we would like more people to know...”

These phrases not only get attention, but then allow you to redirect the interview back to your key messages and keep the tone positive.

Print Interviews

- If you're asked to do the interview over the phone, that is probably to your advantage. You may relax and perform better if you're not face-to-face. (See notes on radio interviews).
- If the reporter comes to your location for an interview, treat it as any other professional visit. Offer them a beverage, make sure your meeting is uninterrupted, etc.
- Watch your speed in answering questions. Reporters are usually pretty good note-takers, but allow them to keep up with you. This will also ensure the accuracy of their notes.
- Have any printed fact sheets, diagrams, etc., available and make sure they don't contain sensitive info in the event the reporter asks for a copy.

Radio Interviews

- Smile! It will come across in your voice.
- Try to keep your statements under 20-30 seconds.
- Speak clearly in a normal tone.
- Have your notes on a table in front of you, but try to keep them concise. If you have to be shuffling papers throughout the interview, it will become a distraction.
- Keep a beverage nearby in case your throat gets dry.
- Don't chew gum.
- Unless you're on a live program, remember that radio interviews can be edited.

– It is ok if you're stumbling to ask if you can repeat a comment or an answer.

Television Interviews

- Focus on the reporter, not the camera.
- Try to keep your statements under 20-30 seconds.
- Be authentic. If it is typical for you to work on the jobsite, don't wear a suit for the interview.
- Remove jewelry, sunglasses or accessories that have a shiny or reflective surface.
- Wear neutral colors. Loud or overly patterned clothing can create an unfavorable effect on the screen.
- Do your best not to fidget and be aware of your posture.

After the Interview

- Evaluate yourself: Did you...
 - Get your key messages across?
 - Stay in control of the interview and your emotions?
 - Speak clearly and audibly?
 - Refrain from negativity, personal opinions, or speculation?
 - Use effective body language, maintain eye contact, etc.?

Take note of your strengths & weaknesses so you can continue to improve.

- Always follow up with the reporter, thank them for the opportunity and offer additional info, if needed.
- Make yourself available for future interviews.
- If you like the finished article or interview, be sure to follow up (phone, email or written note), and compliment the journalist. (They receive a lot of criticism, so a little kindness goes a long way.)

If you are unhappy with the results of the interview or you've been misquoted:

Mistakes happen. Look at the big picture objectively and determine the impact of the damage. Your options:

- **Do nothing.** If you complain about something that is trivial or something that is a matter of opinion, you risk doing more harm than good.
- **Bring it to the reporter's attention.** Tactfully explain that you want the reporter to have the correct facts for future coverage. If you don't hear back from the reporter, you can bring it to the editor's attention.
- **Ask for clarification or correction.** This should only be done if there are serious factual errors involved. Always maintain a positive and professional attitude.
- **Write a letter to the editor (if a newspaper).** Don't repeat any misstatements. Chances are high that readers may not have even seen the original piece. Keep it brief and positive. Make sure you set the record straight but do not focus on the negativity. Check the paper's guidelines on letters to the editor – they usually have a word limit.
- **Issue a press release.** If seriously incorrect information has been disseminated as a result of a story, you may distribute a release with a positive angle to the other media in your area. It is better that someone publish the story correctly, even if it isn't the source that made the error. Do not reference the original error in the release.

