

# Working With the Media

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As a Meals on Wheels leader, your opinions and thoughts will often be sought by the media, colleagues, elected officials, and community members.

How do you learn to be a spokesperson for Meals on Wheels and work with the media to effectively promote your message and the image of your organization? This guide offers tips and examples to guide you.



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# Introduction

You need not be a superstar to appear on the evening news or the front page of your local paper. Many of the folks you see there are just like you: involved in their community, making notable achievements, and promoting new and cutting-edge projects.

As a leader for Meals on Wheels, you are passionate about your cause. You are also likely someone whose opinion the media will seek when it comes to the issues regarding hunger, the elderly, and independent living. Your status brings you authority, and the right and ability to speak with added weight to these issues impacting our communities and future generations.

It is important that you are prepared as a spokesperson for Meals on Wheels, both for the issues for which you are passionate, but also for your organization, the clients your organization represents, and your donors.

This guide offers you tips to help you cultivate strong relationships with the media in your region to generate hard-hitting stories and top coverage to get your community and state talking – and doing something – about the issues on which Meals on Wheels is working.

# Before the Interviews Start

Whether it's a reporter from your hometown paper or a well-known media celebrity, your status as a key player at your Meals on Wheels affiliate is likely to net you more than one media interview. If you have never been on camera before, had a microphone shoved at you, or sat down with a reporter, preparing for this experience is your first step.

It need not be daunting. Media personnel are people with jobs just like us. Knowing that our words and image might make the 10 o'clock news, though, can make just about anyone nervous.

Here are tips to help you establish strong relationships with your local media representatives and to help prepare you for print, radio, and TV interviews:

1. **Get to know the media and reporters most likely to cover your program.** Begin by really getting to know the local media. Tune in and open the papers: whose "beat" covers your issue area? What are their typical angles and storylines? Can you tell if they have a particular interest area that could tie into your work and focus at Meals on Wheels? In addition to making sure you have a subscription to the local paper(s), be sure to watch the local news, bookmark media websites, and get active in organizations where you are likely to meet reporters and editors, such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary.
2. **Get to know reporters personally.** Media personalities are people just like you and me. Like us, they appreciate getting to know others, and being networked helps them do well at their job. To help cultivate a strong relationship, contact local reporters to arrange short meetings to introduce yourself. Be considerate of their busy schedules and make it brief. Drop off printed materials (business cards, brief research pertinent to the Meals on Wheels cause, etc.). Over time, you will have other opportunities to develop these contacts into more familiar relationships. Develop a media list (phone, email database, Facebook listings) of these contacts for easy reference. Keep it updated, as turnover in the media is just as common as with other jobs.
3. **Develop two to three key points to make (your message) and stick to them.** Keep your key points brief, focused, and simple: we live in an era of sound bites and short attention spans. Don't let reporters get you off subject: always come back to the point(s) you want to make. Otherwise, you risk a weak story, having your audience miss your point, or ending up with no story at all. Get comfortable with the facts, figures, and anecdotes that support your points and have them ready to provide to reporters if necessary. Anticipate questions reporters might ask and have responses ready. Practice ahead of time, but be sure not to sound "canned".  
*EXAMPLE:*  
Key Point #1: Habitat for Humanity is a volunteer-driven organization.  
Key Point #2: Habitat for Humanity builds homes in partnership with families in need. We offer a hand up, not a hand out.  
Key Point #3: Habitat homes are sold to Habitat homeowners, not given away. Habitat does not charge interest, making mortgage payments affordable for Habitat families.
4. **Be prompt.** Reporters are usually on deadline, so if they contact you, either try to take their call or respond to their email right away. When you do speak with a reporter, always find out to whom you are speaking, which media organization s/he works for, and what the deadline is.
5. **Don't feel pressured.** If a reporter shows up or calls unannounced and you are unprepared, reschedule for a time when you will feel comfortable and at ease.

6. **Be prepared.** When a reporter calls requesting an interview, be clear on the subject of the interview and get some sample questions if possible. If you need time to collect your thoughts (and the reporter's deadline allows), offer to call back later at a specific time. *Follow through in a timely fashion or your credibility erodes.*
7. **Be calm.** Reporters' schedules are often determined by "breaking news". Don't be offended if an interview gets canceled or rescheduled for a more urgent story.
8. **Help them be prepared.** Have printed materials (reports, photos, etc.) to support your information whenever possible to help reporters minimize errors. Offer to email the reporter printed information in advance of or right after the interview. Have a bank of clients that are willing to be on camera and/or be interviewed.
9. **Make yourself easily available to the media.** The more available you are, the more likely media representatives are to contact you, and the more likely your issues and angles will be covered. In establishing relationships with media representatives, be sure to provide them with work, home, and cell numbers and email addresses so they can reach you day or night. Be sure to get their numbers, too, and enter them into your media list and phone.
10. **Always give the media newsworthy information.** You need not always wait for the media to contact you: if you have something new, noteworthy, and relevant to a large share with the public, drop reporter contacts a line asking them about their interest in coverage. Your chances increase if you also provide a good human interest angle to your lead or story.

# The Interview

Now that you have interviews set, knowing what to expect – and how to handle yourself – during the interview will help you stay focused, create a great story, and project a positive, dynamic image for your Meals on Wheels affiliate.

Whether it's a beat reporter from the local paper, a stringer from the local NPR affiliate, or a regional TV reporter, here's what you need to know about being in a media interview:

1. **Focus.** Before the interview begins, remind yourself of your message (your 2-3 main points). **Stick to your message throughout the interview and don't get distracted by or lured by tangents. Practice key phrases in advance.**

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "Free homes to people must be really popular right now given the recession. Do you have people lined up at your doorstep for free homes?"*

*You DO: "Actually, Habitat for Humanity builds homes in partnership with families in need. In doing so, Habitat provides a hand up, not a hand out. Our volunteer-built homes are sold to homeowners without interest, making mortgage payments affordable for Habitat families. And families must put in 'sweat equity' – volunteering for the project alongside volunteers."*

*You DON'T: "It would be pretty nice right now with the economy where it's at to be able to give our homes away to everyone who needed them. If only we had a huge donation..."*

2. **Keep it brief!** TV and radio stories generally use a 10-20 second cut – a couple if you're lucky. Even print reporters look for short, snappy quotes. **The shorter and more concise your comments, the better.**

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "What are some of the basic findings of your recent study?"*

*You DO: "We found two key findings. First, a vast majority of those over 55 aren't eating proper meals. Second, there are huge untapped resources volunteer-wise in our community. We intend to tap those resources to deliver more meals to more seniors, while also keeping the rising costs of food down at Meals on Wheels."*

*You DON'T: "We found that 84% of senior citizens over 55 do not get three balanced meals a day, that 69% of people aged 24-45 in our region don't volunteer, and that costs for providing meals to our service sector have risen by 24% in the last year alone. "*

3. **Avoid academic or technical jargon.** Your audience is the general public, so stay at a basic level and explain special terms if you must use them.

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "How are you able to achieve such high senior participation rates?"*

*You DO: "Reaching seniors where they are at has been key for Meals on Wheels. We have visited churches, asked for referrals from nursing home colleagues, and gotten in touch with area social service agencies directly."*

*You DON'T: "I use an outreach program called MLST. It was developed two years ago by Dr. Smartypants at Hoitytoity University and is proven to increase participation rates by seniors aged 55 and older. It's a program supported by the NPTA."*

4. It's tempting to talk a lot to get your full point across, but in doing so you jeopardize the clarity of your message. Instead, return to your key points to get back (or stay) on track. If you just

presented a key point in an unclear or rambling way, stop for a second and make your point again. The reporter needs the quote to make sense.

5. Remember these SIX C's to ensure success in working with the media:

- ↖ Speak with conviction in a conversational manner.
- ↖ Use catchy phrases (sound bytes) that include your main points.
- ↖ Always maintain your composure.
- ↖ Project confidence! You are the expert!
- ↖ Use color: Use stories, examples, and anecdotes to illustrate your point.

6. In speaking with reporters, remember that their questions will be edited out: your responses must stand on their own. **Speak in complete thoughts and get to your point quickly.**

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "What's the average cost of a Meals on Wheels meal?"*

*You **DO**: "All seniors in our program are served healthy, balanced meals by volunteers as many times a day as they want delivery. Meal costs average out to \$3.22. This is kept so low mainly because of donations from generous area businesses."*

*You **DON'T**: "\$3.22."*

7. Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, set the record straight in a polite, non-confrontational manner. Offer background information where necessary.

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "Isn't there more that Meals on Wheels could be doing than just delivering meals? Why is that the only program you have?"*

*You **DO**: "Actually, Don, Meals on Wheels is about much more than just delivering meals. While hot, healthy, fresh meals are delivered, we go beyond just delivery. In working with our senior participants to get their meals ready, our volunteers form important bonds with our participants, creating relationships and connections that matter. This in turn helps seniors maintain healthy, more active independent lifestyles. Meals on Wheels is about nutritious meals, relationships, and independent living."*

*You **DON'T**: "We aren't just about dump-and-run meals. Who told you that?"*

8. If you don't understand a question, seek clarification. Don't talk around it.

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "Junk food must be a big problem for you. What are you doing about it?"*

*You **DO**: "Thanks, Marcia. To clarify, are you asking about nutrition rates and needs for our seniors, or referring to donations from companies of food we're not able to use?"*

*You **DON'T**: "Tell me about it! If we get one more donation of Fritos, I'm going to scream!"*

9. If you don't have the answer to a reporter's question, always say so. Tell them where to find the information (if possible) or tell them you'll look into it and get back to them. Always get back to them with the *answer in a timely fashion*.

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "What percentage of your participants are widowed individuals?"*

*You **DO**: "That's a great question, Sandi. I don't have that number off the top of my head, though. Let me verify it with the regional director this afternoon. I'll call you with it no later than 4PM. Will that work for your deadline?"*

*You **DON'T**: "Well, I heard it's about 70%, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it's a lot."*

10. Never say, "No comment." Instead, if you can't – or choose not to – answer, explain briefly.

*EXAMPLE:*

*Reporter: "So you agree, then, with the points made in HUD's 2010 Report on Elderly Essentials?"*

*You **DO**: "Unfortunately, Ron, I can't answer that because I haven't had the chance yet to read that report."*

11. Avoid traps and difficult situations with these tactics:
  - ↳ If a reporter poses a question using negative language, avoid getting baited into a negative response.
  - ↳ Reporters sometimes play devil's advocate to get colorful responses. Never give angry, defensive responses. Instead, return to your key points and keep things positive.
  - ↳ Avoid saying things "off the record." Reporters may or may not honor this. If you don't want to hear it on the evening news, don't say it.
  - ↳ If a reporter asks you to speculate or answer a hypothetical question (i.e., "Assume that..." or "What if...") and the direction seems sketchy, respond with something like: "I can't speculate on the unknown, however..." and restate one of your main points.
  - ↳ If a reporter pauses after you've answered a question, avoid feeling tempted to add more. Sometimes they use this pause to get you to say something you otherwise wouldn't. Smile and wait for the next question.
12. If interviewed by phone, a reporter must by law tell you when you are being recorded. If you're not certain, ask.
13. Always be honest.

# Tips For TV & Radio Interviews

We've all seen them before: the interviewee who chewed gum on camera, the executive who forgot it was a live interview, and that poor fellow whose toupee or tie wasn't right. Don't let this be you!

Here are a few tips to keep the interview process going smoothly and ensure a top-shelf job on your part:

1. For television interviews, wear solid-color clothing. Stripes, plaids, and other designs are distracting to viewers, as are large, jangling, or reflective jewelry. Make the audience focus on your message and words, not your outfit or accessories. Also, if you do not need to have your glasses on, remove them for camera interviews: they can glare into the lens and reduce the audience's ability to connect with you visually.
2. Look in a mirror just before going on camera. The reporter may not tell you your lipstick is smudged over or your tie is off-center.
3. Choose a location with limited noise. Silence your phone and computer/email alert. Avoid rooms with loud noises (i.e., kids, dogs, HVAC units). Never chew gum while being interviewed!
4. Find out in advance if the interview is edited or "live". If you agree to a live interview, be sure you're comfortable thinking on your feet and responding off the cuff. Sometimes you do not have a choice, but if you do, and you prefer a non-live interview, ask for one.
5. While it is normal these days to insert "um", "like", and "you know" into casual conversation, these unconscious fillers do not play out well on the radio, television, or in print. Often, reporters will print verbatim what you say, including such stammers, and TV and radio reporters are unlikely to edit them out. To avoid this, get comfortable with your message, key points, and general topic areas. It also helps if you can approach the interview stress-free: avoid high-intensity meetings, hectic errand-running, and difficult conversations just before your interview to keep distractions to a minimum.
6. In edited (non-live) interviews, pause briefly before answering questions. This helps reporters get "clean" taped sound bites and allows you to think out your answer. It's also okay to stop and start over again if you don't like the way you worded your answer.
7. In TV interviews, look at the reporter, not the camera. If your topic is an upbeat and positive one, be sure to wear a genuine smile. This comes across in the tone of your voice and engages listeners. If the topic is not upbeat (and not a tragedy), avoid coming across as angry or upset: it can turn listeners off.
8. Sit (or stand) still in front of microphones. Avoid chairs that rock or spin. Also, avoid nervous habits like pen tapping and coin jangling.



# After the Interview

Now that it's over, take a deep breath and loosen the tie. Reflect on your experience, noting your strong and not so strong points. Before you run to program the TIVO, take time to do an 'outcome evaluation' – a personal reflection of how you did. How do you feel? Did you get your main points across? Was the reporter engaged? Do you feel that you connected with him/her? Did you exchange contact information to keep the relationship moving forward? Reflect and jot notes in a journal if you wish. Here are some tips for after the microphones and cameras are turned off:

1. It's unlikely you'll have a chance to review a reporter's story before it appears. However, you can ask questions after the interview to test for comprehension.  
*Example: "What do you think the main story angle is here?"*
2. You are free to ask when a story will appear. The reporter may not know, but if she does she will usually be happy to tell you.
3. If you feel after reflecting on an interview that you misspoke, gave incorrect information, or missed something major, call the reporter as soon as possible.  
*EXAMPLE:*  
*You DO: "Hi Brenda. Thanks for the interview today. I was thinking about what I said about nutrition rates and wanted to clarify one point I made. What I meant to say was..."*
4. If a *major* error appears (the wrong date for an upcoming event), let the reporter know right away. Sometimes a correction can be printed or aired. If an issue is minor and insignificant, resist the urge to correct the reporter – you risk jeopardizing your relationship with them.  
*EXAMPLE:*  
*You DO: "Hi Sam. Thanks for a great article in yesterday's paper. I wanted to clarify one important issue, though. The date for the march on the capitol is Saturday, May 7, not Friday, May 6. I am terribly sorry if I misspoke. Could you could run a correction?"*
5. Give positive feedback to reporters (if merited) after a story appears. Written notes, email, phone calls, Facebook messages, or voice mails all work fine. Like us, they usually hear only complaints and rarely get a call or note to say they've done a good job. If you're unhappy with a story, share your concerns tactfully with the reporter first. Contact the editor as a last resort.  
*EXAMPLE:*  
*You DO (positive feedback): "Hi Sue. Just a quick message to let you know I enjoyed the story on the news last night. It was concise and delivered a big punch. I've already heard from colleagues about it and they, too, thought it was a great piece. Thanks again.*  
*You DO (critical feedback): "Hi Sue. Thanks for the interview yesterday. I heard the piece on AM600 this morning. I had a couple of things I wanted to discuss with you. Can you please give me a call back when you have a chance? Thanks."*
6. Record the broadcast and use this guide to critique your performance, looking for ways to improve in the future.

# In Closing

As you get more and more comfortable in your role as a spokesperson for Meals on Wheels, you will find yourself building stronger and lasting relationships with your media partners. They are your key to reaching thousands of community members, elected officials, caregivers, and potential volunteers.

Partner with the media wisely and to your advantage, and you can create a great deal of change for people of all ages throughout your community!