

Tips in Dealing with the Media:

A Mandatory Skill for Muslims Today!

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Based on how much the media loves us Muslims, there is no telling when you might get the next call to answer “a few questions”. Many times, media professionals rely on people whose message they want to sell. So, if the media wants to sell the progressive message or the radical message (for some reason, they do seem to forget the 99% in the middle, don’t they??), they will have particular people in mind. And then quite often, they will look for a corroborating or contradicting opinion from the local Imam or President of the local Islamic mosque or society. Here is where the problem ensues!

Unfortunately, many of our Muslim leaders are not trained in interacting or dealing with the media. So, sometimes, quite inadvertently, these leaders will say things that come off as either completely ignorant or completely negative. Obviously the leaders didn’t mean to look like fools, but once the sound-byte is out, it is usually too late to control the damage. So, I hope that our communities will realize the need for media training for all our leaders (Imams, Presidents, etc.) and even consider the urgent need for professional PR persons (especially for the larger organizations). It is definitely worth a few bucks, especially because good sound-bytes can also be a form of good dawah!

Until that happens, and I am not holding my breath, I thought it would be good to share few media tips with our readers. I have always hoped that my dive back into school (business school in my case) didn’t emanate from a symptom of mid-life crises, but rather would be of benefit to both my career and to my brothers and sisters in Islam. So, I bring these tips to you straight from the experts (based on videos by Amy Sharp- a media professional).

Introduction

First of all, you should know that interacting with the media is an extremely useful skill, which like all other skills takes time to learn, practice and hone. There is always a good chance that one time or another, you will have the opportunity (or be forced) to speak with the media. You may be speaking on behalf of yourself, your company, or as a Muslim, your religion.

Many people feel that reporters are out to get you. And I cannot blame Muslims for feeling that, because I do believe that FOX, for example, is in fact out to get us! But other than FOX Noise, most other media outlets (although they may still not be completely fair and balanced), are really not out to get you. Rather, they are out to get a good story! Sensationalist stories make for good stories, so Muslims do need to remain alert and understand how to deal with reporters, especially the ones who can get over-zealous (and you will learn through these tips about the importance of research in order to isolate these over-zealous reporters).

What is presented here is of course the most basic of skills in interacting with media. These skills will not be good enough to be gainfully employed as a public-relations officer, but they will help you formulate a plan of action if you do get picked for the prized opportunity to deal with a reporter! These basic skills will also help you avoid misrepresenting whatever topic you are being asked about. For Muslims, it is especially

important not to misrepresent Islam, because in a way our religion is a trust from Allah, which is not something to be taken lightly.

In this series of three posts, you will learn how to control your first interactions with the reporter, how to not say something you don't mean to say, how to craft your message, how to take control of the interview, and last but certainly not the least, how to appear confident.

First Interactions



Let's start with what to do if a reporter calls you out of the blue for a story. Should you start blurting out everything that you can think of? Should you "give it to him" because he was going to write against you? The answer is an emphatic "NO" to both.

If a reporter does call you, your goal is to make a brief conversation and get off the phone as quickly as possible. You can be assured that the reporter has done his homework, and has done his research on you and the topic (always assume so, even if it turns out differently). You, on the other hand, were caught off-guard by that unanticipated phone call. The last thing you want to do is to shoot off the hip. Unfortunately, shooting off the hip is a Muslim uncle specialty, if you get my drift.

There are some questions that you need to ask in this brief first conversation. You need to ask these questions in order to level the playing field. The reporter has first-mover advantage; he knows why he is calling you and who you are. You on the other hand don't. So, commit these questions to memory or keep them handy (the way you ask the question is completely up to you; always remain polite and calm and ask the questions in a methodical, composed manner):

- Which organization are you *directly* working for (if they haven't already identified themselves clearly)?
- What is your angle?
- Who else are you speaking to?
- Who is your target audience?
- How much do you already know?
- What are your expectations about talking to me?

And the most important question: What is your deadline? You absolutely need to keep up with the reporter's deadline. If you ignore or miss the deadline, then either (a) the reporter will ignore your opinions or completely exclude you from his piece, or (b) report what he believes about you or whatever he has heard from others about you that you may agree or disagree with. Keeping deadline starts you off on a good foot and may build trust, such that the reporter may contact you again for future stories. If you are going to miss a deadline, you need to let the reporter know: ask for an extension or do whatever it takes to meet the deadline.

Other important tips:

- Fax or email the reporter whatever you can; information that depicts or strengthens the story that YOU want to give. Any written material that you provide to the reporter, to help him write the story, can only help in guiding him to the story on your terms and based on the data that you have given (if it involves data).
- Anticipate tough questions – write down 10 questions that you think are tough or those that you don't want to be asked. You can bet the questions that you don't want to be asked are exactly the ones that are going to be asked

- Validate “no comment”. “No comment” is usually the worst thing that you can say to a reporter. It comes off as if you have something to hide. Instead, you should say something like this, “I cannot comment at this time because I have not seen that report”, or “I cannot comment at this time because I am not properly aware of the issue”
- Remember you are NEVER off the record! Don’t let a few sweet words fool you into saying something “off-the-record”. Remember the reporter hasn’t come to you for friendship! He has come to you for a story, and sometimes off-the-record comments make for a great story (even if not great for you).

Crafting the Right Message



Once the interview starts, there are lots of things that you may want to say and remember.

Your key message points are what you think is important and what you want to ensure gets out.

You need to prepare for the interview by breaking your message into 3 sections that can be a combination of any of this: who, what, when, how does it affect you, what you are doing about it, etc. More than 3 message points can get confusing. More likely, you may not have time to relay and do justice to more than 3 key points.

You need to know and understand your audience. The type of language that you will use depends on audience, so you should tailor your message to reach the right people, at the right level. AVOID industry jargon. For Muslims, this means that if you are talking about Islam, AVOID using technical terms that may be common to Muslims but if your audience is non-Muslim, they have no idea what you are talking about. Don’t mention Hajj or sajdah or worse still, get into a discussion of Usool al-Fiqh, without explaining what you mean (this would then become of one you 3 key messages) in simple terms with examples. You need to keep it simple. The easiest way to lose audience is talk over their head.

Practice out loud, start forming catch phrases, also work out mentally how you will work out from A to B to C. Don’t memorize your points otherwise you will sound robotic and unreal (you don’t want to sound like John Kerry).

If you have to memorize your points, then you probably aren’t familiar enough with the topic to be talking about it. So, make sure then that you know what you are talking about. It seems obvious but people sometimes are overconfident about what they know, and reality strikes only when they are challenged on it. Memorization makes your believability even lower. Be natural. We don’t memorize our conversations.

Taking Control



Even though it's the reporter's interview, it is really YOU, the subject, who is the focus of attention. So, how do you control the interview such that you are able to talk about the messages that you want to give, and not to let the reporter veer off subject. Remember you don't want to have the playing field become unlevelled again!

Making bridges to out-of-place questions:

If the reporter does ask you about something that has absolutely nothing to do with subject (like if you are talking about the pilgrimage to Makkah, and he pops up about what you think about the Iranian involvement in Iraq!), then you cannot simply ignore the question. You have to dignify the question, and then create a bridge back to the topic you were prepared for.

So, if someone does ask you about the Iranian involvement, you can reply with, "that is an interesting question that I haven't much looked into, but it let me tell you how wonderful it was to have people from all those regions in one location at Hajj—Iraqis, Iranians, Europeans, etc." Another example, what if someone asks you if you were going to run for City Council in 2010, although the topic at hand was your administration's achievement, then you can say: "2010 is far away but lets talk about what we are doing in 2008". Here are some other bridges that you can use:

- But its important to note that
- But what you don't want to forget is
- But the question I'm most frequently asked is
- But what we are happy to report is

You don't always need script for the type of bridge to use, but instead create any bridge back to your message points. The important thing is to get control.

Planting effective verbal flags:

Another technique to drive in a message point is to plant a verbal flag: "Listen up... what I am about to say its important". These flags are very helpful, especially right before you are about to mention your most important point. Some other flags include:

- The bottomline is
- The most important thing is
- The real thing to remember is
- The one thing I always tell my client is

What if the interview is being taped?

What if reporter will edits the whole thing? Often time, they will. So, you need to learn to condense your message points into short answers, what we often hear called "sound bytes". Sound-bytes allow you to get more of your message out, and it also allows reporter to ask your more questions.

Don't repeat reporter's negative language:

If a reporter asks you what you are going to do about the massive casualties caused by a "Islamic-terrorist", don't repeat the words "massive casualties", otherwise you are repeating language that you don't necessarily

want people to connect with you or to your interview. But, you do need to correct language that is not factual right away. So, if the report about Muslims being involved in unconfirmed, then you need to check the reporter that the report is unconfirmed. Or if the reporter suggests information that is factually incorrect about your mosque, or your dawah organization, you need to correct it at the spot. You may never get that opportunity.

Appearing Confident & Final Tips



How you appear may count quite a bit into what people perceive about your believability or credibility. A controversial UCLA study found that what you actually say only counts for about 7% for overall credibility, but how you say it counts for nearly 40%! So, how you come across in the interview counts for nearly half your credibility. A good illustration is to consider the Nixon/Kennedy debate, which was aired on radio and TV. Those who heard it on the radio believed Nixon won, while those who saw it on TV believed that Kennedy won; same debate, different conclusions!

How to look confident

- Position yourself to be engaged.
- Make eye contact with proper people
 - If you are being interviewed one on one for TV, then the reporter/producer is usually off-camera. Make sure make eye contact with them. If you keep looking back at the camera, you will look shifty and unsure.
 - If you are in a remote location, like in a room giving a lecture/talk, then look at the audience by looking straight into the camera.
- There is also a good likelihood that you will not be standing. If you are sitting:
- Don't sit straight up. Lean forward slightly. This indicates that you are more actively engaged.
 - Keep your hands loosely clasped in your lap or in front of you, so you can gesture easily.
 - Keep your gestures far away from your body. Usually a microphone is hooked on your body somewhere, so you don't want to hit it
- Attitude is everything! Roll with appropriate emotions. Be flexible. You don't have to always smile or always frown. A cardinal mistake is to keep smiling when the topic is either not something to smile about or if you are being constantly attacked. Let your expressions flow with the mood and tempo of the interview.

Final Tips

Dealing with the media is a skill that you need to hone.

You have been asked to participate in interview because you have something to add. The more you do well, the more you are likely to be quoted and to be called in for future interviews

Note: This series is almost entirely based on a series of short videos (part of Wharton's Communication class) by Amy Sharp, a media professional.