



Together we hold their future

Media Training: A Guide to Training Your Spokespeople



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Benefits of media training

A key component of a successful speakers bureau is developing key messages and providing media training to members.

Media training is a professional and specialized form of communications training that helps spokespeople confidently focus and share key messages across multiple platforms. It can be highly effective in helping spokespeople develop the skills they need to successfully communicate succinctly and with an impact.

Individuals who have participated in a formal media training are an excellent resource for their state and private agencies as they support recruitment efforts by lending credibility, inspiration, and encouragement to prospective parents.

Professionals benefit from media training because it helps refine and influence their messaging and ensures confidence and control of intended messaging outcomes. This training also helps professionals avoid speaking gaffes or missteps that can derail even the most experienced speaker.

Customizing your key messages

Helping spokespeople develop key messages based on your organization's priorities before speaking in public will help ensure that key points are highlighted and will contribute to an overall successful speaking experience. Consider the following guidance when helping spokespeople develop key messages, draft their personal stories, or prepare for a speaking event.

- Ensure that spokespeople have appropriate background information on your organization.
- Review key goals and priorities for each specific speaking opportunity. Organize and align messaging around the goals for the speaking engagement.
- Consider the type of event: Is this a fundraiser? A recruitment event? A celebration?
- Consider who is in the audience (e.g., number of people, state vs. local) and length and type of speaking engagement, and tailor messaging accordingly.

Developing and sharing a compelling story

Stories engage people at every level—not just in their minds but in their emotions, values, and imaginations, which are the drivers of real change. People will often only truly connect when they can see themselves in the storyline.

When you are helping spokespeople develop their story:

- Include something personal or unknown.
- Feature emotions.
- Use everyday language.
- Prioritize key messaging.
- Use real and relatable examples—personal anecdotes are best.
- Remind them to speak with confidence and passion—they are the experts on their personal foster care and adoption stories.

As you work with spokespeople to develop their messaging and are preparing them to share their stories publicly, remind them to think carefully about what they want to share, who they will be sharing it with, and how it will be shared. We've found that using the visual reference of a stoplight can help frame what information to share.

- **Red light zone:** Private information—do not want to share.
- **Yellow light zone:** Information to share with close friends and family but may not want out in public.
- **Green light zone:** Information OK to share with the general public.

Preparing spokespeople for interviews

At some point, spokespeople may be asked to participate in an interview with the media. We've developed a few tips you can share with them in advance to help them feel prepared and confident.

- Preparation, planning, and practice are the keys to a successful interview. It's best to have two or three key messages prepared in advance of the interview and to stick to those messages throughout the interview process.
- When referencing information related to adoption and foster care, use reliable data and sources.
- Keep all comments professional before, during, and after interviews. Nothing is off the record.
- Try to answer questions in complete sentences, but keep your responses clear and concise. Here's an example:

Question: "How long have you been fostering?"

Answer: "We have been foster parents for five years and have provided care to more than 20 children during that time."

- Don't feel obligated to fill silences with idle chatter or more information than is necessary. This can be challenging for many people, as silence can sometimes feel uncomfortable.
- Avoid the phrase "no comment." It almost always looks like you're hiding something. Plan answers for difficult questions in advance, or explain why you can't answer. Here's an example response to a question you are not comfortable answering:

"That's a great question, however that is private information I'm not comfortable sharing publicly."

- It's ok to say "I don't know." If you feel a question is outside of your scope of knowledge or you need to confirm information or data at a later date, it's acceptable to offer to follow up with additional information. It's better to say "I don't know" than to improvise an answer—or provide incorrect information that will need to be corrected later.
- Avoid "ums," "uhs," and "ahs." This can be challenging for many people, because it is a nervous habit and often people don't even realize when it's happening. However, if you practice responses in advance, it will significantly reduce the use of these words because you will be confident about the information you are sharing.

As necessary, take a brief pause before you answer a question to gather your thoughts, or take a deep breath before you answer. Both of these tricks will reduce use of the "ums," "ahs," and "uhs."

- During an interview, you may be asked negative questions, or questions that are outside of your area of focus and the key messages that you want to communicate. It's best to sidestep them with a technique called "bridging." Bridging allows you to deflect a negative question or comment and creates a transition so you can easily move from the negative back to the messages you want to communicate. Here are some example bridging phrases:
 - > "What's important to remember, however, is..."
 - > "That's an interesting point, but I'd like to focus on..."
 - > "Let me put that in perspective...."
- Avoid sarcasm and facetious statements because reporters may take you seriously.
- Being honest and factual are tried and true best practices and will serve you well in any interview situation.

Another interview technique, "headlining," provides the opportunity to share key messages before the close of an interview. It's best to use this technique when a reporter asks you at the end of an interview, "Is there anything else you would like to add or say?" Always take advantage of this time and use the following examples as a guide:

- "The most important thing to remember about adoption from foster care is...."

- “What I really want you to know is...”
- “To find more information on adoption and foster care, visit <promote your website or phone number>”

Tips for TV and online interviews

When speaking publicly, people are not only listening to your words. They are also looking at your body language and facial expressions. Television and the web are visual media, and viewers form impressions quickly based solely on what they see. With this in mind, we have developed a few additional tips specifically for television interview opportunities.

Getting camera-ready!

The most common question people ask when preparing to be filmed is “What do I wear?” The simple answer is, wear something that makes you feel confident and comfortable, not necessarily sweatpants and t-shirts comfortable, but an outfit that will not cause distractions or be unnecessarily uncomfortable.

These are a few wardrobe tips we recommend:

- ✓ Wear clothes that are solid in color. Patterns, while pretty, can be distracting.
- ✗ Avoid wearing all white or solid black.
- ✗ Avoid distracting jewelry, including heavy eyeglass frames or self-adjusting lenses.
- ✓ Check your appearance before an on-camera interview. You don’t want lipstick or food on your teeth!
- ✓ Your hair should be neat and away from your face.
- ✓ Use a light layer of powder to control shine—some TV stations will have this on hand, others will not.

- ✗ Avoid bulky items in pockets such as cell phones and be sure to turn off your technology during interviews. If you forget, quickly and as discreetly as possible turn it off.
- ✗ And definitely—no gum! Use breath mints if you want to freshen up for an interview.

During the interview

Of course you will be nervous. Everyone is. But do your best to stay calm and composed. Specifically, it's important to maintain the following:

- ✓ High energy
- ✓ Confidence
- ✓ A friendly smile
- ✓ A relaxed demeanor
- ✓ Direct eye contact
- ✓ Occasional hand gestures

Try to avoid the following:

- ✗ Slouching or sitting too straight—both come across as awkward.
- ✗ Shifting your eyes—you will come across as untrustworthy, even if it's just a nervous habit.
- ✗ Bouncing or crossing your legs. This will make you look nervous.
- ✗ Swiveling in your chair. This will make you look like you are distracted and uninterested in actively participating in the interview.
- ✗ Touching your hair, face, or clothes. This will also come across as being nervous and not confident in your responses.



Working with youth

There is an element of risk for youth when sharing their stories as there is always the possibility that it can bring up past trauma. We can't always control what questions may be asked during an interview or an event, and it's important that youth feel in control of the information they are sharing. They will need help planning what information they want to share, when they want to share it, and with whom. Sharing with the media requires careful preparation with youth so as not to unintentionally exploit the youth, their stories, and or others who are part of their stories. It is the responsibility of adults to ensure youth are fully prepared in advance.

Matters of particular importance when working with youth spokespeople include the following:

- Keeping safety of youth top of mind
- Understanding all concepts of strategic sharing
- Preparation and practice
- Understanding the audience and how information will be shared. In the age of digital information, once information is shared, it is challenging, if not impossible to take back
- Support before, during, and after all engagements
- Debriefing and follow-up

To learn more about helping youth tell their stories, see “[Empowering your child to tell their adoption story](#),” an article on [blog.adoptuskids.org](#).



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