



# 5 steps to pain-free media interviews



BY PETE BURDON  
[www.mediatrainingnz.co.nz](http://www.mediatrainingnz.co.nz)

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## Introduction

Leaders from all walks of life have two major aims with their media interviews. They want to avoid humiliation and grow their status among audiences.

All leaders need to take part in media interviews. Some do it regularly, some occasionally, while others may still be waiting for that first call.

Media interviews are like no other conversation, and must be approached in a totally different fashion to any other form of communication.



How many times have you heard someone say they were taken out of context? The truth is that everything in a news story, apart from live interviews, is taken out of context. The key is to know how to get the points you want into the story the reporter writes.

This White Paper shows you the 5 crucial steps to succeed in your next media interview. It is designed for the busy leader and future leader wanting to build and protect their reputations.

## Step One: Buy time and find out about the topic

When the journalist first contacts you, it's important that you buy some time. Never do an interview on the spot. You always need time to prepare.



But having said that, don't wait too long. If you do, you run the risk of being either left out of the story entirely, or limited to a brief insignificant quote at the end.

That's because the journalist may have gone ahead and written the story from the information he or she received from other sources.

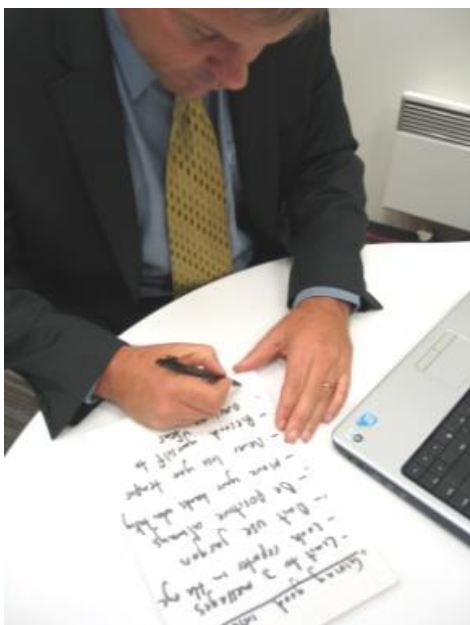
For negative stories about you or your organisation, you want to take control of them, and to do that, you must be available. If you aren't, the stories may well be wrong or heavily biased against you. This is the last thing you want. It is also made worse when your contribution to the story is something like: "He refused to comment," or the next worst outcome: "He could not be reached for comment."

During that initial contact with the journalist, you also want to find out as much as you can about what he or she wants. Don't ask for questions, but do ask what angle they are looking at using, who else they intend to talk to, and if for print, is it a feature or a news story. A feature is longer.

Now you have the information you need, it's time to prepare for your interview.

## Step Two: Prepare your media message

Now you know the topic and angle the journalist is focused on, it's time to prepare your media message. This is the three most important things you want to say on the issue. You must be able to sum these up in about 30 seconds.



The other requirement is that they be of interest to the audience. So while they must be things you want to get across, you must remember that the reporter will only use them if he or she thinks they will interest the readers, viewers or listeners of the media outlet.

The best way to find them is to write down every point you can think of, before narrowing them down to your top three.

You will probably find that lots of points overlap, and it's quite simple to work out what your most important points are.

### Why three points?

A news story only ever includes a few points and you want these to be points you want to get across. If you give a reporter 27 different points, he or she will go away and whittle them down to two or three. You don't want to give away the opportunity to dictate what is used in the final story.

In the next section, you'll learn the importance of your media message and how to use it.

## Step Three: Predict difficult questions

While your aim in the interview will be to keep using bridging statements to get back to your key points, you do need to answer questions asked of you.

This is why you must predict the difficult questions. Don't spend hours on this because you will never know exactly what they may be. But do look for the obvious ones and have brief answers ready for them.

Remember, you have total control about what comes out of your mouth. The interviewer can ask the questions, but you have total power over your response.

But it's important that you do answer these difficult questions. Don't ignore them as some people do. That will only damage your reputation.



But don't dwell on the answers. Get back to a key point as quickly as possible by using bridging statements like: "the point I really need to make", or "the real issue here is."

## Step Four: Create Sound Bites

Sound bites are the news clips of people speaking verbatim on the TV News. They last from 7 to 12 seconds. On radio, you only hear them, while in print media they are called quotes and appear between speech marks.

News stories all need these, so this gives you a great opportunity. If you can make your key points in ways that make them sound more interesting, you can almost guarantee that reporters will use them in their stories. In other words, they can become the sound bites or quotes the reporter uses.

Remember, only snippets of your media interviews will make it into the final story (Unless it's live).

So by knowing what reporters want, you dramatically increase the chances of your key points making it into the story (In the form of interesting sound bites). This way, you have a big say in what's used.

Rhetorical questions, examples, emotion, absolutes and analogies are five such elements that reporters like. For example, a key point may be, "Police Officers must be allowed to carry guns."

While a reporter may use that in a story, what if at some point in the interview, the person said, "How many more Police have to die before they are given guns?" That uses emotion and is a rhetorical question. I



don't need to tell you which one of those statements is more appealing to the reporter.

So under each key point you select, add 3 sound bites. Or in other words, more attractive ways of saying the same thing.

This significantly improves the chances of your points making the story and also avoids concerns that you may sound like a broken record.

## Step Five: Practice, Practice, Practice

This is the most important step of all. Without practicing on camera, you will learn nothing. It's like sitting the practical test for your driver's licence without ever having driven a car. The theory is one thing, but putting it into practice is quite another.



Get someone to interview you on camera and watch it back. There's no excuse in this day and age not to have some device to record on.

Don't only focus on getting your key messages and sound bites out again and again in different ways. Look at your body language, particularly if it's a TV interview.

Body language has a huge influence on how you are perceived. Think about the public figures you respect. A big part of your respect is probably how they come across in the media.

Tone of voice is vital for both TV and radio, while it's still important to use positive body language if you are talking to a print reporter.



### About the author

**Pete Burdon** is founder and head trainer of Media Training NZ. He has trained leaders from throughout New Zealand on how to master media interviews and communicate during crises. These include Business Executives, Board Directors, Politicians and School Leaders.

Pete is a former journalist and government press secretary. This puts him in a unique position, having worked on both sides of the camera.

He also has Masters Degrees in both Communication Management and Journalism.

For more information on training options, contact Pete Burdon.

**Media Training NZ**  
Level 2, Suite 12, 225 High Street  
Christchurch 8011

P: 03 420 0300

M: 029 200 8555

E: [pete@mediatrainingnz.co.nz](mailto:pete@mediatrainingnz.co.nz)

[www.mediatrainingnz.co.nz](http://www.mediatrainingnz.co.nz)

