**Media Interview Basics**

SLS Policy Lab Communications Workshop

#### General Interview Preparation for News or Feature Stories

**Know the audience.** Before preparing an interview with a reporter, take some time to think about the target audience. Remember the reporter is not the audience – the people who will read, hear, or see the story are your audience. Knowing the audience of a given media source will help you create and tailor your message for greater effectiveness.

**Ask questions.** There are several questions you will want to ask before going into an interview – especially if the reporter is the one requesting the interview:

* What is the angle of the story?
* Who is the target audience? What demographic should you target in your answers?
* What kind of interview is it? (print or broadcast, news or feature story)
* What is the setup of the interview? (live vs. taped, location, your office, etc.)
* What is the format of the interview? (solo, panel, by satellite, in person)
* What does the reporter hope to capture or represent in the surroundings?

**“What is the story about?”** The reporter should be able to explain the story. You will want to ask this question even if you have pitched the story because the reporter may take a different approach to your idea.

**Set your goals.** What do you want the interview to be about, and what do you want to avoid? What do you hope to accomplish in the interview? In general, news stories have three main goals or objectives:

* To educate or explain
* To persuade
* To entertain

Ask the reporter about their goal for the article or interview before you agree to talk, and share yours. If you are willing to educate or explain an issue, but the reporter is hoping for advocacy and persuasion, you’ll want to clarify guidelines in advance that do not result in you being pushed to say more than you know or feel comfortable with.

**Be prepared for predictable questions, but don’t be surprised by off-beat or “gotcha” questions.** Questions can range from the relevant to the irrelevant. Reporters may accept someone else’s perception and agenda and pose questions based on those assumptions. If you are being interviewed about something controversial, some reporters may slip you a question that is designed to trip you up.

With a little media practice and a lot of knowledge in your area of expertise, you’ll find yourself comfortable in any interview situation. And once your name is out, don’t be surprised to find yourself a regular news source or presence on screen. Reporters are always looking for knowledgeable, reliable sources who are comfortable being interviewed and they will return repeatedly to trusted news sources. That reliable source could be you!

#### On-Camera Interview Preparation

* **Plan ahead.** Ask the producer or journalist about interview length, format (live or taped?) and what topics will be covered.
* **Pre-Interview.** A producer or journalist may request a pre-interview by telephone or ask you to warm up ahead of recording with soft-ball questions. Take advantage of this. It will allow both of you to get a better feel for the content of the segment.
* **Focus your message.** Identify the specific ideas you want to get across in the interview. Utilize key phrases, insightful metaphors and buzz words that will capture the audience’s attention, but avoid jargon. If necessary, prepare brief notes or a few bullet points that summarize your key ideas. You won’t have a chance to look down, though, so don’t rely on your notes.
* **Practice.** You can do this alone or with someone else asking the questions. Develop different ways of delivering your key points. Keep your responses concise, especially if the interview is brief. Remember, time is limited.
* **Expect a free-flowing interview.** The interviewer may interrupt you midway through an answer to shift the topic. Be prepared to respond. Develop some stock response phrases that will allow you to regroup your thoughts during the interview. Maintain your composure and stay on message. Return to your key points often to maximize their impact.
* **Practice hard questions.** Occasionally a journalist might ask you a hard question that is meant to catch you off guard. Practice responding with new ways of staying on message. You don’t want to sound as if you are avoiding the question but your goal is to make sure that your audience hears the message you want to deliver.

#### On-Camera Interview Tips

* **Dress the part.** Wear professional attire that will match the image you wish to convey. As a general rule stick to solids rather than plaids or stripes. Avoid bright white shirts and busy ties. Avoid linen and other wrinkly fabrics that catch shadows, which look bad on television. Darker colors appear slimming on camera. Blues can be especially flattering.
* **Use light makeup.** In the studio, a light application of powder helps reduce shine from the overhead lights. With Skype, a bit of powder or blusher can keep you from looking washed out.
* **Maintain good posture.** Ensure the chair settings are comfortable for you. Sit up straight – it makes you appear confident and will complement your message.
* **Gesture comfortably.** Feel free to use your hands during the interview, but avoid sudden movements on camera. Look to see how the camera frames you so that your gestures occur on screen. Off-screen movements can make you look jumpy and unsettled, whereas the same movements on screen can animate your answers.
* **Make eye contact.** If you are interviewed remotely by Skype in your office or by satellite in a studio, think of the camera as your friend. Imagine that your friend is there talking to you through the camera. Smile, blink naturally, and relax your face.
* **Be yourself on camera.** Speak confidently in a relaxed tone. Avoid “ums” or other irrelevant utterances. There’s nothing wrong with an occasional moment of silence while you are gathering your thoughts. Slow down a bit if you are a fast talker; otherwise the viewers may be unable to follow your discussion. Remember to breathe and relax.