



**BASIC MEDIA TRAINING  
&  
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW**

For the **Santa Monica College Board of Trustees**

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By: Grace Smith, Director of Public Information

# Overview:

- When to & why respond to media inquiries
- How to frame your responses:
  - *SMC established/recommended processes*
  - *Basic tips for media interactions*
- Before & During an Interview
  - *What to do & what not to do*
- In a Crisis

# When to Respond/Speak to Media:

- Milestones & important events
- Crises that require thoughtful—and vetted—responses from leadership (defer to assigned spokesperson when the situation calls for it)

# ...and why?

- When an interview can help reinforce the College's position on an issue & the outcome is considered to be more or less positive
- Such an interview is *not* meant to fulfill the reporter's agenda or give them what they want, it is an opportunity to:
  - *Inform*
  - *Persuade*
  - *Advocate*
- *Remember to deliver/stick to your message, no matter what*

# How to Respond:

- Check in with the SMC Public Information Office ([Smith\\_Grace@smc.edu](mailto:Smith_Grace@smc.edu)) who will help you prepare/develop a strategy:
  - *In a crisis/emergency, all responses to media ought to be vetted per the processes outlined in our internal crisis communications plan to ensure consistency & accuracy*
  - *Almost always, the response will be assigned to the designated spokesperson*
  - *Always respond with **intention** (think through possible, long-term impact), with **care/empathy**, and with **confidence***



# Before an Interview:

- Do your homework on the issue
- Develop a set of messages & possible questions
- Practice, practice, practice . . .
  - *Avoid using jargon or acronyms*
  - *Your message should be understandable to someone without prior knowledge of the issue/the higher education landscape*

# During an Interview:

- Direct the interview towards your top messages
- Stay on message
- Try not to ramble
- Avoid hypothetical questions – or hypothesizing in general
- Never comment on issues outside your expertise & never speculate on what happened

**Being at your Best** (What to Do):



# 1. Be clear and concise

- Communication is mostly about **word choice**. And when it comes to word choice, **less is more**. The key to powerful communication (written or spoken) is **clarity & brevity**.
- Before engaging in any form of communication, define your goals and your audience.
- Outline carefully what you want to convey.

- Avoid unnecessary words and overly flowery language, which can distract from your message.
  - *Do use firsthand examples and descriptive language.*  
*Communicating personal experiences (if appropriate and supportive of your message) can be dramatic and powerful. Use them as often as possible.*

## 2. Prepare ahead of time

- Know **what you are going to say and how you are going to say it** before you begin any type of communication.
- Being prepared means more than just practicing a presentation.
- It also involves thinking about the entirety of the communication, from start to finish. Research the information you may need to support your message. Consider how you will respond to questions and criticisms. Try to **anticipate the unexpected**.

# 3. Be mindful of nonverbal communication

- Our facial expressions, gestures, and body language can—and often do—say more than our words.
- Nonverbal cues can have between [65 and 93 percent more impact](#) than the spoken word. People are more likely to believe the nonverbal signals over spoken words if the two clash.
- Leaders must be particularly adept at reading/conveying nonverbal cues.
- Your nonverbal cues must, at all times, support your message. Conflicting verbal and nonverbal communication can cause confusion.

# 4. Pay attention to Tone

- How you say something can be just as important as what you say.
- When speaking, tone includes volume, projection, and intonation as well as word choice.
- Tone can be easier to control when writing.

**What to Avoid . . .**

# When to Avoid Responding / Speaking:

1. **You don't know the answer** - Never guess, or provide misleading information
2. **You don't understand the question** - Ask for clarification
3. **The question should be answered by someone else** - don't speak on behalf of someone else who may not share your objectives or who is the subject-matter expert
4. **The question calls for speculation** - Could be used against you

# Three things not to say:

## 1. “No comment”

*it's OK to have no comment—just don't say so*

## 2. “Off the record” –

*It's best to presume nothing you say is off the record. If you don't want to see it in print, or have it live on the Internet, don't say it*

## 3. Avoid Yes or No answers—

Acknowledge the question, then redirect to your message, using “The Bridge” . . .



# The Bridge Technique – allows you to acknowledge the reporter’s question & transition back to your key messages

## 1. Acknowledge the Question

- “That’s a good question...”
- “What’s most important here is that...”
- “The key issue is...”

## 2. Connect with a Bridge Phrase

- ...However...
- ...In fact...
- ...That’s why...
- ...Even more important...

## 3. Deliver your message

- Have message ready in easy-to-remember soundbites
- Use data & stats wherever possible

# A Few More Pitfalls to Avoid:

- Avoid speculating—on worst case scenarios, what might happen, what could happen or even possible outcomes. Just stick to the facts
- Avoid using “I” or giving the impression that you are the sole decision-maker
- Avoid negative words and phrases (use positive language wherever possible), and avoid highly-charged analogies
- Don’t repeat negative allegations, but reinforce your position succinctly & go back to your key message(s)

# A few extra tips/recap

- Relax
- Remember body language
- Express empathy when appropriate
- Speak in a conversational manner and normal volume
- No jargon or acronyms
- Understand the audience: General audience vs. specific audience
- It's okay to restart an answer in a recorded interview; in a live interview, it's okay to pause to gather your thoughts before you speak
- The interview isn't over until the camera & mic are off, the phone is hung up/the Zoom has been ended
- Provide any follow up information or data you promised

# In a Crisis:

- SMC has an internal crisis communication plan that provides clear guidance on development of messaging, dissemination & tips/protocol for spokespersons, and much, much more.
- The stakes have never been higher for the College (and for institutions like ours). It is better to err on the side of being cautious. Coordinate all crucial public-facing communications that will impact SMC with the PIO & key decision-makers (Superintendent/President & Senior Staff).





QUESTIONS?