A media interview is a prime opportunity to advance your message. Preparation and focus are the keys to success in media encounters. A reporter’s objective is to get an interesting story; yours is to stay on message.

Preparation
In preparation for the interview, make sure you know as much as possible about the reporter’s audience. Knowing the typical reader, viewer or listener for a given media outlet will help you create, develop and tailor your key messages and anticipate questions. Consider the following “ABCs” of interview prep:

A. Ask Questions
   Some questions to ask if you are contacted by a reporter (as opposed to when you have pitched the story) include:
   - What’s the story about? What’s the angle?
   - What are you hoping to learn in this interview?
   - When is it going to be published or aired?
   - Who else will you interview or have you interviewed?
   - Will the interview be live or taped (for broadcast interviews)?
   - How much time will you need?
   - Where do you want to conduct the interview?
   - What’s your deadline?
   - What’s your telephone number, so I can get back to you?
B. Buy Time

- Never feel obligated to drop everything to immediately respond when a reporter calls you for an interview. They respect your time and, in most cases, will accommodate your schedule. However, understand that journalists have tight deadlines. Find out what their deadline is and offer to get back to them within a reasonable period, giving you time to prepare.

C. Consider Questions and Develop Answers

- Another key to preparing for an interview is to anticipate the questions a reporter may ask, including sensitive items. You may get a mix of both easy and hard questions designed to catch you off guard. Take time in advance to think through your responses and practice role playing if necessary. The most effective spokespersons introduce their key messages into the conversation at every credible opportunity.

The Importance of Staying on Message

Rather than participate in an interview that is disjointed or unfocused, staying on message helps you control your agenda and convey your message effectively.

Your job during the interview is to stick to these messages and steer the interview – and your responses – back to these message areas.

During an Interview

- Have a plan/set your agenda
- Remember your audience
- Anticipate what your opponents will say
- Be truthful
- Stick to three key messages
- Bridge back to your messages
- Give the headline first
- Use colorful sound bites
- Give examples
- Keep it simple
- Be brief
- Stay relaxed
- Follow up

Traps and Pitfalls

When covering advocacy, legislative and regulatory issues, some reporters may look for drama and conflict in a story. They may search for information or a quote that will make their story stand out from the competition. Most of the time, reporters will ask straightforward questions to obtain information.

Here are a few situations when reporters could use different interview techniques to probe an issue or elicit more compelling comments:

Hypothetical and speculative questions – Stick to “what is” not “what if” when asked such a question. Don’t speculate or answer hypothetical questions. Avoid speaking for others, as reporters often ask you to speculate what outside groups may say on the issue at hand.

Questions outside your expertise – When presented with a question outside your area of expertise, do not try to answer. Simply tell the reporter that you are not able to answer and offer to help find the person who can.
Proprietary information – Reporters sometimes ask questions in an attempt to secure proprietary data and information. Explain why you cannot give them specifically what they are asking for, and then tell them what you can give them – a closely related fact or figure that is suitable for public consumption.

Loaded questions – Don’t repeat negative or sensational words a reporter may use in a question. When faced with such a question, respond with a generally positive statement and bridge to a key message with the following phrases:

- On the contrary . . .
- Actually . . .
- The fact is . . .
- Quite the opposite . . .
- The reality is . . .
- The point here is . . .

Interruptions – If a reporter interrupts you or doesn’t let you complete your point, try not to get flustered. Either let them interrupt you and come back to answer the question later or stop, listen patiently to the new question, and say you will address it in a moment.

Paraphrasing – There may be times when a reporter unfairly or incorrectly restates what you say. Stay calm and repeat your point clearly.

Technical jargon – Avoid jargon, buzzwords and complex terminology that can confuse reporters and their audiences. For example, rather than using terms like “three-tier system” that people outside of the industry will not understand, talk about the role distributors play in helping brewers get to market and delivering a wide variety of beer to retailers for adult consumers to enjoy.

Humor – Be careful using humor. It can backfire when an interviewer quotes you out of context, or if the humor is considered inappropriate by others. Best case, people do not understand your wit; worst case, you offend a reporter or a key audience.

After the Interview:

- Update your internal team and any stakeholders as needed.
- Send follow-up information to the reporter as requested.
- Be on the lookout for the story.
- Correct any misinformation with the reporter. Often, items published first online can be corrected quickly.

Points to Consider:

By making yourself available to journalists consistently, it’s clear to them that you are trying to be forthright and help them do their jobs. This tends to have a positive impact on the nature of their reporting, and they appreciate the resource. Additionally, cultivating such relationships gives you access to reporters for your proactive media efforts.

Be available, accessible and credible. Be a consistent and helpful resource, and be prepared to tell your story. If a reporter calls for comment, he or she is most likely going to run a story with or without your input, so it is usually beneficial to take the opportunity to help shape the content.
Interview Checklist

BEFORE
- Coordinate with PR/Communications team
- Pre-interview reporter
  - What is the story about?
  - Who else is being interviewed?
  - What is the deadline?
- Decide what you want to say
  - Develop key messages and proof points
- Remember the audience for the outlet
- Anticipate reporter questions
- Consider what your detractors will say
- Conduct recent news roundup: no surprises
- Role play with a colleague

DURING
- Stick to your key messages and proof points
  - Statement/Evidence/Conclusion/Stop
- Give the headline first
- Bridge back to key messages
- Speak in normal, “everyday” terms
- Use colorful soundbites – give examples/anecdotes
- Be truthful
- Keep it simple – be brief
- Stay relaxed
- It’s okay to say, “I don’t know, but I’ll get back to you”
- Remember you are always on the record

AFTER
- Update internal stakeholders as needed
- Send follow-up information to reporter as needed
- Look for the story
- Correct any misinformation with reporter
- If you are pleased with the story, be sure to share the news via email, your website and social media