

The Social Change Media guide to

# Working the media



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BOOKS

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**newcitizen**  
BOOKS

practical tools for citizens



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## Sources

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material adapted from Film Australia's Executive  
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# Going public

In our democracy the media is a vital intermediary between citizens and the powerful.

Politicians are often astonishingly sensitive to criticism in the media and a well-placed media story can be an effective way to obtain a response from immobile, smug or recalcitrant representatives and bureaucrats.

Equally, media stories can be a way of influencing private corporations, especially when they threaten expensively purchased corporate reputations or reveal potential legal liabilities.

This booklet contains most of the essential skills and facts you'll need to make your story public – in print, on radio and television.

It will be up to you to supply the other ingredients of successful media 'management' – guile, persistence, diplomacy and, of course, the story.

Contrary to common belief, the media

# Understanding the media

(mostly) are not engaged in a corporate conspiracy against the common good. Just because they don't run your story does not mean they are 'working for the other side'. Usually the 'other side' complains just as bitterly about media bias.

Also contrary to the common belief, journalists are not there to perform a community service. They are not a public address system. That doesn't mean they are evil. It just means they are professionals working mostly for private corporations whose business is selling advertising. If we want our story told we have to expect less and work a little harder to satisfy their professional needs.

It is essential to understand that (usually) neither the journalist, nor the editor, nor the media corporation gives a toss about the rights or wrongs of an issue. Their narrow concern is whether they can print or broadcast 'a good story'.

It's your job to give them that good story.

# What makes a good story

Knowing how journalists and editors define a good story is a vital part of being an effective media manager.

Mostly, journalism is a very conventional business and a good story is defined in very conventional ways. To be acceptable to journalists your story should aim to:

## ❑ Report a real event

News is active. It depends on actual events and happenings. Hence if nothing has happened lately it may be necessary to create an event in order to get your story told!

Demonstrations and launches are actions created solely for the sake of media coverage. These events may be artificial but they provide the essential rationale for a journalist to cover your issue.

## ❑ Have a human focus

'Pesticides kill frogs' might be a good story, but a better story is: 'Scientist reveals pesticide link to frog deaths'. That is, someone is doing something.

The human element is vital and the central drama of a good story should be about a real person's experiences, joys,

tribulations, triumphs, discoveries or views.

This may seem artificial, when, for instance, we believe the real story is about genetically modified foods or the dangers of nuclear power. But it's part of good communication – readers relate to a story better when they can empathise with real human dramas.

## ❑ Be new

The event must be recent and preferably unreported. That is, someone must do something today. This is called 'breaking news'. Journalists never run old stories.

## ❑ Have a strong 'angle'

As we noted, news reporting is a conventional business. Here are a few typical story angles to keep in mind:

- 'we name the guilty'
- 'we name the heroes'
- 'we report something particularly frightening, tragic, ghastly, pitiful or unjust'
- 'we reveal a sensational brawl'
- 'we bring you heart-warming kids or animals' (photos essential)
- 'we reveal genuinely novel, surprising or amazing facts'.

## ❑ Be credible

You need hard proof. Assertions without supporting evidence won't cut it with journalists or their readers and viewers. Suspicions, opinions and hearsay are not 'stories'.

You'll need a 'smoking gun' – an eye witness, an official report, a scientific study, incriminating photographs, an independent expert, or a respected commentator.

Sadly, the exception to this rule is any statement by any 'hot' media personality, senior politician or business mogul. This generally constitutes a 'good story' without the need for any supporting evidence.

## Aim to build good media relationships

It's important to develop good working relationships with the journalists, editors, chiefs of staff and news directors who are likely to cover your story. That way they'll get to know your issue and be more likely to see you as a credible source.

These are the people to target with your media release and follow-up phone call.

Find out their deadlines. Don't be afraid to call and introduce yourself. Invite them to a special breakfast or lunch briefing (and don't forget to provide the food). Stay in regular contact and offer them interesting items of insider information. Don't be afraid to offer exclusives.

Remember that journalists are busy, hard-working people. They work under pressure and – like normal mortals – get frazzled close to deadlines. The easier you can make their jobs, the better your relationship will be.

Do your homework and be well prepared. Present them with a good story, simply and succinctly, and you're at the start of a fine relationship.

Avoid calling them close to deadlines unless your story is particularly important.

It's important to be honest when dealing

with journalists and editors. Don't lie, exaggerate or make allegations you can't prove. They have no time for fools or false leads.

Journos can misquote you and get things wrong. Personal contact is a way to make sure they are clear on the important issues. Most journalists will not read you their story before it's published, but if there is something very sensitive or potentially damaging in the story, ring them anyway and try to check if they've got it right.

If a journo does a good job, ring and thank him or her. It will help build your relationship.

## Choosing your media

The first step is to do some research and decide which media will most effectively influence your target audience and be likely to run your story. If you decide on newspapers, pick up a copy and check the staff details. Here you can find out who the Chief of Staff is and which journalists cover your area of interest.

With radio and TV you should target the specific programs which are most likely to cover your type of story.

Different types of media have different advantages. Here are some points to keep in mind when choosing which media to aim for –

**LOCAL PAPERS** – are often neglected but are free and have high local readership. They are always looking for news and have wider definitions of newsworthiness than metropolitan dailies.

**The AAP NEWS WIRE**. It's a real advantage to get a story on this because it goes to every major media outlet in Australia. AAP journos collect stories in just the same way as print journos.

**METROPOLITAN NEWSPAPERS** – the toughest nut to crack because they have hundreds of stories to choose from and only a limited amount of news space.

**TELEVISION NEWS** – high on visual impact, short on detail. So think ‘vision, vision, vision’ and make sure that your spokespeople are well prepared with succinct, high-impact newsbites.

**RADIO STATIONS** – are hungry for news and frequently run stories not covered elsewhere. They will base your story around a pre-recorded telephone interview – so have points prepared in advance.

**TALK-BACK** – know what you are going to say, say it clearly, and never get drawn into an argument.

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR** – an effective medium that should not be neglected. Often one of the most-read parts of a newspaper.

**LIFESTYLE SHOWS and PRINT FEATURES** – don’t write them off. They have high readership, and often you can find a ‘lifestyle’ angle to your story; for example, family health, tips from local heroes, environmentally friendly actions or products.

**SPECIAL INTEREST MAGAZINES, JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS** – use these when you want to reach a highly targeted audience e.g. doctors, new mothers, sports enthusiasts, business people, town planners, environmentalists, truck drivers. The list is endless ... just

check out the titles in your newsagency.

## **Media lists**

Listings from companies such as Media Monitors, Info Australia and Margaret Gee may be available in your local library. These are comprehensive, regularly-updated directories of all media in the country with names of key staff and contact numbers.

# Writing your media release



The media release is the bread and butter of journalism.

A media release tells a journalist whether a story is newsworthy by succinctly describing the story angle and giving a few essential facts and quotations.

Try to write your media release like it is a racy newspaper story – often overworked local media outlets will take advantage of a well-written release by simply publishing it word for word!

Here is a check-list for a writing a good media release.

## Make it clearly identifiable

That is, on a letterhead.

## Date it

You can always prevent early release of your story by clearly writing, for example, 'Embargoed until 10.30 am Tuesday 23 September' on the top of the release.

## Keep it to one page

Keep you release one page long, double spaced (two pages maximum).

Reduce your media release to the bare bones, just an opening paragraph, one or two supporting paragraphs, plus supporting quotations. Don't try to tell the whole story – just outline the angle you have decided to focus on.

## Write simply

Journos can be very ignorant of specialist areas. Write as if you were addressing someone who knows nothing about the subject.

Use plain English and steer clear of jargon, cliches and acronyms e.g. NCOSS.

Your media release should read like a good newspaper story.

Newspaper writing is an art in itself, but the easiest way to learn is to look at a few stories. Make your writing active and human. Use concrete language and word pictures. Avoid management-speak like the plague. Be colourful but avoid exaggeration.

Pay careful attention to your headlines and opening paragraphs.

## The headline grabs attention

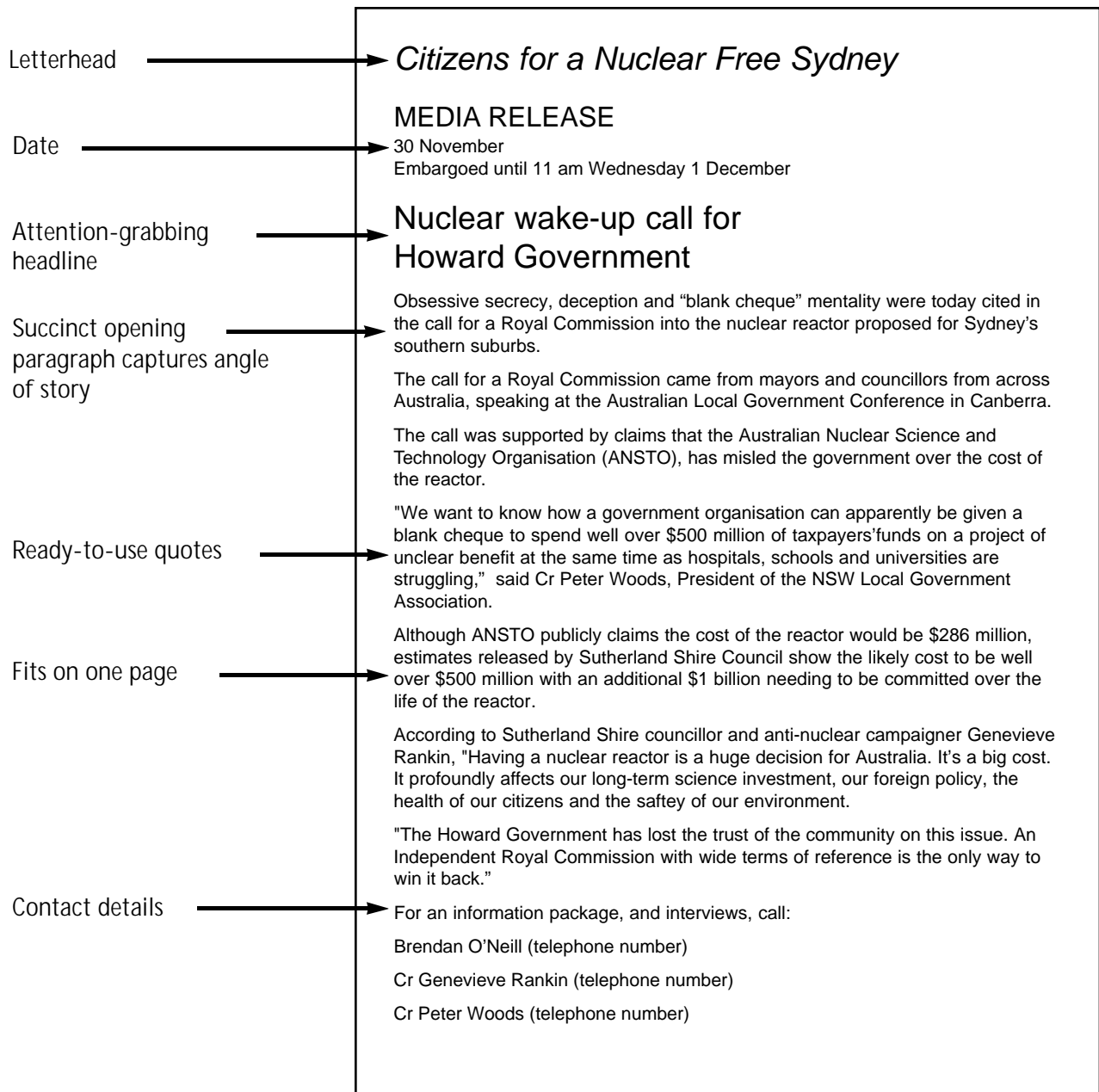
The headline grabs the reader's attention, creating interest in what follows. It should be strong, suggestive and entertaining.

A few points to consider:

- A headline is a stripped-down



## Elements of a media release



sentence – make it active, preferably with a verb, and with a person as the subject.

- ❑ State facts, avoid opinions (except when the headline is an excerpt from a quotation).
- ❑ Beware ambiguity – to make sure the meaning is clear.
- ❑ avoid the past tense.

To make sure your headline makes sense, try reading it aloud.

The opening paragraph succinctly announces the ‘angle’ of the story

A well-constructed opening paragraph is a story in itself. Generally it says ‘Who – What – When’. It reveals the essence of the story and lets the audience decide whether to read on.

On the next page are a few examples of headlines and opening sentences.

Notice how a lot of detail is summarised into a few words.

### Ready-to-use quotations

Your media release should contain ready-to-use quotations.

The speaker should be the most credible, senior and well-known spokesperson you can lay your hands on. Don’t forget to include his or her full title and position –

### **Prime Minister favoured brother, claims workers’ leader**

John Dick, head of the National Workers Union, today accused the Prime Minister of favouritism and possible corruption in the Government’s bail-out of his brother’s collapsed company.

### **Orphan’s death sparks outrage**

Community groups have renewed their calls for a swift end to mandatory sentencing laws, following the death of a 15 year old Aboriginal orphan in police custody.

### **Shore win for river guardians**

The Georges River watchdogs were buoyed this week after winning a major environmental award valued at \$10,000.

the more impressive the better.

This applies even if the speech hasn't been given yet. It is routine for media releases to be written BEFORE an event or demonstration or media conference occurs. Don't be embarrassed by this – journalists expect it. Just make sure the speakers are briefed on the words attributed to them!

### Contact details

Finish with at least two contact names, with work and home phone numbers (preferably mobile numbers). These contacts are either your well-briefed spokespeople, or someone who can quickly track them down.

The spokespeople should be available 24 hours a day and ready to give interviews at short notice. Journalists often keep odd hours. If they can't find you easily, they won't cover the story.

## Throw away your media release!

Writing a media release is a great discipline – it makes you work out your story and get the quotes together.

But media releases are becoming less and less useful.

Journalists are flooded in them – scores or hundreds arrive on an editor's desk every day.

There is an easy way to get ahead of the pack. Once you've got your story worked out simply ring the journo and tell them about it.

The media release, if you issue it at all, is best used as a back-up to your conversation.

Plan what you want to say, be clear about your angle, and have some interesting facts at hand.

Call the journalist, the news editor, producer or chief of staff.

Tell them who you are, what the story is, and who the story is about.

Ask: 'Would you like to do an interview? They are ready now!' and 'We've got a photo opportunity lined up on (when/where):'

## Think long-term

It's natural to want publicity immediately – but things don't always work out that way.

You might have to put out several media releases and work at developing relationships with journalists before you get results.

One radio producer said that she gets so many media releases that only one in 10 makes it to air. So the more often you try, the more likely it is that your story will get a run.

### Addressing your media release

Whenever possible direct your media release to a specific journalist, otherwise to the news director or producer (radio and TV) or chief-of-staff or news editor (newspapers).

If a journalist has covered your issue previously, make sure you contact him or her first about doing a story. Note that journalists are generally assigned to specialised areas or 'rounds', for example, local government, business, community news, police.

## Timing is important

Press releases to print media should arrive early in the morning of the day you expect the story to be written or late the day before.

When you are planning an event you should send a 'media alert' the day before, so photographers and TV crews can put the event in their diaries (see below).

### Good days and bad days

- The earlier in the week the better.
- The earlier in the day the better.
- Fridays are very bad days.
- Saturdays and Sundays are very good days for stories and events (print and electronic journalists work seven days are usually desperate for stories for the Sunday and Monday papers and TV).
- Public holidays are good days.
- Days when the Prime Minister is in town, or when a victory parade for the cricket team is happening, are bad days. Avoid this sort of conflict as a major event will push other stories out of the news.
- Too much warning is as bad as too little. If a press release arrives

earlier than the evening before your event, it'll get lost.

- Keep in mind that most stories in morning papers have to be written by 6.30pm on the day before.

## Media events and launches

Media events, media conferences and launches are good because they pull journos together in one place and add importance and drama to the issue.

You'll need:

- An easily accessible location – don't expect for the journos to travel a long distance, take your story to them. \*
- A spokesperson or 'star' with an already existing media profile.
- 'Photo opportunities' specified on the release.

When the journalists or TV crews arrive, greet them, give them a media release or media kit (see below), and brief them on what will occur.

Your event should be well planned. Prepare a written agenda or 'running order'. Your spokespeople will be briefed by you, clear on what they are to say and how long they have to say it. The

\* For many community campaigns, Parliament House is a great venue for a media conference. There is a special media conference room a few metres from the rooms where the parliamentary press corps have their permanent offices. You'll need a member of parliament to book the room for you – and they'll usually want to be part of the event.

spokespeople will usually sit at a table or speak from a lectern. If outdoors, a loudspeaker will usually be needed (you can rent these from specialist audio-visual hire firms). After the formal event, TV crews and journos will want to conduct one-on-one interviews with the main spokespeople.

## **The photo opportunity**

Television is vision, vision, vision, and newspapers love a good photograph.

So make sure your event is photogenic – a pile of syringes, a kids' recycling derby, a riverbank with dead fish, a giant cheque, street theatre. Be brazen and inventive.

## **Timing**

Conferences and events work best in the morning e.g. between 10am and 12 noon, in time to make evening TV.

## **The media alert**

If you want journos or TV crews to attend your event, you'll need a little notice. So send out a media alert the day before the event. A media alert is like a media release, but even briefer. It tantalisingly summarises the issue (preferably in a single paragraph), specifies the photo opportunity, and states time, date and contact details. Just as for a media release, call the media beforehand and check that they received the media alert. Ask, 'Will you be coming?' Remind them of your

great photo opportunity.

## **The media kit**

Professional public relations firms always develop a media briefing kit about a particular issue. This is given to journalists attending the media event.

The kit usually consists of a few A4 sheets, with double-spaced type, in a simple folder. Its aim is to let journalists understand the issue in more depth and more easily construct a news article or voice-over. It may include additional quotes, charts and tables ('facts and stats', in public relations jargon).

Like any other document for the media, it should be quick to read, succinct, simple and interesting.

A media kit, while not essential, marks you out as a professional media manager. Making a media kit is also a useful action in its own right, because it forces you to collect a coherent case and acts as a valuable briefing document for supporters and spokespeople.

# Ethics and defamation

Beware of defamation, contempt, sub judice, unethical behaviour (exploiting people for the sake of your story). If these issues could potentially arise, do not be afraid to brief journos about them.

For instance, if there is some information you won't divulge or comment on for legal or ethical reasons, point this out.

If in doubt, steer clear of potentially defamatory statements.

If you feel you have no choice but to 'name the guilty' then get advice from a lawyer who is experienced in defamation law. There are usually ways to say what you need to, but it's important to get professional advice on the wording (both for your own peace of mind and to prevent handing your opponent a weapon to use against you).

Here are some useful self-education resources on defamation law:

Mark Pearson, *The Journalist's Guide to Media Law*, Sydney, 1997.

Mark Armstrong et al, *Media Law in Australia*, Sydney, 1995.

*The NSW Defamation Act 1974*  
– [http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol\\_act/da197499/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/da197499/)

*Legal Pitfalls in Cyberspace: Defamation on Computer Networks*, Timothy Arnold-

Moore (despite the title, the principles apply to all forms of media)

– <http://www.mds.rmit.edu.au/law/defame.html>

*The Australian Journalists' Code of Ethics*

– <http://www.alliance.aust.com/news/ethics-99a.html>

# Radio interview techniques



Radio news interviews are pre-recorded, so don't worry if you make a mistake. Just pause and say, 'I'll start again'.

Studio interviews are usually live, but don't worry – you will usually be in the care of a consummately professional host who will aim to make the broadcast as smooth, inoffensive, and interesting as possible.

Whether you are being broadcast live or pre-recorded, preparation is the secret of a good interview.

When you talk to the producer or interviewer before the interview, ask what angle they are taking. Suggest your own angle. It's even OK to suggest questions – it makes their job easier.

Then shut yourself in a quiet room for 20 minutes and jot down, say, three to five key points you want to get across.

If you are an official spokesperson, it's a good idea to test yourself on tape a few times to hear your speech mannerisms, such as 'mmm'. Radio stations these days are too busy to edit them out. If it sounds too bad, they'll just throw out the interview.

## Questions to ask before the interview

- What type of program is it?
- How long have you got?
- Is it a brief news 'grab' or a longer interview?
- How much does the interviewer know about the topic?
- Is it live to air?
- What questions will be asked?
- Would they like you to send them a list of questions?

## During the interview

- Avoid long sentences.
- Speak clearly; be careful of voice impediments and accents.
- Avoid jargon and cliches.
- Speak simply – don't assume people know very much about the subject. Try to aim for greatest audience comprehension. Don't use acronyms without explaining them.
- Be passionate. Energy and enthusiasm make up for the fact that people cannot see you.



- ❑ If doing interviews for news, devise a 20-second grab with all your main points.
- ❑ The 'speak slowly' rule is a fallacy. Speak quickly and clearly.
- ❑ On radio, numbers are useless. You can get away with stating one or two, but no more. Try to make your point without figures. People can't do the sums in their heads to work out what the point is. But you must balance this with giving your audience some hard data to take away with them.
- ❑ Plan some 'bringing it back home' examples or stories which tie in with people's ordinary experience.

### Tricks to overcome nervousness

If you are feeling nervous, go for a walk in a park before the interview and repeat to yourself 'I will be relaxed ... I will be brilliant ... I will find all the right words ... I will be lucid and easy ...' etc.

This really works.

An actors' trick is to practise breathing out for 10 seconds and then breathing in for 5 seconds. This prevents hyperventilation.

- ❑ Know what your main point is and how to get it across at the start and the end of interview.
- ❑ Look at the interviewer, not the microphone.
- ❑ Don't rattle the papers or wear leather or plastic.

### Dealing with an unsympathetic interviewer

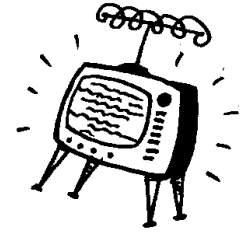
- ❑ You will usually know in advance if an interview is likely to be hostile. In that case, spend time anticipating the likely questions and planning your answers.
- ❑ Make sure you know what you want to say, and say it.
- ❑ Don't be led off by other questions.
- ❑ If you don't know the answer, talk about something else. If challenged, say that your topic is much more important.
- ❑ Don't argue or lose you cool. Instead, quietly and firmly point out the correct facts.
- ❑ Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.
- ❑ Avoid evasiveness. If given a direct question, return a direct answer. If you don't know how to answer the question, simply say, 'I don't know,

but I'll find out for you.'

### Ethnic radio

Radio is by far the most important medium for migrants. Surveys show they are great radio listeners but read newspapers much less.

## Television interview techniques



Read the previous section on radio interviews. Most of the same points apply – especially to non-studio television news interviews.

- ❑ Do your homework. A two-minute spot seems trivial – but two minutes could influence one million people. By the time the little red light goes on, you should know every word you are going to say.
- ❑ If you're being interviewed ask for the general or specific questions to be covered. Answer them out loud to yourself before you go on.
- ❑ Don't extemporise, no matter how fluent you can be. One tangled sentence can waste 30 seconds – and that could be 25% of your time.
- ❑ Be selective. Choose two or three vital points and make sure you get them across.
- ❑ Be theatrical. TV is an entertainment medium.

Remember you are giving a

performance. Be passionate and good humoured. Have one or two colourful phrases ready. Save a good one for your wind up. This is the one they'll remember.

- ❑ Be visual. Television is not radio. The screen is watched intently – so what viewers see is as important as what they hear. Think about the picture you'll be presenting. In TV your 'look' is half the message, so be neat and well-groomed.
- ❑ In a studio, 'case the joint' first. Get there early. Make sure you meet the director (and floor manager, if there is one). If possible, go to the studio and look around well before you go on air. Try the seat you're going to sit in.
- ❑ Be calm and collected. Take your time. If something is bothering you, say so, and make them fix it. It may seem unprofessional to ask for the monitor to be turned away, but seeing yourself talking on the screen is an acquired taste. You could come across shifty-eyed. It's your image – look after it.
- ❑ Choose darker clothes with solid colours. Don't wear white or shiny clothes, stripes or patterns that are too "busy" or jewellery that rattles. Make sure you are comfortable.

- ❑ In front of the camera sit comfortably with feet flat on the floor. Avoid clenching hands or hunching shoulders – this will make the rest of you tense. Breathing or stretching exercises before you go on are a very good idea.

## During the interview

- ❑ Never look at the camera. Look at the interviewer.
- ❑ Listen to the questions and make direct simple answers.
- ❑ Remember your prepared points, wait for your chance and repeat your most important message at least twice. If the interview is not live, don't be afraid to say 'can we stop' while you think of an answer to a complex question.
- ❑ When you've finished your answer, shut up. Quite often a reporter will carry on looking at you with pleasant silence and expectancy. The idea is to tempt you to carry on. Don't.
- ❑ Be strong and firm. Never get angry. Interviewers are often provocative, anger always rebounds to your discredit.
- ❑ Don't be led into unnecessary

defensive postures or self-justifications. When you are being pushed, just repeat your message firmly.

- ❑ Be intimate. Speeches which are superb at hall meetings flop on TV. Strikingly effective platform gestures look forced and phony. Remember it's a 50 cm screen, not the opera house.
- ❑ Be yourself. You may feel all alone out there under the lights. The camera person may very well yawn as you're speaking. But at the other end you're inside someone's living room and they must remain interested or they'll change channels. Try to be sincere, warm, natural. Don't be afraid to use your hands naturally to express yourself.
- ❑ Speak 'spoken English'. Written English is formal and stilted compared to speech. Even radio speech will be more formal than speech for television. Write your notes as you'll say them.