

## **On-Camera Media Relations Training for Public Relations Students: A “look live” on-camera interview assignment**

(910 words)

### **What is your idea?**

Students prepare for and conduct a two-minute on-camera interview as the spokesperson for an organization. By connecting two assignments together, a news release and an on-camera interview, students experience media relations in a controlled and realistically intimidating environment.

### **What are the goals?**

Bridging the gap between the classroom and industry by allowing students to participate in the media relations process, including release writing, pitching, and performing in an on-camera setting. Also providing faculty members from different areas (e.g., PR and video production) an opportunity to collaborate to create a professional learning experience.

### **How does it work? Give a step-by-step rundown of how it is implemented and what happens (in and/or outside of the classroom).**

Training public relations students in media relations can be a challenge, often limited to hypothetical situations and pretend narratives. We teach students that “earned media” can be an effective tool for getting out key messages to large audiences; however, few PR students ever have the experience of being on camera. To build empathy and best practices for on-camera interviewing, this assignment exposes students to the process of pitching for proactive media coverage on a short daytime/evening TV news segment.

First, students research a local business of their choice to become a confident spokesperson. Students must also create the details necessary to promote a fictitious upcoming event hosted by their organization, which will be the “news hook” of their on-camera interview. Next, students write a news release for a local television station seeking airtime to promote their organization’s upcoming event. They are given a short deadline to complete this release, including creating a formal email pitch to the station. Once that assignment is graded, students receive a “notice to appear on camera” by the station for the following week.

In the meantime, the instructor prepare students by lecturing on best practices for on-camera interviewing, including:

#### How to prepare

- ✓ Create talking points.
- ✓ Practice, practice, practice.
- ✓ Record your main points and listen back.

#### Interviewing Skills

- ✓ Always listen to the question being asked before you answer, even if you think you know what's going to be asked.
- ✓ Misunderstanding a question can lead you and the journalist in circle.
- ✓ Let the interview flow naturally.
- ✓ Don't force-feed your talking points, but work your answers in strategically.

#### How to dress and act

- ✓ Look and act professional as a representative of your organization.
- ✓ Don't wear flashy jewelry.
- ✓ Keep prints and patterns to a minimum.
- ✓ Try to wear pastel colors rather than black and white.
- ✓ Engage the journalist and be friendly.

The PR instructor works with a faculty member knowledgeable in video production to record the interviews in the most professional setting available, preferably a TV studio set up for a three-camera interview (host, guest and "two-shot" with both). The interview host should be someone with professional TV journalism experience, like a faculty member or local TV news reporter, who can gently control the interview and guide the student guest, if need be.

On interview day, students are kept in a "green room" area (not the studio) and enter the studio one at a time. Each student is escorted into the studio, hands a printed list of five talking points to the instructor who watches live from another room (e.g., the control room), is introduced to the journalist, asked to sit down, and fitted with a lavalier mic. The journalist asks for and takes note of the student's name and name of the organization, and gives them last-minute advice to relax, just look at her/him, and that they'll have a conversation. Technicians may need the student to briefly speak for a mic check and to refocus that camera. A floor director gives a countdown and the production goes "live."

Students must maintain their narrative, answer questions, and inject talking points. After introducing the student (e.g., “We’re here with [name] from [organization]”) and thanking her/him for being there, the journalist begins the interview:

- ✓ Tell us about [organization name].
- ✓ I understand you have an upcoming event?
- ✓ What is [organization name] hoping to accomplish with the event?
- ✓ Is there anything else you’d like to add?

The journalist concludes the interview by repeating the student’s name and organization, again thanking her/him, and “tossing” it back to the studio (e.g., “Back to you.”).

The instructor can grade these interviews in real time and looks for:

How many of the five talking points were mentioned?

How well prepared did the student look and sound?

How appropriate was their attire for an on-camera interview?

Completed interviews are edited together and shared back with the students for review (e.g., posted as an unlisted YouTube video). Students are asked to reflect on their performance and what they might do differently in the future, and perhaps to also constructively comment on their classmates’ performance.

### **How have students reacted? What are the take-aways for students?**

This assignment has become rather famous in our program. Whether they enjoyed it or not, students talk about it with one another and it gets great “buzz.” The expectations of preparing, pitching, and interviewing on-camera are heightened in the students’ mind when they first hear about the expectations. This reaches its peak when the students enter the TV studio for the first time. In the four years we have provided this exercise, the experience has frightened some, excited others, and even motivated a few to pursue television interviewing as a facet of their future careers. In their reflections, students have remarked that this assignment gave them a memorable perspective for something they would not have otherwise understood or fully appreciated: the knowledge and skills required to be a successful media spokesperson.