

WHO? WHAT?  
When? Where?  
How? Why?



Public Health Communications  
Taking Responsibility

By Margaret Kitchen

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Taking Responsibility

By Margaret Kitchen  
Journalist and Public Health Communicator

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School of Health and Human Sciences  
Liverpool John Moores University  
Liverpool L3 2AB

Tel: +44 (0151) 231 4301  
Fax: +44 (0151) 231 4320  
Email: [m.kitchen@livjm.ac.uk](mailto:m.kitchen@livjm.ac.uk)

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# FOREWORD

By Dr John Ashton, North West Regional Director of Public Health

Communication, communication, communication - there, I've got it off my chest! This is the secret and the imperative for effective action on public health.

The basis of public health practice, to protect and improve the health of the populations which we serve, is an accurate understanding of the issues and threats confronting people connected to policies and action to tackle these issues and threats. That's it in a nutshell.

The weakness of public health has often stemmed from a failure to make these connections. In the world of the 21st century and in a policy climate more favourable to making progress in public health than at any time since 1948, we must not miss our once in a lifetime opportunity to make a difference. The public health White Paper Our Healthier Nation and its sister framework for modernising the Health Care System - the NHS Plan, provide the agenda. What is needed now is a systematic approach to communication, which will underpin delivery.

Such an approach will be both comprehensive and inclusive and will need to ensure that communication at individual, group and population levels, as well as at corporate and institutional levels, is both open and dedicated to excellence on the one hand and empowerment of the public and front-line professionals on the other. The focus must be on addressing inequalities in health through effective partnership working at all levels.

This little book should help. It is intended to provoke and challenge all of us engaged in improving public health to reflect on and improve our communications. It is a first stab and we would appreciate feedback to help us develop it as a useful tool and roadmap for the journey ahead.

Dr John Ashton CBE  
21 August 2001



## Taking Responsibility for Communication

*"Words are the most powerful drug known to mankind." - Rudyard Kipling.*

You cannot have public health without communicating the messages, so honing your communication skills on a regular basis is a vital part of the work.

Communication means different things to different people. Dictionaries offer a variety of explanations, such as: *to impart knowledge or exchange thoughts by speech writing, gestures etc; to transmit (as in 'the dog communicated his fear to the other animal); or to have a sympathetic mutual understanding.*

Communication is, of course, all those things and more. Body language, instinct, mood, intellect, feelings, intuition and other human features, play their roles in both personal and public communication. Sometimes we are unaware of the signals we impart and therefore, like detecting an electrical fault, we need to develop skills to alert us to how well, or poorly, we are communicating.

Some of the most intelligent and creative people are very poor communicators. The ideas are up there in their brains but getting them out of their mouths and into other people's understanding can be a bit like wading through exceptionally thick treacle. Impatience is the enemy of communication but equally, developing patience can be tough for those whose imaginations are racing at the speed of a Formula 1 racing car.

People receive and absorb verbal information at different speeds and levels of understanding. They also read in a variety of ways. Good communicators develop the knack of tapping into everyone's receptors at an easy level. Humour is often an effective tool in enabling people to understand and remember facts. Good speakers, like good writers, will know how to raise a smile, a laugh, or at the very least a nod of empathy.

Professionals who have been highly educated often make the mistake of thinking they are good communicators. They may have been on courses for writing or speaking skills. They will have had to communicate their learning at college and they constantly liaise with their colleagues at work. Yet too often communication, especially in the work place, misses the point. Put any group of colleagues together and you will usually find they are trying to find out what somebody, usually the boss, really requires from a specific project, or issue.

A lot of time and money is wasted in poor communication. When public money, as well as public health, is at stake it is particularly important to develop personal responsibility for communication whether it is internal or external. This booklet is intended to help you take that responsibility.



In order to be a good communicator in your work and to put out healthy messages, you have to begin with yourself. So this is intended as a journey through you as a person, your family and wider social and working networks, on to the means of communicating public health messages and ideas in various ways including the media.

Confronting yourself as a communicator can be tough but removing barriers and understanding how others receive your communications, will enhance your public health work and help others too.

## Know Thyself

It was the Athenian philosopher Socrates, who said there were two simple rules for life: *Know thyself* and *Take nothing in excess*. Both these observations are as true today as they were when he lived between 469 - 399 BC. Practitioners of Chinese medicine, which has a growing following in this country, constantly repeat the latter, while good communicators urge the former.

If you do not know yourself very well you are unlikely to be a good communicator. Yet it is tough coming to terms with the person that you truly are, rather than the person you think you are. Especially if you are a well educated professional. Because you have received so much communication from other people in order to advance professionally, you might assume that you are, therefore, good at communicating the knowledge you have acquired to others. You only have to look at how often political messages go wrong, to know that a wealth of information and resources does not necessarily make you a good communicator.

The best starting place for measuring your ability to communicate is within your family. Partners, children or parents are unlikely to be backward at coming forward if you ask them to tell you how well they think you communicate. It might, however, be a difficult experience discovering that your nearest and dearest find you an exasperating communicator, so you need to be prepared for some honest feedback when you tackle this thorny issue with them!



The best idea is to ask them to give you examples of how you transmit information or wishes. How do your children translate your expectations of their behaviour? What psychology does your partner use to persuade you to do something, without having a row? How much do your parents know about your job? How much do you really want your family to know about yourself? (Now that can be a hard question to answer!)

You could also ask your friends how well they think you communicate, but do bear in mind that it is easier to forgive your relatives for telling you the truth than it is your best mates. Often we choose friends whom we know will support us, no matter how we behave or think, whereas families are not always so accommodating. If you ask for an honest assessment from friends you need to ask yourself whether the friendship can sustain such honesty...

Going back into your past and asking people whom you might not have seen for a while how they saw you as you grew up, can also be very revealing. Another way is to get a friend or relative to write your obituary. Sounds gruesome but all famous people have their obituaries written in advance of their demise by media organisations, so there is nothing new about this exercise. Curiosity about how you will be remembered is an effective way of coming to terms with the way you communicate.

Curiosity, is the foundation of communication. If you are not interested in people and their lives, you are unlikely to want to communicate with them. This is a criticism often levelled at 'ivory tower' academics who analyse mountains of information but rarely come into contact with a human being, out of choice.

Some people who are very focussed on their careers are prone to screen out the human activity around them and often fail to realise that this impacts on their ability to communicate successfully within their work. We are all guilty at some point in our lives of being incurious about our surroundings but to be so on a daily basis makes us exceptionally poor communicators. So we could add to Socrates's maxim: *Know thyself and those around you.*

## Observe, Listen, develop curiosity and trust

Observation, listening and curiosity are the key to developing yourself as a good communicator, while trust is the most important component of building up good relationships, whether personally or professionally.

You can develop your skills in this area by working on them but it is amazing how many people fail to do this. Communication as an integral part of working life has only recently been recognised as essential and many organisations are still grappling with how best to facilitate good communication. In public health, there have been various crises that have placed public health at risk and have undermined confidence in politicians and doctors, which have illustrated the need to improve communications and foster respect for the public's understanding of issues. The BSE crisis was a good example of this and one which will have reverberations for a long time to come.

Public Health practitioners recognise how important it is to develop relationships of trust with the people they serve. It is,

however, easy to pay lip service to a culture of openness and honesty, it is much harder to practise it in the context of extremely busy, stressful working days. Yet good communication can make working life less stressful.

By taking personal responsibility for developing your communication skills and those of the team you work with, you are helping to enhance your work and your relationships. A daily check of how things went, how they could have been improved and how you might manage similar situations in future is a starting point which can be extended to team discussions. Putting simple mechanisms in place like reviewing your diary to allow enough time to talk to people, can be a major breakthrough. Poor timekeeping leads to poor communication because you are too rushed to listen and people in a rush often make mistakes.

Good listeners make first class communicators. A lot of people listen selectively which can make them poor communicators. Short concentration spans and low boredom thresholds work against communicating effectively. If you have taken your personal journey through evaluating your ability to communicate, you will know by now whether or not you are a good listener.



You can work on your listening skills by devising your own exercises to see how well you have listened to another person, or during a meeting. The easiest way to check out your listening skills is to compare notes with somebody else who has been listening to the same conversation, or speakers. You might be surprised at how you vary in your listening experience. People often interpret what they hear, rather than report it.

Frequently people who are being interviewed by journalists think they have listened to a question when they have not heard what is behind the question. This can undermine credibility with the public who might think the interviewee is trying to hide something. Always listen carefully to the question before answering it and ask for clarification if you need it.

When you are talking to people they need to know you are listening to them. Listen with genuine interest - you need to work at this. Show understanding and empathy so you elicit a response. Study facial expressions and body language to learn more about the person you are talking to, or being interviewed by.

It is crucial to listen to everyone when you work in an organisation. Too often, professionals are so focussed on what they have to do, the mountain of paperwork that goes with it and the endless meetings they have to attend, they do not take the time to listen to the support staff around them. Personal assistants, office managers and so on, are the people who make the world go round. They are the most important people in the lives of professionals. By making time to take an interest in them,

by listening carefully to what they tell you and by delegating some responsibility to them, to make their work more interesting, you are building a dynamic team relationship which will help you to communicate well in all other areas of your work.

One of the toughest things you can do is to ask your colleagues what they think of you as a communicator and to take on board their criticisms. Yet you will strengthen your position as both a manager and a communicator if you are prepared to schedule in time to talk to the team about the processes of organisation and management and act upon suggestions for improvement.

Making your team feel valued is vital to the work of public health and to everything else. Those who are not valued do not perform well, because they are disinterested and perhaps even depressed, or much too frequently, distressed. It is all very well being a high-flying professional, with excellent ideas which impact upon the health of the community, but your plans will fall at the first hurdle if you do not have a supportive, informed and highly motivated team putting them into place. Your administrative support staff are your frontline communication troops. It is worth sticking that message to your computer, or fridge.

If those for whom you are working, can see that your colleagues have enormous confidence in you, that helps build relationships of trust which are crucial to the work of public health. We no longer live in an era when the word of a health professional was taken as gospel. The public is learning fast to ask pertinent questions and wants to be properly informed. Doctors are no longer perceived as 'knowing best', nurses are not necessarily viewed as 'angels' and all other health practitioners can expect to meet suspicion and hostility if they do not create a climate of respect and trust. Health practitioners have never before come under so much scrutiny. The expectations about communication is what is changing the culture of health care.



In the past, the authoritarian view of imparting limited information was usually done with a well meaning purpose. Health professionals did not want patients or the public to suffer unnecessary anxiety or distress, or to be overwhelmed with information they might not understand. These days people find that attitude condescending and even insulting. They

would rather decide for themselves what they want to know and they expect guidance to interpret complicated information.

Control is a key component of modern life. People might not turn out to vote at the ballot box but they will hotfoot to court if they feel they have been wrongly treated, or if control over decision making has been taken out of their hands. This does not mean that professionals should be haunted by fear of prosecution but that they should want to create a climate of trust and respect,

through excellent communication and practice, so that people do not feel as though they have been maltreated, or disrespected in any way. Respect and trust lie at the core of relationships between public health practitioners and the people they are working for.

The starting point for public health communications, is for each individual to want to be a good communicator. When you have taken your personal journey through your personal and working communication skills and reviewed their efficiency, you can begin to develop effective methods of communicating with the public. Bear the following message from the Reputations Communications Consultancy in mind:

### **Make Your Words Work:**

- First, be clear about who you want to communicate with and why.
- Next, listen to them very carefully, in particular for concepts, words and phrases they use.
- Try to see the world from their point of view - their hopes, fears and dreams.
- Use all this knowledge to shape the way, time and place you will communicate with them.
- Do so, but keep seeing things the way they do.
- Finally, get feedback - have they heard and understood what you thought you said?

### **Targeting messages appropriately**

There are many ways of communicating messages but not all of them are effective. The key to good communication is finding the most effective way of delivering messages. To do so you have to know your audience.

There is no point, for example, in targeting teenagers through the mainstream media if most of them do not read newspapers or watch news bulletins. You need to reach them through their own media - special interest magazines, music radio stations - and by placing notices, or holding events, in the clubs, bars, shops and sports centres that they visit.

It is worth bearing teenagers in mind when you need to communicate a message to any particular group because they are easy to profile in terms of where the messages need to be placed. The theory behind targeting teenagers, can also be translated to other groups. What do they do, where do they go, what do they read, listen to, watch on the television? Simple research can produce the most effective means of communication.



Using the media might not necessarily be the best way of getting messages across. If you work in a practice or clinic, the noticeboard is a starting point. Messages or events in schools, workplaces, public places, sports centres, libraries and so on, can sometimes have more impact than stories in a newspaper or on the radio or television where attention might be

fleeting. Or you might feel the need to display your notices in tandem with an event and media reporting. Messages should be written in plain English with no jargon, or acronyms.

Face to face contact, talking to people, is often essential but how do you know if the individual or audience you are addressing is listening well, taking in the information and committing it to memory? Using humour, asking questions, finding ways of repetition without boring your audience rigid are techniques worth developing. Giving people short, sharp summaries of what you have said is a helpful tool for aiding people to retain information. Most important, however, is to judge your audience in advance.

The comedian, Ken Dodd, takes a peek at his audience before he goes on stage and once he is standing before them he has a repertoire of warm up gags to gauge reaction and give him a steer about what kind of jokes he can move onto. Watching him, or any good comedian, at work is a useful exercise in developing communication tools for addressing an audience, or even individuals. Very few people get bored with a live performance of Ken Dodd, usually they are still there into the small hours and repeating his jokes for years to come. Watching him and other comedians reminds you that humour, empathy, body language and emotions are all tools of communication.

Holding events can seem like a good idea but you must first ask yourself what is the incentive for people to turn out? They will usually attend an event if they think they will have a good time, it will amuse the children, they will receive a gift or could win a prize, or they are particularly fired up about having a forum to impart their views. Learning something to the benefit of their health is rarely an incentive to turn out on a rainy day. So what you provide at the event and how and where you hold it, will be crucial to how many people learn from the experience.

You can never assume that once you have communicated a message, you have done your work. Communication has to be constantly monitored and re-invented.

Think of smoking as an example. Certainly since the 1960s, when health messages and education about the risks of tobacco related illnesses began to appear, smoking has diminished. It has become unacceptable in most workplaces and in many other venues. The smoker is made to feel a social pariah in lots ways,

yet smoking is still a primary cause of illness and death because of nicotine addiction and health promoters currently concentrate on the aids available to help people give up their addiction. Yet they do not just send out blanket messages, they target them appropriately. Ways are found, for example, of convincing smoking women who are preparing to conceive, that they will benefit from nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), or that they receive counselling which will support them through the ordeal of relinquishing their addiction.

You have to start early with this one by getting messages into the magazines women read when they are thinking of becoming pregnant, as well as putting them up in GP's practices, chemists and other public places. Just as women might take folic acid to try to prevent spina bifida in their children, so they might ask for an NRT prescription to

rid their bodies of nicotine. However, there are no guarantees in the risk business. There are always sections of the population for whom health is not an issue, it is something that doctors deal with and they are the most challenging in terms of encouraging them to stop smoking in order to conceive, or to protect babies and children from passive smoking.



Campaigning through national television advertising focuses on different life situations and age groups to promote giving up smoking. For example a campaign might depict younger men and women with children, whose illnesses and deaths have a devastating impact on many lives. This targeted campaign explodes the prevalent myth that you do not get lung cancer until you are older.

Then again, older people, who have smoked all their lives and have probably tried to give up several times, are more likely to say that smoking is not going to make any difference now, so they might as well carry on smoking. This generation could be more susceptible to the 'Don't give up giving up' campaign, which points out that NRT is available on prescription (therefore free to the over-sixties), that there is a drug which has the potential to cure the addiction forever. There are many ways of explaining that it is always worth making the effort to give up smoking in order to be healthier in old age.

Periodically there is a scare about cervical screening, which means much publicity has to be done, yet again, on the risks of not being screened. Hand in hand with the need to constantly re-invent the perceived benefits of screening for cancer, is the resistance by women to be put through this unpleasant ordeal and fears that their smears might get mixed up in the laboratories anyway.

Finding new ways of convincing women to keep on going through a distasteful screening process calls for a lot of imagination. When one of the characters in Coronation Street was killed off with cervical cancer, allegedly because of a mixed smear test, health professionals were in despair. Yet, as it turned out the story line encouraged more women than ever to have a smear test! Which reminds us of that old adage: “There is no such thing as bad publicity”. It also reinforces the power of messages promoted in soaps. We cannot, however, expect producers and scriptwriters to do the nation’s entire public health promotion work.

So much good practice is done in the field of child health, yet in many areas of the country, more than half of young children do not have their teeth cleaned. Persuading parents and carers of the importance of oral health care in children is an uphill struggle. So this is an excellent example of how health visitors, nurses and doctors have to go on being inventive. If you give out free brushes and toothpaste to one sibling at eight months, most likely you will have to do the same for the next one who comes along. Will there ever come a day when children automatically have their teeth brushed from the moment their first tooth appears? As an example of a communications challenge, tooth brushing is right up there with smoking and here we can see that the health visitors are the frontline communication troops in the battle against oral disease in children.

These examples illustrate that the communication of health messages needs to use a variety of methods. Local work can team with national campaigns and there is always an element of intuition, or instinct, in knowing what will work best in your community. There are no blanket prescriptions but therein lies the challenge for the professionals. Communication provides an outlet for creativity.

## Developing a communications strategy

If yours is a small organisation or office, it might seem a bit high flown to have a strategy for communications. But a strategy does not have to be a complicated document, full of jargon. It can be a very simple plan of what needs to be done, at what times of the year and how. It should always be written in plain English, without jargon or acronyms and everyone on the team should have a copy of it. The strategy should also contain procedures for dealing with crises in case they occur. There is nothing like good preparation for dealing with disaster.

Messages tend to be cyclical - there are the ‘killjoy’ warnings of the festive season about drinking or eating too much, taking drugs and so on. National No Smoking week crops up every March, keeping safe in the sun comes round every summer and people are urged to eat healthily and have safe sex on a regular, or seasonal basis.

Whatever your work, it is likely you will need a map of the year and a plan of how you will communicate messages, whether in an on-going manner, or with events and campaigns at different times of the year.

If, for example, you organise an annual run in July to encourage people to keep fit and to raise funds for heart disease research, your planning needs to start the previous August. You have to liaise with the appropriate charity, get your venue fixed, your motivators on board, your publicity material published, talk to journalists to ask for help in promoting the event and get your celebrities or dignitaries booked to come along to the start of the race. Keeping the details of how previous events have been organised helps prepare the annual process.

The need for communication should not come as a surprise. If everyone has a copy of the strategy which includes the main messages that need to be communicated, these topics can be brought up at relevant meetings and appropriate people involved in the planning well in advance.

You might work for an organisation which has a communications team, in which case they will have an overall strategy that your team can feed into and they will work with you to organise events, campaigns, press releases and so on. Identify your organisation's communicators and get to know them.

Communicators are, however, only as good as the people who communicate with them. They need to be well briefed in advance, invited to the relevant meetings and kept constantly informed of any changes or additional requests. They need to know who is empowered to speak to the media and who is not and they need to have any facts and figures involved in a campaign or story, easily accessible to them. These should be written up in a format that can be easily faxed or e-mailed to the journalist. The better your fact sheet, the more likely it is to be used exactly as you have written it.

This goes back to everyone being responsible for communications within an organisation. When you have a meeting with your communications people, always write a memo to them afterwards summarising what has been agreed, so that everyone is very clear about what will take place and who is responsible for what. You, or they, might be surprised at how different that memo looks, to what individuals thought took place in the discussion!

In fact, if time and resources permit, it is a good idea to get communications officers along to meetings on a regular basis. This way they move from being the person in a remote office who "does communications", to being team players who can influence communications, internally and externally, throughout

the organisation. This method of involving communications professionals should lie at the core of all work. The need for more communicators on the ground is vital and this could be something you could lobby for within your own organisation.

When you are communicating with the media you need to be aware that journalists not only react to crises, or come up with their own ideas for stories, much of their work is done around topical issues. So it is wise to keep up to date and constantly find out what is being written or broadcast about your speciality, so that you can prepare responses in advance, or do pro-active publicity yourself. For example, if you are driving to work and you hear a story on the radio about cot death and you work for a clinic. You could, either directly, or through your communications people, organise for a health visitor to speak to a journalist with advice for parents which will help and reassure them during the prevailing news stories. This is an opportunity to turn a negative story into a more positive one and to get preventative messages across.

The MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella) vaccine is a topic that recurs constantly. By being well prepared and constantly updated on this issue, health teams are providing anxious parents with information which they can use to form their own judgements about whether their infants should have the vaccination. This preparation extends to providing journalists with that information and, again, the better prepared you are, the more likely the information will be well presented in broadcasts or newspapers.

Know your journalist is a maxim all good communicators respect. Getting to know your local journalists and the way they work is vital to having a good relationship with the media which works both ways.

Targeting audiences appropriately while crucial, can be a dilemma for professionals who feel they have to over-simplify messages in order to get them across to the public. They might feel they are being judged critically by their colleagues who would say that the complexities of an issue are not being broadcast, or written about.

Recognising this is the first step to building your self confidence in communicating messages. Whatever your colleagues may feel, the whole purpose of communicating to the public is to target appropriately so you capture the interest of those who need to hear the message. They do not need to hear the complexities, they can leave that to the professionals. What you are trying to do is to persuade them to take professional advice.

So the message to anyone feeling intimidated by their peers is: be strong, make your point and help your colleagues to understand appropriate targeting!



## Working with the media - the internal structures of news organisations

Whether or not you are working with professional communicators to publicise messages, responding to media inquiries, or reacting to crises, you need to know how news organisations work in order to get the most effective results.

It is important to remember that news organisations, whether broadcasting companies or newspapers, are not public services. They are businesses. Even the BBC is a business in the sense that it is in competition for audiences with commercial organisations. Public health works for the public good, the media works to make profit through boosting audiences or readership. It is important always to bear these differing agendas in mind.

Inside the organisation, a newspaper is usually referred to as a “product”, so it is wise to think of news organisations in the same way as a box of soap powder. You should ask yourself whether your product sits with their product and why that organisation should market it for you? In other words - what is in it for them? Will your story sell more papers, encourage more viewers, or attract more listeners? Does it fit into the news agenda of the organisation and if not how can you make it more acceptable? What is the hook to attract the editor's attention?.

The days are long gone when newspapers automatically covered every public service in the community. Now public services must compete with everyone else to ‘sell’ their stories to the journalists. You need to have an unusual angle to your story to capture the imagination of editors.

It is important to know that a reporter, or writer, is only the frontline troop. Reporters do not make decisions about what goes into the paper, editors of sections make the initial decisions and the overall editor makes the ultimate decision. Reporters are given an angle to follow before they leave the office, or pick up the phone and often it does not matter whether they come back with an entirely different story, the editor will still want the angle he or she first envisaged.

Reporters do not write headlines, sub-editors write them. So the person who has researched and written the story, done the interviews and leg work, does not write the one thing most people remember from here to eternity. How many times have you read a story which was well written but winced at the headline? Well now you know why.

Headlines are what sell stories and newspapers. People do not stop and buy a paper because of the story on page 32, they buy it because the front page headline caught their eye (or out of brand loyalty). Think of the sub-editor who writes headlines in terms of the marketing copy writers who do the eye-catching slogans branded onto packaging. Like: *Daz Washes Whiter Than White*

or *Persil Washes Brighter*, headlines proclaim: *Doctor's Drug Ordeal* or *Nurse in Nightmare Attack* in order to sell the product.

The broadcast media works on a similar basis. Editors and producers back at base have a very clear idea of what they want from a story and the reporter out at the sharp end will be tasked with getting the story with the slant the bosses want. The presenters who read the news and do live, or taped, interviews are briefed by their editors to ask certain questions and those questions will have a pre-prepared bias. If you want to get your messages across you have to be firm about insisting that the reporter listens to you.

## Preparing for Interviews

Preparation is everything when it comes to being interviewed by journalists. Which does not only mean being prepared for a set piece interview on television or radio, or for a newspaper or magazine.

Your most frequent contact with the media is likely to come from your local newspapers, or broadcast stations which will phone you at the drop of the hat whenever a topic that concerns your organisation arises. Being prepared for the media means, therefore, that you must be constantly informed and updated on the subjects which you may be questioned about. Whether it is a major incident at a chemical factory, or the hole in the ceiling of the waiting room in the clinic, keeping yourself well informed avoids being taken by surprise and also shows that you are a serious professional.

Getting to know your local journalists and their specialities is vital to developing a good relationship and building up trust. Always be aware that they are being told what to do by their newsdesks, or other section editors, but over time you will get used to the way they work, what sort of questions they ask and the best ways to satisfy their need to write or broadcast a story.

When a journalist rings you without warning you do not have to start talking to him or her immediately unless you are entirely sure of what you have to say. Especially if you do not know the answer to the question, in which case you should admit that you do not and say that you will find out. Unless you are very practised at talking to journalists and very sure of your subject, you should give yourself time for thought and a little research.

Ask the journalist what is his or her deadline. Most likely they will respond that the deadline is immediate, or almost imminent. However, you usually have a few minutes, even half an hour's leeway to collect your thoughts, think through the questions they might ask and check that you have all the information they will want, as well as the points you want to get across.

Explain that you will phone back within a certain time limit. Take his or her direct and mobile numbers and do phone back exactly when you say you will. Any delay could be interpreted as fudging or stalling. Always sound authoritative and in control (even when you are not!). Anticipate the 'trick' questions you think they may ask and have an answer ready. Even if they do catch you on the hop, keep your cool and respond levelly, as best as you can. Calmness takes the heat out of the surprise. It is often hard to regain composure after what you perceive as an 'attack' but by being prepared for the unexpected you can deal with it, take a deep breath and move on. Getting testy, or hanging up, is only going to make the matter worse. Remember that practise makes perfect. The more you deal with journalists, the more you can anticipate what they will ask.

Journalists are always impressed by promptness, good manners and helpfulness. If there is nothing you can say on the subject, try to direct them towards more appropriate people. Or if you are not ready to pronounce upon the subject, never say 'no comment', which will generate suspicion that you are hiding something, always prepare a statement like: 'We are unable to discuss this issue at present as it is under investigation. As soon as we have the full facts, we will comment at that time.' The journalists will still try to press you but just stick firm to that line, bearing in mind that as soon as possible you must come back and provide the information required.

Keeping fact sheets handy is always useful, especially when you know certain topics are going to come up repeatedly. Journalists will worship you for life if you are able to fax them over a fact sheet with information that can virtually be dropped straight into their stories. They will also be over the moon if you can give them telephone numbers for experts on the topic under discussion. If you try to be as helpful as possible to journalists, they will appreciate your efforts and make more effort themselves to interpret the story in the best manner possible. Nothing is more irritating to a journalist on a tight deadline than a tight-mouthed, obstructive interviewee who should know better!

Being well prepared for interviews means that it is easier to stick to the messages that you want to get across. When a journalist takes off on a line of questioning which you feel is either unhelpful or irrelevant, you can interrupt politely and steer the conversation back to the information you wish to impart. Always identify three messages you need to get across and make sure you get to repeat those messages during the course of the conversation. Do not assume that the journalist has listened carefully to what you have said the first time round. Repetition is your best bet for getting the information across.

This is partly due to the fact that the journalist may well be coming new to the subject and so requires a little time to get his or her ear in to the themes and the language. We all do that in new areas of conversation. If you feel the journalist is not

understanding you properly, offer to go over it all again. Remember that a reporter is either writing or recording, as well as listening, so make allowances for the technicalities of interviewing. Speaking at a reasonable pace helps both note taking and comprehension. (But speaking too slowly might send your interviewer to sleep.)

Avoid jargon and acronyms, try to use plain English and ALWAYS spell unfamiliar words or names. You would be amazed at the number of experts who think that journalists can spell complicated medical or scientific words or terms that they have never previously heard. Remember that the journalist might be a little nervous as well and may feel too intimidated to ask what something means, or how it is spelt. I once asked a scientist how to explain a particular term he had used and he arrogantly replied: "Anyone who watches Newsnight knows what that means." Apart from his rudeness (I was tempted to hang up but I needed the assignment), if he assumes that all journalists watch Newsnight he is going to come a massive cropper some day.

Unless you know your journalist very well, never assume they have knowledge on the topic. General news reporters are not specialists and may never have done a similar story previously, especially if they are young - and many regional journalists are just starting out on their careers. Ask them, politely, if they know anything about the subject and they will probably confess immediately that they know nothing or very little. "What's it all about then?" is the best question they can ask. You can then give them a background to the issue, or situation, which will be helpful to them in their reporting - and they will be eternally grateful.

Journalists are only as good as the people they communicate with. Certainly things do get changed in the editing process but if the reporter has got the facts from a clear, well informed communicator, who speaks in easily comprehensible language, you are off to a good start in getting your message across.

If you agree to be interviewed on television, you not only have prepare for the questions and research the information you want to impart, you also have to think about appearance, body language and coherent speech in a stressful situation. Appearance is 80 percent of everything, so you need to put over the right image for your message. Practise relaxing your body, so that you can sit comfortably and not transmit tension, or look untidy.



Make sure you are wearing clothes which are not too bright or patterned and that your hair is not too wild, or your hands flapping. Details like this distract the viewer and may give a less serious impression, which could be destructive to your arguments. Colour can make or break an interviewee, it can make you

look wan and tired, or florid and flushed, so striking a balance is vital. Extremes of colour do not take kindly to studio lighting and cameras. Black tends to look too sombre, while white reflects in the studio lights and red can cause colour to 'bleed'.

If you are to appear on a regular programme take a look at the studio setting in advance and judge which colours might best suit the environment. You also need to know the format of the programme, is it a straightforward news programme, a chat show, or a discussion forum? If you have time, do your research in advance and it will help you be more relaxed on set. Anyway it is a good idea to study news programmes regularly and carefully to see how they operate and the style of the interviewers. There are a lot of people around who think they are Jeremy Paxman but most regional journalists are not as good as him and so it is easier to work out how to handle their interviewing techniques.

The 'trick' question is more difficult to deal with on television because your reaction is visible. Do not assume that because you have had a cosy chat with the presenter beforehand and gone over the outline of the interview, that he or she will not have a dynamite question up a sleeve.

A surgeon responding to a particularly tragic event at his hospital, will be incensed to the end of his days by the ordeal by camera he received. Having arrived at the regional television studio and had a lengthy chat with the presenter who went over the content of the interview in great detail, the doctor was horrified to hear the first question, live in the studio: 'Why have you been experimenting on children?' Somehow the doctor stumbled through an indignant denial but cannot remember the rest of the interview, or what he said. It is unlikely he will allow himself to be interviewed again. Sadly, nobody had warned him of the 'trick' question which makes a news report more 'entertaining'. (News is frequently referred to as 'infotainment' in the media business.)

Going over possible questions in advance with a colleague or two can help pick up the pitfalls and potential controversial questions, so that you are prepared. However, it is unwise to over-rehearse or you will sound scripted and insincere. Look for ways to put a positive spin on a negative question. Experienced interviewees prefer live interviews, even if it is nerve wracking for all involved and they might have the odd slip, because at least it cannot be edited to detrimental effect. If you think you are going to have to appear on television, or radio often, then it is advisable to pay for some good training.

Broadcast interviews, whether on television or radio, might also include other people in a discussion. You always need to know who else is going to take part, so that you can anticipate their views and deal with them robustly. For example, if you are calling for the regulation of prostitution, in order to bring down the high levels of sexually transmitted diseases, you can be quite sure that you will be debating with somebody from a family

values or religious organisation, who will feel they hold the moral high ground. Do a little research on their weak spots in advance so that you can use that as ammunition to put them on a level playing field!

Always listen carefully to questions and answer as honestly as possible. Remember the chairman of British Nuclear Fuels who, when asked at the very end of an interview, how his company would tackle converting nuclear waste into glass, answered: 'Safely'. A punchy ending will always be remembered.

## Who, What, Why, When, Where, How.....?

Journalism is all about those six crucial questions beginning with - who, what, why, when, where, how? Bear that in mind and you have the framework of your story, or your press release, when you are doing pro-active publicity.

If your organisation wants to issue a press release about an event, issue or innovation, the starting point must be those questions. The following is a brief statement to the media about a ministerial launch. Although it only contains three paragraphs of information it transmits all the relevant details and gives a contact number for follow up. Below is an analysis of the questions the press release answers:

### **Chairman Launches Safe Sex Campaign**

*The Chairman of Crompton Health Authority, James Jones, will launch a campaign for safer sex in Bridge Street, Crompton on Monday, July 1st at 10am.*

*He will unveil a billboard with a safe sex message which has been produced by the advice agency Keep Safe. Billboards, messages on the backs of buses and leaflets and posters in clubs, pubs and shops will be part of the campaign to make people aware of the need to protect themselves. The government is backing initiatives to encourage people to use condoms as rates of sexually transmitted infections are rising.*

*The chairman will meet young people who have been involved in developing the campaign and will be available for media interviews at 10.30am at the Junction Street health centre.*

*Editors: for further information contact Caroline Davis, Safe Sex co-ordinator, on.....or mobile:.....*

### **Analysis:**

**Who?:** The Chairman of the Health Authority.

**What?:** Will be launching a campaign for safe sex

**When?:** On Monday July 1st at 10am, followed by media

interviews at 10.30am.

**Where?:** Bridge Street, Crompton at 10 am, media interviews at Junction Street health centre

**Why?:** Because the Government is promoting safe sex campaigns

**How?:** The minister will unveil a billboard, talk to young people and give media interviews about the need for protection. The journalists will also want to talk to the young people involved and to the co-ordinator of the project. A fact sheet will be prepared giving details of the rise in sexually transmitted infections and the aims of the campaign.

Journalists are daily bombarded with information, so they do not like to be swamped with too much material in advance of an event. Send out your press release, preferably on one sheet only, a few days in advance of the event and then telephone the newsdesk nearer the time to confirm that a journalist will be attending.

Usually the newsdesk will also book the photographer but check whether you need to call the picture editor as well, to confirm that the photographer will be there, so you can prepare the subject for the photograph. Remember to include an out of hours number or mobile number on every press release. Journalism works 24 hours a day and you need to be available all the time if you are trying to get a story into the media. Similarly if you are on call to pick up media inquiries, you must give an out of hours number.

When the journalists arrive everything should be organised so that the photographers can get their pictures quickly and easily. News photographers never have time to linger so they need to get in and out with the best shots as quickly as possible. Remember that a picture speaks a thousand words, so preparation is the key here.

Work out, for example, where the chairman will stand and who should be with him and make sure the photographer has the names of everyone who is photographed - spelt correctly! Similarly television camera people need to have easy access for their work and they may want to do something a little different with the chairman, so ask in advance what they would like to do and how much time they will need, so you can slot it into the schedule. Radio reporters usually want somewhere quiet to do an interview, so would the health centre have a quiet office where they can go?

You are always more sure to get a story in the paper if it comes with a good picture. So if you are sending in a report to a local paper, you need to send a clear shot, properly captioned. Unfortunately, papers do not like groups of people grinning at the camera, or cheques or prizes being presented with a handshake,

so try to do something different. Take your subjects outside where the light is better and get them doing something which is eye catching. After headlines, photographs are the items readers remember most from newspapers and getting captions wrong can be a hanging offence. If somebody only has their picture in the paper once in their lifetime they do not want it to carry somebody else's name.

The six questions also apply to announcements or statements. For example:

## **Getting Help to Give Up Smoking Works**

*Thirteen thousand people quit smoking in the North West last year thanks to help from the NHS. Nicotine Replacement Therapy, counselling services and advice on the National Smoking Helpline combined to help people meet Government targets to help people give up tobacco and improve health.*

*£60,000 new funding has now been allocated by the Government to Tobacco Alliances throughout the region to boost campaigns to help people quit smoking. The Alliances include business, community organisations and health and local government services to work in local areas to reduce the use of tobacco.*

*Professor John Ashton, Regional Director of Public Health, commented: 'This is good news for the region. It means that more people will give their health a better chance and that non-smokers will be less affected by smoking in public places. Passive smoking is harmful and we all have a right to smoke-free environments.'*

*The National Smoking Helpline can be contacted on: 0800 169 0 169.*

*Editors for further information and case histories of quitters, contact Brenda Fullard, Regional Smoking Programme Manager on 01925 70423, or mobile:.....*

### **Analysis:**

**Who?:** Smokers. Professor John Ashton.

**What?:** Quitting smoking figures and announcement of Alliance funding.

**Why?:** Because the Government is encouraging people to quit smoking to become Healthier (and relieve pressures on the health service due to smoking related disease.)

**When?:** Now.

**Where?:** In the North West.

**How?:** By offering services to help people quit.

Journalists always want human interest stories, so they will probably follow up a press release like this by phoning the Smoking Cessation programme manager and asking for case histories of people who have given up, so they can document their struggle and the help they received. They might also interview the manager or Professor John Ashton to get a wider picture of this good news story. This is an opportunity for them to say that not only will people be healthier if they quit smoking but there will be less stress on the health service which has to treat so many diseases related to smoking.

Dry facts do not sell stories. People sell stories. People make stories relevant to other people's lives. So always ask yourself where the people are in any press release you are sending out or in general when talking to journalists. Case histories are always invaluable to journalists for making stories come alive.

Finally, you must also always remember the "so what?" factor. Bearing in mind what has been said before about selling products you must place yourself in the position of the editor. How does your story enhance his or her paper? Why will people want to read it? How is it different or unusual? What grabs the attention so that the editor will want that story in the paper?

Will the editorial team want to market your soap powder?

