



## The Five Key Performance Elements for Any Media Interview

By Brad Phillips

If you're like most of the executives in our media training workshops, you probably prepare extensively prior to any media interview. But are you preparing the right way?

Too often, media spokespersons spend hours drafting their perfect messages while giving absolutely no thought to the *presentation* of those messages. That's a major oversight, since most communications studies find that the *way* you say something has more impact than *what* you say.

Just think of the corporate executive on television whose eyes keep wandering aimlessly. Or the government official who appears frozen and stiff. No matter how good their words are, the audience will hold their poor eye contact and stiff appearance against them.

Mastering the five key media performance elements – your energy, eye contact, gestures, posture, and voice – is critical for media success.

### Energy

Often when I conclude a mock interview during our media training workshops, I ask the trainee to rate on a ten scale how much energy she thought she had during the interview.

“Oh, around a seven or eight,” she'll usually guess.

I then ask the other people in the room to rate their colleague's energy during the interview. They usually rate it a four or five. The trainee is usually shocked.

It turns out we're not great judges of the amount of energy we convey during media interviews. What feels right to trainees in the training room often looks flat on television – which makes sense when you consider that television tends to flatten people. That means that in order to be a successful television guest, you have to over-compensate by speaking with additional energy.

The single easiest way to do that is to increase your volume by 10 – 15 percent. I'm not suggesting you yell – the microphone will do the amplification for you – but rather that you speak using the most energized version of yourself. *That* version of you – the one that holds your friends' attention at cocktail parties – is the version of yourself you should bring to media interviews.



## Eye Contact

According to the authors of *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, Americans maintain eye contact just 40 – 60 percent of the time when talking. That's probably a good thing, since anyone displaying an over-abundance of eye contact can seem downright creepy.

But the media spokesperson who maintains eye contact just 40 – 60 percent of the time will fail. On television, the lack of eye contact comes across as nervousness (at best) or evasiveness and defensiveness (at worst).

In general, television guests will look one of two places, depending on the format: at the interviewer or at the camera. Regardless of the format, you should lock your eyes at the interviewer or camera and never let go. Aim for 100 percent eye contact.

Keeping your eyes locked in a fixed position during an entire interview will probably not feel natural, at least at first. That's because we often look away when trying to retrieve information from our brain. But since great spokespersons do most of their thinking *before* the interview begins, there's no need for them to look anywhere but at their target.

Finally, a word about straight-to-camera interviews, in which interviewees have to stare at the lens. It's a tough format. You might practice by delivering your answers to a specific place on your office wall. Another creative approach comes from a former trainee, who told me she succeeded in that format by drawing a face on a sheet of paper and taping it just below the lens.

Whatever it takes, lock your eyes and don't let go.

## Gestures

Hand gestures don't only make you look more natural, but are enormously helpful for the audience.

According to body language experts Allan & Barbara Pease, "Using hand gestures grabs attention, increases the impact of communication, and helps individuals retain more of the information they are hearing."

Something amazing happens in our training sessions when we encourage spokespersons to incorporate gestures into their delivery – their *words* actually get better. The physical act of gesturing helps them form clearer thoughts and speak in tight, staccato sentences.



For seated interviews, keep your arms open and ready to gesture at any moment. When not gesturing, keep your arms on your lap with your hands near your knees. Avoid clasping your hands, which is regarded as a “closed” form of communication.

For standing interviews, keep your arms by your side or, even better, in front of your torso. Avoid hugging your body in any way and resist the temptation to place your hands in your pockets.

As I mentioned in the section on energy, there’s an easy shortcut to bringing your natural gestures to a media interview. Just speak at a slightly higher volume than usual, say 10 or 15 percent louder. It’s often enough to help re-animate your frozen hands.

## **Posture**

Slump back into your chair for a moment.

Comfortable? Good. Now try to gesture with genuine enthusiasm.

If you’re like most people, it wasn’t easy. The gestures probably felt a bit forced and were almost certainly too casual for a media interview.

Okay, now lean forward in your chair. Plant your feet firmly on the floor in front of you (women, you may cross your feet at the ankles), and try to gesture again. It probably felt better, right? More natural, more authentic, and less forced?

Leaning forward and projecting energy outward may seem obvious, but many people in our media training sessions begin their first interview by slumping into their chair. Doing so inevitably dampens their energy and decreases their volume – worse, the passive position often makes them a little slower on their feet.

For standing interviews, try placing one foot slightly in front of the other. Doing so prevents the dreaded side-to-side sway and helps keep your energy directed forward.

For seated interviews, move forward so you’re only sitting on the front half of the chair.

Lean forward a bit to help increase your energy and ensure that the camera’s main focus is on your face, not your body.



## Voice

In its early days, radio was populated by announcers – mostly men – with deep, clear voices who “announced.” Those big, booming voices came to symbolize what a radio performer should sound like. But you do not need one of those so-called “radio” voices to be effective during your radio interview.

Instead, learn to breathe correctly. Take a deep breath. Did your chest expand? You aren’t breathing correctly. Try it again, and this time, as you breathe *in*, push your stomach *out*. Make sure your chest doesn’t move. Now begin talking and expending that air you’ve taken in. Your stomach should be moving in.

Now you are practicing “diaphragmatic breathing,” and the benefits are enormous for the spoken word. Your voice is suddenly fuller, more resonant and less nasal, and you have much better breath control, meaning you don’t have to take a breath as often. This is a technique you should continue practicing until it becomes the natural way you breathe.

## Conclusion

Eventually, your goal should be to incorporate all of the above tips. But trying to remember them all – plus your messages – might be overwhelming prior to your next interview.

Instead, focus on the one or two areas in which you’re weakest. Once you’ve improved in those areas, refer back to this list and add another one or two areas to focus on. By doing so, you’ll be on your way to becoming a terrific media spokesperson.

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