

# The Medical Cannabis Advocate's Handbook

## TALKING TO THE MEDIA

*By any of the major criteria of harm—mortality, morbidity, toxicity, addictiveness and relationship with crime—cannabis is less harmful than any of the other major illicit drugs, or than alcohol or tobacco.*

—The Police Foundation (UK)



# TALKING TO THE MEDIA

Talking to the media will almost certainly be a part of your work as a medical cannabis spokesperson and advocate.

After all, most Americans form their opinions about issues from news coverage. Your media work may involve interviews, published comments, or new online media. This chapter is designed to give you some basic skills in using your strategic messages to influence media coverage. News media can be a powerful tool for medical cannabis activism, but you need to know how to operate in the media environment to reap its rewards and avoid its pitfalls.



Consider the three major media formats you will encounter as an activist - broadcast, print, and new media. Each has its own strengths and weakness, but basic principles outlined in this chapter will be useful in all of them.

Broadcast media includes television and radio. These outlets reach broad audiences quickly, but the amount of time you have to communicate your message is limited. In contrast, print media offers a great opportunity to discuss medical cannabis issues in detail. That matters because print media is still the gold standard in opinion making. Politicians pay attention to influential newspapers and magazines. On the downside, the audience for print media is shrinking as broadcast and new media gain larger shares of the public eye.

New media is a term that refers to new and enhanced media content in the digital age. This includes the assimilation of print and broadcast media into online formats, but it also includes non-traditional media outlets like web sites, blogs, podcasts, etc. People sometimes use the term new media to refer to social networking sites like Facebook,

MySpace, or Twitter. New media is a tremendous force for the democratization of media, and medical cannabis activists should embrace it to be effective voices in the media. However, you must never ignore the power and significance of traditional broadcast and print media. A lot of people still form opinions based on network news or the daily newspaper.

This section will give you some tips and tools to use to prepare for a media interview. After reading this section, turn to the worksheet on page and practice turning your strategic message into a sound bite. Then **PRAC-**

**TICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE....**

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

### Logistics and Details

There are several questions you want answered before you agree to an interview. Some people are hesitant to ask these questions, but the more knowledge you have, the more prepared you will be. You won't lose an interview if you make sure to answer these questions:

- What's the format of the outlet? Print? Broadcast?
- What's the interview about?
- What's your organization's role in the piece being proposed? Are you the focus or just a supporting player? Who else are they interviewing?
- Which outlet is it for? Ask about the reader- or viewership to determine if it reaches your target audience. You shouldn't necessarily turn down an interview if it doesn't, though you probably won't make it a priority.

- What's the format of the interview? Is it a one-on-one, a debate, or another format?
- Are you part of a panel? If it is a broadcast interview, will it be live, edited on tape, is it a call-in?
- How long will the interview last?
- For print pieces, do they need a photo? Usually they will take their own pictures, so be prepared if they plan to have a photographer snapping away at you while you speak.

If you are comfortable with the answers to all of these questions, and you feel this interview gives you a good opportunity to get out your organization's messages, go for it. If you don't feel you are the right messenger for the show, consider suggesting someone else from

your list of spokespeople who might be more appropriate or who could make a stronger statement.



If the story just isn't on the right topic or won't give you the forum to discuss

what you want to discuss, consider turning it down. Spend your time on something that will let you get your message out.

### Creating Sound Bites

To have successful interviews, you need to answer questions in a way that supports your messages. If, after an interview, the quotes included in a story do not support your main messages, then you are what we call in the industry "off message." This is bad. You had an opportunity to get out your message and you blew it.

To avoid mistakes, practice interviewing using the messages from your strategic plan. All spokespeople for your organization should be familiar with and proficient in delivering these key messages. Remember: part of getting out messages successfully is picking the right spokespeople. Certain spokespeople will resonate better with your target audience than others. Don't let egos eliminate a chance

to showcase your best spokespeople and get the most from a media interview.

### Use the Three Cs

**CONCISE.** Typically, your comments will be edited to about 5 to 15 seconds or a short sentence. Focus on getting your points across efficiently. Avoid long words and lengthy sentences. Also, it is better to pause to gather your thoughts than to rely on fillers like "uh-uh-uh," "like," or "you know."

**CONVERSATIONAL.** Avoid insider jargon and policy-laden language; use words and descriptions that the average reader/viewer will understand. When you must use jargon, explain it—briefly.

**CATCHY.** The reporter is looking for the catchy phrase or sound bite. To ensure your main points are included, say them in a clever fashion. If you just presented a key point in an unclear or rambling way, stop for a second and make your point again. The reporter needs the quote to make sense.

### Say what you want to say

Sometimes media coverage is a double-edged sword. You want to get your strategic message out, but the reporter has another agenda. The most important thing that you can remember is that you have a role in determining how you and the issue of medical cannabis are portrayed. You can turn negative media coverage into something positive. We call this "redirecting" media. There are two basic tactics for doing this - sticking to your sound bite and turning back to your message.

Sticking to your sound bite - Reporters will sometimes try to draw you into uncomfortable territory with leading questions. You must remember that an interview is not a regular conversation. The media outlet is unlikely to broadcast the reporter's question. If you feel the reporter is leading you toward something negative, just repeat your sound bite (strategic message) and don't repeat their question in your answer. Repeating their question will make you want to answer it. This may feel awkward, but ensure the media

will have nothing to use besides your carefully crafted sound bite. Consider this example:

*REPORTER: "Isn't it true that most people who use medical marijuana are not really sick? Aren't they just trying to get high?"*

*ADVOCATE: "Research and experience show us that sensible regulations protect safe access while preventing crime and complaints around dispensaries."*

Note that the advocate did not respond to the reporter's accusation, thus denying the media outlet an opportunity to talk about people "just getting high." This may annoy the reporter, but it is what is best for telling the truth about medical cannabis.

Turning back to your message—Sometimes you will be unable to avoid responding to negative leading questions. In these situations, it is best to respond to the reporter's question with a generality, and then turn the conversation back to your strategic message as quickly as possible. This is a good tactic to use when you know the reporter's questions will be a part of the interview. Remember that you want a neutral "turning phrase." You are not trying to reinforce the reporter's bad question. Instead, you are trying to neutralize it. For example:

*REPORTER: "Isn't it true that most people who use medical marijuana are not really sick? Aren't they just trying to get high?"*

*ADVOCATE: "The large majority of medical cannabis patients are not taking advantage, but what we must remember is that research and experience show us that sensible regulations protect safe access while preventing crime and complaints around dispensaries."*

Always remember that you should not reinforce a negative message. Take your time to respond. Turn back to your message and stay on topic. The reporter may be frustrated by this, but you are doing the right thing.

## INTERVIEW TIPS

Interviews and studio discussions can be a bloodsport, and you, the interviewee, are one of the combatants. So here are some rules and tactics. Practice, as in any other sport, is absolutely critical. If you haven't done many interviews before, get someone to pretend to be the interviewer a day or two before you're due to go on, and get her to give you a hard time.

## RULES AND TACTICS

**Be informed.** This is the golden rule. Remember, this is an information war, and the best warriors are the ones with the best information. Make sure your information is reliable and stands up to critical examination.

**Be calm.** Generally the audience sees the calmest person as the winner. This doesn't mean you can't be passionate and enthusiastic—indeed these are good things—but don't spill over into anger. If necessary, take a deep breath before answering the question. Be polite but firm with everyone.

**Be concise.** Use as few words as possible, and speak with clarity and determination. You should summarize the whole issue in just one or two sentences before expanding on your theme.

**It's the answers that count,** not the questions. When you go into the studio, you must know exactly what you want to say and how you want to say it. Don't be too scrupulous about answering the actual questions—get to the points you want to make.

**Don't try to make too many points.** Have a maximum of three lines of argument. Any more and both you and the audience will get lost.

**Finish your point.** If the interviewer tries to interrupt you before you have finished, carry on talking until you've said it. Sometimes it's useful to say "Just a moment" or "If you'd let me finish." Be assertive without being rude. Don't let yourself be bullied.

**Simplicity.** Make your points as clearly as possible. Use short sentences and simple words. Try not to use sub-clauses (a sentence within a sentence), as you might confuse the listener.

**Turn hostile questions to good account.**

There are several ways of doing this:

- Deal with the question quickly, and then move on to what you want to talk about. This is the simplest and safest way of handling tricky questions. A good way of going about it is to agree with part of the question, then show that it's not the whole story.
- Deliberately misinterpret the question. "You're quite right; there were a lot of undesirable elements at the protest. In fact, there's an urgent need to regulate the security industry properly. Do you know that a lot of security guards have criminal records for violent assault?"
- Undermine the factual content of the question. But always, always, bring your answer back round to the point.

**Leave your notes behind.** If what you want to say isn't in your head, you shouldn't be in the studio.

**Project.** You're not having a casual chat with the interviewer or the other guest. This means that you should put more emphasis into your voice than you'd do in a normal conversation. It might sound strange to you when you first do it (and practice it before you do a real interview), but on air it'll sound fine.

**Use your body.** On TV a good rule is that your head and torso should stay fairly still (which makes you seem solid and trustworthy), but your hands should lend emphasis to what you say (they can help to drive your points home). Eyebrows are pretty useful too.

**Humor.** If you can do it without making it sound frivolous or irrelevant, a bit of humor can help a lot to win your audience over. Gently satirizing your opponent's position is often quite effective.

**Don't hate your opponent.** This is absolutely necessary. Whatever you might think about

the person you're up against, you must leave your feelings at the door of the studio. If you allow yourself to hate them, you'll lose your cool, lose focus and lose public sympathy. One way of dealing with your feelings is to regard your opponent as someone who has been misled and needs to be told the truth.

*[Adapted from "An activist guide to exploiting the Media" by George Monbiot <http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhplgs/handbook/media.htm>]*

**AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

**Give Thanks.** Write a note to the person who interviewed you, thanking them for their time and attention. Regardless of how the story comes out, you want them to know you appreciate the opportunity to talk about your campaign/issue.

**Review the coverage.** The best way to get better at interviewing is to review your performance and make a list of what to do better or differently next time.

Ask yourself:

- Were you on message?
- Did you get your main points across in a concise and easy to understand way?
- Did your opponents make any compelling arguments for which you will need a good counterpoint in the future?
- Was the piece in any way inaccurate or unfair?

**If the story is inaccurate or unfair...**

If a story comes out with factual mistakes or misquotes, do not call up screaming at a reporter. Instead, calmly point out the mistake and ask for a correction. Consider contacting the editor or news director. Going over a reporter's head is a serious step and should only happen when a major mistake has been made and the reporter refuses to acknowledge his/her responsibility for the miscommunication. If you go over a reporter's head without first speaking with him/her, you will sour whatever relationship you have with that reporter, and it can come back to haunt you.

*\*prepared from materials produced by Resource Media\**