

# ImPRESSive

## A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

July 2002

### ON THE RECORD & OFF THE RECORD: CONTROLLING THE STORY

*Are you intimidated by talking to reporters because you don't know WHAT they will write? Knowing and establishing the parameters of a discussion or interview before giving reporters information will allow you to control the message and help shape the story.*

*There are four kinds of verbal agreements you can establish with a reporter. Before you answer any questions, it is always a good idea to determine how your answers will be used. You can do this by establishing whether you are speaking to a reporter "on the record," "not for attribution," "off the record," or "on background." Each level of conversation determines how much of what you say can be used in the story. You can deliver your organization's message effectively through each of these methods, and more importantly, you can use each of these methods to shape the story.*

#### ON THE RECORD



Speaking on the record is the most direct means of delivering your message. When talking to a reporter on the record, it is understood that anything you say can end up in the story and will be attributed to you. Once you establish that you are speaking on the record, you cannot retract anything you have said. Therefore, talking on the record is the equivalent of talking into a microphone or into a tape recorder.

On the record should be used when you want to get your organization's message out to the media through your spokesperson.

#### **What Is Message?**

Message is the main point and idea that helps shape and target your argument. Your message should be the main thought you wish to convey to the press about an issue.

When speaking on the record, it is extremely important to stay on message and to not stray from your talking points. You will not be given the opportunity to retract a statement or to take back anything you said. Therefore, you should make sure to say only the things you want to appear in the story. Stay on message.

To prepare for an on-the-record interview, you should decide what message you are trying to communicate. Talking points are good tools to prepare before your interview. In addition,

# ImPRESSive

**Writer:**

Kati Anderson

**Layout:**

Anita Watts

**Editor:**

Ingrid VanTuinen

Readers are encouraged to reprint **ImPRESSive** materials, giving credit as follows:

“Reprinted from **ImPRESSive**, Families USA, 1334 G Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-3169.”

Please send us a copy.

## Tell us what you think...

**ImPRESSive** is a series of tip sheets providing media guidance to advocates. Please contact us with your comments and questions.

Phone: 202-628-3030  
Fax: 202-347-2417  
info@familiesusa.org

For additional copies, send stamped, self-addressed envelopes to:

**ImPRESSive**  
c/o Families USA  
1334 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005.

tion, you can practice your talking points and discuss your message with someone else. In preparing for the interview, try to anticipate what questions are going to be asked and plan how you will answer these questions in a way that gets your message across effectively. An on-the-record interview works best when it is controlled. An on-the-record interview should never be conducted spontaneously.

## Tips for Speaking On The Record

- ❑ **Never speak on the record without knowing everything about the interview:** You should never talk to a reporter on the record if the reporter calls you out of the blue and doesn't specify exactly what the piece will focus on. If this happens, you should take a message and then call the reporter back. This way, you can figure out what the reporter is writing about and anticipate the questions that might come up. Calling the reporter back once you are prepared puts the ball in your court so that you have better control over what is said during the interview.
- ❑ **Don't let the reporter take you off message:** Continue to bring them back to your message. Don't worry about sounding repetitive. The more you repeat your talking points, the more likely it is that your points will get across. Your goal when speaking on the record is to get your message out through direct and clear talking points even if this means that you are repeating them over and over again. Reporters can only *use* what you give them, so only give them what you want them to use.
- ❑ **Answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering:** If you are asked a question that you did not expect, but you know the answer and it is something you feel comfortable answering on the record, then you should briefly

answer the question. If the question takes you off message, answer it briefly and then link it to your original talking points.

- ❑ **Don't fall for the silent trick:** Reporters often use silence as a technique to get their interviewee to continue to talk and add a comment that is not scripted. Don't fall for the silence. Answer the questions using your talking points and then wait for the next question. If you begin to feel uncomfortable and start to talk, you will very likely say something that you did not mean to say.
- ❑ **Pass on questions if you do not know the answer:** Even the most seasoned interviewee sometimes gets unexpected questions. If you do not feel comfortable answering the question or, worse yet, you do not know the answer, you should feel free to pass. For example, if your interviewer asks you about a particular piece of legislation that you are not familiar with, you can answer in the following way:
  - "I don't know the answer to that question, I'll have to get back to you with that information,"
  - "I don't know that off the top of my head, let me get back to you later," or
  - "That is not really within my area of expertise, but I would be happy to get that information to you later."

Remember, it's better to admit you don't know the answer than to have an inaccurate quote in the paper.

- ❑ **Juggling between staying on message and not stonewalling the reporter:** There is a big difference between continuing to bring the interview back to your message and not answering a question. You don't want to sound like a broken record, but you also want to

control what is being said in the interview. Therefore, you should prepare talking points that say your points in many different ways, and you should anticipate how you can answer a variety of questions with your talking points. Answer the questions, and quickly tie them back to your message.

- ❑ **Don't be a fickle source:** Once you have established that you are speaking on the record, it is not advisable to change your mind mid-sentence and to attempt to retract your statement. If you do, you run the risk of the reporter printing it anyway. More importantly, you will damage the relationship you have with the reporter. If you ask a reporter to not use something you have already said, you are breaking your agreement. This will ultimately harm your relationship with that reporter. They'll no longer come to you as a reliable source.

### SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR KEEPING AN ON-THE RECORD INTERVIEW ON MESSAGE:

Imagine that the focus of your interview is the importance of a real prescription drug benefit in the Medicare program.

If the reporter begins to ask you about patent abuse and different drug litigation cases, you should answer the question briefly, and then return to your original message, which is that all of these lawsuits exemplify the need for a real and meaningful prescription drug within the Medicare program.

## NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION



Not for attribution is an agreement in which a reporter can quote what you say but cannot attribute it to you. Therefore, the article would use your quote but attribute it to a health care advocate. Quotes that are not for attribution appear in the paper all the time. Articles that say things like “a senior White House staffer said” or “a source close to the campaign said” are all based on information that was revealed because the reporter agreed to not attribute it to the source.

Not for attribution can be used to leak information that you would like to see in print but that you would not want your name associated with. The quote has validity because it does attribute the information to someone who would be in the know, but it is not as direct as an “on the record” quote. Not for attribution is

usually reserved for juicy bits of information that you know a reporter is going to be itching to print when you do not want your name or organization associated with the quote.

Negotiating a not-for-attribution agreement can be tricky, and it must hinge on two very important elements. 1) You must make this verbal agreement BEFORE you give the reporter any information. The reporter will probably try to get the information before giving up the right to attribute it to you. Don't let her. As soon as you give up the information, you lose the right to control the source of the quote. 2) You should only work with reporters that you trust when giving up information that you do not want attributed to you. Not for attribution relies heavily on trust. Therefore, if you do not already have a working relationship with a reporter, you really have no basis of knowing if he or she will break your agreement.

### Script for Establishing a Not-for-Attribution Agreement:

**You:** I have some information that you're going to find interesting, but you cannot quote me on this. (If you feel that you need to have further clarification.) My name cannot appear anywhere near this information.

**Reporter:** What is it? Is it good?

**You:** It's very interesting, but I am not giving it to you until you agree not to attribute this to me.

**Reporter:** Is this necessary?

**You:** Yes.

**Reporter:** Okay, I'll say it's from a health care advocate.

**You:** Alright, here's the information....

## OFF THE RECORD



The main difference between off the record and not for attribution is that information you give off the record cannot be printed in the story. If you establish that a conversation is off the record, the reporter **MUST** find a different source to give her that information before she can print it in the story. If the reporter prints something you said off the record, that reporter has broken your agreement.

Types of information you would give a reporter off the record:

- ❑ Information that you feel would help the reporter better shape their story but that you do not want to see in print.
- ❑ Information that you have heard, but you can't verify if it is true and therefore you do not want to be the one that leaked the information.

In order to establish an off-the-record conversation, make sure you do not give any information to the reporter until you have received a verbal agreement that it cannot be printed in the paper. The way it works is that a reporter comes to you with a question. You must then establish that you will answer if the reporter agrees that it is off the record. For obvious reasons, most reporters will try to talk the information out of you before making this agreement. Therefore, it is extremely important that you remain firm and do not reveal any information until you come to a verbal agreement that the reporter will not use any of the information you are sharing. If the reporter cannot give you the verbal acknowledgement, then you should move on to the next question.

## ON BACKGROUND

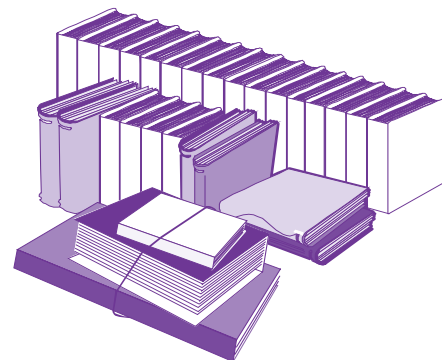


When speaking to a reporter on background, you are giving the reporter important information they will need to write the article.

This is usually when you give reporters data, a historical context for their story, and other information that shows relevance and helps shape their story.

As with not for attribution and off the record it's important to establish that the information exchanged is on background before you give the reporter any information. Simply saying "I can talk to you only on background" can do this. If you give the reporter the information before you establish that it can only be used on background, you run the risk of having data as your quote in the article instead of a tight quote that better conveys your message.

It's important to remember that just because you are not being quoted directly does not mean you should not stay on message. On background can be an effective means of delivering your message, as long as you remain focused and give clear data that back up your talking points. Therefore, instead of spouting figures and numbers, take some time to figure out how the information you have will best support your talking points and message. This is not the time to tell both sides of the story or to give the reporter any data that supports your opponent's points. Leave the objectivity to the reporter—that's her job. You should just focus on getting your points across clearly and effectively.



## Script for Establishing an Off-the-Record Conversation:

### **SCENARIO:**

You are talking to a reporter about a piece of legislation. You have heard that a certain state senator has decided to support this piece of legislation. Nevertheless, you do not have any proof that this is the case. This state senator is someone your organization never works with and who historically never supports your issues. You find through your conversation with the reporter that she is not thinking that this piece of legislation stands a chance of getting anywhere. Therefore, you feel that if she knows that this certain state senator has decided to support the bill, she would change her mind. Nevertheless, you know that if the information gets printed, you run the risk of losing this state senator's vote.

---

### **STRIKING THE DEAL:**

**Reporter:** This bill goes before the state senate every year and every year, it fails to pass. What makes you think that this year is going to be any different?

**You:** I have heard something but I cannot tell it to you on the record. If I tell you, it has to be off the record.

**Reporter:** Is this necessary. What did you hear that I couldn't possibly tell my readers?

**You:** This must be off the record or I can't answer your question.

**Reporter:** Okay, I agree that we are speaking off the record. What is it?

**You:** I have heard from a source that state senator x has decided to support this piece of legislation.

**- OR -**

**Reporter:** You agreed to speak on the record. I don't want any information if I can't quote you.

**You:** Okay, then all I can tell you is that we have every indication the bill could pass this year.

## CONCLUSION



The most important aspect of speaking to reporters is to be candid and up-front about how you would like to have your information used in their story. Remember, you lose all bargaining power as soon as you have given up your information. Therefore, make sure to be open and clear about how you would like them to use the information. A reporter cannot be mad if you give them information off the record after they have agreed to listen to it off the record, but if you decide that something you already said should have really been off the record, you run the risk of having the reporter print the information anyway or, even worse, of severing ties you. Don't be intimidated about standing your ground and controlling how you would like your information to be used. By navigating these four ways of communicating with reporters, you will be able to successfully control how reporters shape their stories and get your message out through the media.



Next **ImPRESSive**:  
Coming in Fall 2002

Finding the Hook:  
Getting Press Attention  
without a Press Conference

In the next **ImPRESSive**, learn the tricks to getting the Media's attention without a traditional event.

## ImPRESSive

### Back Issues:

- \* **Building and Maintaining Relationships with Reporters**, April 2002
- \* **Tips for Interviews - Part III: Television**, January 2001
- \* **Tips for Interviews - Part II: Radio**, December 2000
- \* **Tips for Interviews - Part I: Newspaper**, October 2000
- \* **Getting Your Message Into National Stories**, June 2000
- \* **How to Shift Focus on a Story**, April 2000
- \* **The Art of Story Banking**, July 1999
- \* **Getting in the Editorial/Opinion Pages**, March 1999
- \* **Creating Working Media Lists**, December 1998
- \* **Drafting a News Release**, October 1998

All issues of **ImPRESSive** are available on our Web site at [www.familiesusa.org/html/advocates/impres](http://www.familiesusa.org/html/advocates/impres).

  
The Voice for Health Care Consumers  
1334 G Street, NW, 3rd Fl., Washington, DC 20005