**6 Minutes for Media**

Public understanding and support for the work that fire workers do is critical to the success of our mission to manage fire. Every fire worker - from local volunteers to agency leaders in Washington, DC and everyone in between - is responsible for helping educate people about fire management. The following daily discussion points will provide fire workers with some basic media protocols and tips for achieving successful interviews.

**Non-verbal Communication**

Although much of the following information pertains to television interviews, the basic principles are common to any communications environment. For better or worse, what is said is not always as important as the manner in which it is said. Impressions may outweigh substance. Here are some tips for improving you non-verbal communication:

* Maintain a pleasant, attentive appearance. On camera, smile only when it is appropriate. Match your facial expression to the seriousness of the issue.
* Concentrate on the interviewer. Maintain eye contact with him/her. Don’t look at the camera.
* Keep your head up. If you’re sitting, sit up straight. Don’t slouch or lean to one side.
* When standing, keep still. Don’t sway or bounce on the balls of your feet. Any movement is exaggerated on camera. Let your hands drop naturally to your sides and use natural hand movements for emphasis. Avoid choppy motions with your hands. Keep your hands and arms below your shoulders and away from your face.
* Do not look at, lean into, or touch the microphone. The reporter will hold it at the appropriate distance.
* Avoid nodding your head unnecessarily. It may erroneously signal agreement with what was said.
* Wear PPE, including a hard hat, but remove sunglasses or dark eyeglasses in order to establish eye contact with interviewer.

**Preparation Is Key**

* Choose a person who is serious about helping you, one who will do her/his best at playing the interviewer.
* Supply the practice interviewer with your list of anticipated questions. Have the interviewer mix up the list and rephrase the questions in their own style. Instruct the interviewer to press you on those questions and to go on tangents.
* Fully answer each question, but try to redirect the interview back to your agenda of prioritized message points.
* Set a firm time that closely approximates the time you expect to be interviewed for the real thing.
* Practice with as many interviewers as possible.
* If you can, videotape or audiotape each interview so that you can critique your answers. Pay particular attention to how you made your main points, regardless of the questions.
* If you make an error, start over.
* Work to shorten your answers. In a broadcast interview that you know will be edited, a short comment that clearly makes a point is apt to be used.
* Make sure that you listen to the questions and don’t talk over the interviewer. If you talk over the question, your answer cannot be used.

**Staying on Message**

Always remember that your objective is to give the reporter a story based on what YOU want to say.

* First question, step back and provide value. Be concise and say your most important message (often this will focus on safety).
* Keep your cool!
* Stick to your main points, even if it means repeating yourself both early and often.
* Know when to be quiet. Dead air is the reporter’s problem.
* Don’t speculate. If you don’t know the answer, say so, and offer to find someone else who does know (make sure you actually follow up). In a live interview, bridge back to your main points.
* Remember that you represent your organization or agency. Try to avoid giving your personal opinion, unless specifically asked. [Is this accurate for our purposes?]
* Don’t speak on behalf of anyone else. Let other people, organizations, and agencies speak for themselves.
* Clarify/correct incorrect statements made by the reporter.
* Flubbed? Say “Let me start again,” then say what you need to say (for taped broadcast).
* Avoid simple yes/no answers. Use the opportunity to bridge back to your main points.
* When asked “Do you have anything else you would like to say?” or “Anything else?” say you do, then use “The most important thing to remember is…” to really draw attention to your priority message(s).

1. **Five Easy Interview Steps**

Listen carefully to the reporter’s questions and give appropriate answers. Sometimes we tend to give the same answer over and over, whether it has anything to do with the question or not. The trick is to answer the question then smoothly work in your main message. The following 5-Step approach helps you do that:

1. Wait until the complete question is asked.
2. Answer the question directly.
3. Bridge to your main message.
4. Present your main message.
5. Be prepared to back up your statements with facts or another message.

You may need to follow these steps several times during the same interview to stay on message.

1. **Commonly Misused and/or Abused Words and Phrases**

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| **Issue:** | **Reason/suggested alternative:** |
| Irregardless | Nonstandard English - avoid using. It’s “irrespective” or “regardless.” |
| Very unique | Unique means one of a kind. It either is or isn’t. No qualifier is necessary. |
| Completely destroyed | Destroyed is another absolute. It either is or isn’t. |
| A myriad of… | Myriad stands alone. Should be “myriad \_\_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank - i.e. responsibilities) |
| The media is… | “Media“ is plural. Should be “The media are \_\_\_\_\_” (fill in the blank) |
| Close proximity | Proximity means close. |
| General consensus | Consensus stands alone. No qualifier is necessary. |
| Point in time | Points are in space. Moments are in time |
| I feel badly | That means to do a bad job of feeling. Should be “I feel bad.” |
| Lost (i.e. houses lost) | Use “burned.” We’re not looking for “lost” houses. |
| Dilemma | Not just a problem, it is a choice between two equally balanced alternatives. |
| Acronym | Is a word, not just a set of initials. For example, NASA is an acronym, CDF is not. |
| Literally | Means actually. To say a person literally exploded with enthusiasm is likely not true. |
| Basically | One of the most overused words. It means pertaining to forming a base, a fundamental. To say “Basically, we went home after the game” is not a correct usage. |
| Imply/infer | These are often interchanged, but the speaker implies a message and the listener infers meaning from it. |
| “You know” | Don’t use it. |
| Prescribed fire | Controlled burn |
| Wildfire | Fire, [name of] fire, megafire |
| Ecosystems | Natural areas, outdoors, forests |
| Ecological | Natural processes |
| Environmental | Lands and waters, outdoors, forests |
| Ecosystem services / infrastructure | Natural benefits |
| Landscape-scale conservation | Large, connected natural areas |
| Biodiversity | Fish, wildlife, and plants |
| Environmental groups | Conservation groups |
| Herbaceous / vegetative layer | Plants and grasses |
| Fire regime | Natural fire cycle |

**Key Messages for the 2014 Niobrara Valley Preserve TREX:**

1. **Safety is paramount.** That’s why we burn when we do and why we anchor into previously burned areas, perform extensive planning, relentlessly monitor weather conditions, meet national standards for fire workers, and coordinate with local fire departments and other highly experienced personnel. Recent wildfires - not just in Nebraska but also across the U.S. - were an important reminder of the urgent need to proactively manage our forests and grasslands. Tree thinning, grazing, and controlled burns are proven to reduce flammable vegetation and help lessen the potential for future catastrophes.
2. **Fire training is necessary and important.** This exchange fills an important role: increasing fire capacity across the U.S. at a time when this knowledge and experience is in high demand. It’s an issue most everyone can agree on, as evidenced by the numerous private and public entities that have assembled to make this happen. These include: The Nature Conservancy, Nebraska Forest Service, Fire Learning Network, Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Firestorm, Niobrara Council, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.
3. **Like rain, fire is critical in the Great Plains.** Controlled burning is a necessary part of habitat restoration and protection in many landscapes. Proactive actions like these are better for people, water, and wildlife.
4. Pay now, or pay later. Nebraska spent $12 million on wildfire suppression in 2012 (Nebraska Forest Service). From a strictly economic perspective, it is cheaper and more effective to keep woody fuels from building up than it is to deal with out-of-control blazes. Ranchers lose money on every grazing acre that is lost to cedar encroachment.
5. **The next generation of fire workers, managers, and conservationists are taking fire leadership seriously. Fifty members of the Student Association for Fire Ecology (S.A.F.E.) from five universities are spending their spring breaks learning at the Niobrara Valley Preserve.** S.A.F.E. is a college club that supports students studying fire ecology. These students will learn how to use equipment, ignite fires, and plan controlled burns. They will also study the effects of fire on grasslands by visiting controlled burn sites completed over the last few years.
6. Building on past successes and lessons learned, the training exchanges have grown every year, attracting more partners and participants from around the U.S. and the world. People who have met in Nebraska have gone on to host training events in South Africa and Spain.
7. Wildfire effects, such as erosion and large numbers of dead tree skeletons standing across the landscape, at the Niobrara Valley Preserve are dramatic reminders of what unchecked, excessive fuel loads and drought will produce. In contrast, forests and grasslands that have had the benefit of mechanical clearing and fire continue to provide healthier, more resilient ecosystems.

\*\*\*Portions of the information above were adapted from *A Guide to Successful Media Interviews* (NIFC, 2009), located at: <http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/Background/NIFC-MediaInterviewGuide2009-Landscape.pdf>.