



*Remote Media Interviews Are Here to Stay:
How Your Spokespeople Can Thrive*

ED BARKS

www.barkscomm.com



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Policies. Procedures. Parameters.

Most businesses have written directives in place for everything from technology to personnel to work space. Many, however, have paid no attention whatsoever to an emerging facet of their reputation and public image — how their spokespeople handle [remote video interviews with the press](#).

I took a quick scan online, searching for what ground rules organizations have set forth for such exchanges. I wasn't shocked to discover that the cupboard appears to be bare. Granted, many companies will not publish those guidelines publicly, understandably so. Still, it strikes me as odd that not one example came to the fore.

Make no mistake. This is an important and urgent need. Businesses that flop during remote broadcast interviews are destined to lag behind the competition. On the other hand, those that thrive move themselves closer to their business and public policy goals. And isn't that what any media campaign should be designed to do?

So we find ourselves with a clear need for guidance. That is what this paper intends to deliver:

- A series of best practices to abide by.
- A catalogue of worst practices to avoid.
- An outline of who needs to be involved in structuring your video media interviews.
- The good news regarding job opportunities this opens for TV producers and directors who have been tossed out of work.

The Rationale for Corporate Guidelines

Why the need for such guidelines? Rules for [video interviews conducted remotely](#) need to be part of any up to date [communications strategy plan](#).

You might have been able to sneak by without such advice to your spokespeople in pre-pandemic times. Now? As we have all experienced, interviews via Skype, Zoom, and similar tools are de rigueur. If your company is not ready to take advantage of this current trend, you lose. You can bet your rivals will be more than happy to fill the vacuum for the press.

It takes a new set of tools to deliver a message with punch via video link. Sure, a [magnetic message](#) developed properly remains vital. [Nonverbal performance](#) still matters, too. The fact is this latter dynamic contains some new wrinkles in the nascent remote interview environment.

The bottom line question: Why does all this matter?

Should it make a difference that your CEO has no idea where to maintain eye contact with the camera? What's the big deal if your CFO fades into the background when using a not-ready-for-prime-time technology that attempts to blur the background? Why should it matter if the chair of your board shows viewers a shot straight up their nose? Who cares if your chief communications officer is interrupted by cats prowling in the background?

Because your company will be a laughing stock. Perhaps you'll even succeed at trending on Twitter, though not in a good way.

Poor performance cuts your chances of attaining your important business and public policy goals, ceding ground to your competition.

On the upside, having guidelines for remote interviews in place helps to reinforce performance that bolsters those goals.

Best Practices Leading Companies Will Employ

What do effective standards for video interviews look like? Here are some of the key components that help to foster a professional persona when participating in a remote exchange from home or elsewhere:

- Familiarize yourself ahead of time with such logistics as what video system the media outlet prefers, and how to sign on to it.
- Ask the producer in advance when they expect you to sign on before the interview. Whether they say five minutes or fifteen minutes, honor their wish. This gives you time to adjust to the environment while letting the production crew sort out any technical snafus.
- Assuming you have a few minutes of prep time with the producer just before your interview begins, note if there is any delay between their questions and your responses. If you are thrown into the interview cold, pay attention to this early on. It can help smooth out, at least to some degree, the fits and starts so common in remote video exchanges.
- Dress and groom like a grownup. Business attire, a shave, properly groomed hair, and makeup convey a professional look and feel.
- Inform family members or roommates when you plan to participate in a video call so they can avoid hollering across the house, traipsing across the background, etc.
- Leave your video camera open throughout the interview, unless the producer tells you otherwise.
- Understand that you are likely to be on camera for the entire interview even if you are paired with another guest.

Smart businesses will implement guidelines for remote media interviews that advance their business and public policy goals.

- Position your camera so that it is level with your eyes. Set your monitor, laptop, or tablet on a stack of books if need be.
- Look into the camera, not at your screen. Find your camera's lens and fix your gaze there.
- Lighting is important. Place a non-glaring light in front of you and, when possible, a soft backlight on the floor behind you.
- Aim for an attractive, professional looking background. Green screens can work if you have a physical backdrop.
- Prepare for conversational delays. Connections are not always rock solid, so realize that you may have to wait a beat or two before hearing the next question.

Devote your entire mindset to the interview. Use those good manners Mom taught you and pay rapt attention to your conversational partner, in this case the reporter.

Shun These Worst Practices

Those are some of the habits smart spokespeople need to inculcate if they hope to shine during remote TV interviews. Now let's flip the script and examine some of the traits you should avoid at all costs:

- Stay away from the business up top and party down below look. Pajama pants and bunny slippers are forbidden. Your comfort is not the issue. Such scruffy garb will not imbue you with the feel of being a professional.
- Mussed hair, spinach in your teeth, and ratty t-shirts are no-nos.
- Keep any noise makers at bay throughout. This includes kids, dogs, pet birds, and the like. I recall one shot featuring a dog periodically jumping up then off a chair in the subject's blurred background (more on this in a moment). Talk about distracting (and comical). Another featured a squawking parakeet. Viewers are distracted enough. Don't encourage diversions.
- Along the same lines, to the extent possible, keep ringing phones, doorbells, street noise, or lawn mowers out of the proceedings. You can even tell the neighbors you're going to be on TV when you ask them to stow that earsplitting weed wacker for a few minutes. They might get a kick from watching you.
- Refrain from incessant touching of your face, and stay away from any embarrassing facial expressions, gestures, or camera shots.
- Never position the camera below you. No one wants a shot of your ceiling or, worse, a view up your nose.

Dress and groom like a grownup. Business attire, a shave, properly groomed hair, and makeup convey a professional look and feel.

- Resist the temptation to stare at your image or the image of your interviewer. Remember to keep eye contact with your camera lens. Looking elsewhere skews your eye contact, diminishing your connection with viewers.
- Don't keep things too dark. Viewers need to see you clearly.
- On a related note, avoid lighting yourself with glaring bare bulbs that make you look ghostly.
- Do not sit in front of windows. The glare during daylight hours leaves you looking like a dark shadow. Plus, the dazzling brightness proves taxing to other viewers. Passing pedestrians and vehicles can also prove distracting.
- Under no circumstances sit in front of a mirror. Activity across the room or elsewhere in your home could be clearly visible and unintentionally entertaining to viewers.
- Take a pass on those virtual backgrounds offered by services like Zoom. The technology isn't nearly good enough, making it too easy for you to merge into the background with comical results.
- Similarly, keep away from technologies that claim to blur your background. It tends to give your head a funny shape, lop off your ears, cause hair to appear and disappear, fade you into the background — all distracting viewers who are led to wonder “What is that?” as they try to guess the identity of odd shapes peering through the blur. Perhaps the technology will catch up one day, but it's not ready for prime time yet, so stay away from the blur option.

One more point of emphasis: Never, ever tackle other tasks during a media interview. Even if you believe yourself to be a wizard at switch tasking (often erroneously called multi-tasking), humans just aren't built that way. Focus strictly on the interrogatory at hand.

Opportunity Beckons Companies and Workers

Reliance on video interviews is here to stay. Which means it is now safe for businesses to devote additional resources not only to the technology, but also to [skill building for their C-suite executives](#) and other spokespeople.

It is ill-advised to assume your IT department can effectively and elegantly oversee your remote productions. While they may have a certain degree of technical expertise with the backstage gear, they likely have little to no idea how to make your CEO look presentable.

The good news? There is a talent pool wide open to companies in the form of television producers and directors who have been shown the door in the wake of continuing broadcast industry cutbacks.

Opportunity knocks at the door of companies smart enough to seek out these experienced pros.

This is a two-fer since out of work TV directors and producers also win when they find new career avenues. They already know what it takes to make people look good on screen. Companies interested in boosting the image of their executives during remote media interviews would be wise to seek out and lock in these experts.

Keep any noise makers at bay. This includes kids, dogs, pet birds, ringing phones, and, to the extent possible, doorbells, street noise, and lawn mowers.

You may be thinking about affordability when it comes to hiring a new staff member. Sure, there may be an added salary expense. It's a bargain. Compare that new salary with the cost of inaction. How much would a disastrous interview on CNN or your local news channel drain your company in terms of dollars or reputation? The cost of a video production pro pales in comparison.

How can these career shifting video production professionals take advantage of new opportunities? The first step is to acknowledge the need to adjust to a new environment:

- Deadlines may not be quite so demanding or frequent (though crises can change that), so they may not get the same adrenaline rush.
- They may not have as much on-the-spot license to push out a final product. Added layers of bureaucracy may prove frustrating.
- They may not have access to as high a level of technical tools.
- They will likely lack experienced colleagues with whom they can bounce ideas.

Thankfully, solutions to overcome such frustrations exist:

- Learn to enjoy a less pressurized workplace, perhaps even learning to enjoy a regular lunch break.
- Pay attention to the new executives' preferences. Guide them along accordingly. Handled properly and over time, they may come to view video experts as trusted advisors.
- Work with whatever technology is there while suggesting upgrades that can improve results. The more bottom line proof, the better.
- Maintain relationships with former colleagues developed over the years. Just because that talented editor is no longer a co-worker doesn't mean it's not possible to check in every so often. Plus, that information flow goes both ways, so former associates still in the broadcast field can glean insights that prove helpful in their duties.

Where to find these individuals? As with any hire, recommendations are typically the best source. Your media relations staff should have professional relationships with reporters, editors, and producers. Charge them with inquiring among those folks.

Look into professional societies to which you belong. They likely have some sort of listserv or method of fostering member to member contact. Mention your job opening on the grapevine there and get your network working for you. As an example, I belong to the National Press

Club. If I were in hiring mode, that is one of the very first places I would turn to for recommendations.

Associations like the [Producers Guild of America](#) and the [Radio Television Digital News Association](#) offer job boards that allow anyone to post an opening, in some cases for a fee. These groups reach precisely the target audience you are seeking to access. Your state's association of broadcasters may also prove to be a resource. For example, in my region the [Maryland D.C. Delaware Broadcasters Association](#) features an online job board.

Also, keep your eyes open for announcements, news stories, and industry chatter surrounding layoffs among your local broadcast outlets. Work your network and try to determine who got the ax and whether they might be a good fit for your needs.

Another potential source: Online services like LinkedIn. Just be sure to target your job posting correctly. I recommend you not post something in the main stream. Instead, place your news in groups dedicated to TV and video production.

There is one more factor that shouldn't need to be said but deserves emphasis given the attitude of many who are responsible for hiring. As with any job opening, make it a point to treat others the way

you would like to be treated for they may be under a fair amount of stress. If they are truly qualified and submit an application, have the decency to contact them even if you ultimately decide they are not prime candidates. Never leave those in search of jobs hanging out to dry. It may come back to bite you some day, as well it should.

There is one more substantial benefit to hiring production pros that merits mention. Video experts with a broadcast background can also improve the quality of the business' other video offerings for such purposes as marketing, remote presentations, advocacy, and more. After all, successful enterprises will become more attentive to the appearance of all their remote video offerings, including non-media efforts, to reach customers and other stakeholders.

Out of work TV directors and producers will find new career avenues opening as businesses become more attentive to the appearance of their remote video offerings.

Pursuing the Action Plan

Don't let your company fall behind the times — and the competition. These are the steps you need to follow if you want to polish your executives' remote media interview proficiency:

- Commit to writing a concise guide of best practices as detailed on pages 2-3 of this paper. For instance, acquaint yourself with the logistics of any interview, sign on to your video connection early, look into the camera, and arrange a suitable background.
- Instruct your spokespeople on the worst practices to avoid (don't write down and distribute these; you don't want to imprint bad habits on anyone's brain). Among the

key points, as detailed on pages 3-4: Never wear pajama pants and slippers, silence any noisemakers, steer clear of those blurred background effects, and avoid sitting in front of windows or mirrors.

- Assemble a communications staff capable of guiding your executives to stellar performance before the press. No subpar workers or hangers-on allowed. If your communications department is populated with laggards, get rid of them and bring in some fresh minds or, if for some reason you decide to attempt a rescue effort with current staff (realizing this may be in vain), bring on board a consultant capable of improving their performance; just don't expect miracles.
- Keep your eyes peeled for television producers and directors who have been subject to layoff. They can fast forward your success with remote interviews and with your firm's other remote video productions.

Does your company need assistance in implementing these important steps? [Get in touch](#) when you're ready to commit to sharpening your communications edge with regard to [remote media interviews](#). Below are a few of the ways we can help:

- Guide your communications staff to drafting best practices that fit your situation.
- Assess the abilities of your communications staff to successfully implement the procedures.
- Aid your staff in instructing your executives to follow your best practices.
- Lead a [comprehensive media training workshop](#) designed to enhance your odds for success with the press.
- Arrange for a special [group purchase of books](#) suitable for your entire band of spokespeople.
- Act as a sounding board for your ideas.

Remember, smart businesses implement guidelines for remote media interviews to advance their business and public policy goals. Is your company among them?

About the Author

Ed Barks is an author and communications strategy consultant.

He has authored [three books for communications and government relations experts](#), and for executives who represent the public face of their companies:

- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*



His corporate and association clients hire him to provide them with the messages and everyday communications skills their executives need. He shows them how to gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, added opportunities for career advancement, and realization of long-term business and public policy goals.

Clients who turn to him for strategic advice say he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his counsel “two thumbs up!”

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 5500 business leaders, association executives, thought leaders, and communications and government relations professionals toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

He is also the founder and community leader of the [C-suite Blueprint blog](#).

Keep up with the latest news from Ed when you join his *Communications Community* at www.barkscomm.com.

Visit him online at www.barkscomm.com. He enjoys hearing from readers, so contact him at (703) 533-0403 or ebarks@barkscomm.com.