



**ESTIME**

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS TRAINING

**Guide to  
Media Interactions**

[etime.co.uk](http://etime.co.uk)

# INTRODUCTION



## **Media coverage can make or break you**

Are you confident that your media-facing people are aware of the tricks and traps that face them? News journalists and sharp-eyed bloggers are always looking for an indiscretion or disclosure; it's how they build their reputations.

These interviewers will use a variety of techniques to extract information (sometimes with great subtlety).

## **How I can help you?**

My name is David Tebbutt and I'd like to help you improve your handling of the media.

I've worked both sides of the fence, but concentrated mainly on media skills training and writing for magazines, newspapers, websites and social media. More recently, I've shifted the writing emphasis towards corporate writing – marketing collateral, ghost writing and the like.

## **Get on the right path**

You're well on the way to a successful interview if you have a clear idea of:

- your ultimate audience.
- what value you can deliver to them.
- a mutually acceptable outcome.

This guide takes you through all the stages of a successful media encounter. If you'd like to take things further, I'd be delighted to run an online or face-to-face session for you.

Please contact me at [david@estime.co.uk](mailto:david@estime.co.uk) or visit [estime.co.uk](http://estime.co.uk) for further information about ESTIME Interpersonal Skills Training.

## THE MEDIA



### What the media wants

**New and different:** Newshounds want to break a story first. Other journalists will go for a different angle or greater depth.

**Benefits:** Journalists want to inform, educate or entertain their audiences. Ask yourself, "What's in it for them?"

**Bad news:** Even bad news can deliver benefits. "A DVD containing details of many customers was stolen; but it was encrypted."

**Anecdotes and analogies:** Anecdotes bring a subject to life. Analogies help readers see things in more familiar terms.

**Quotes:** Readers love 'em. A computer virus hunter once told me, "It was like trying to catch smoke in a butterfly net." Lovely.

### What the media doesn't want

It isn't interested in anything that its audience already knows. If it misses a story, it will try to compensate by being the first with a picture, video, interview or analysis.

#### A few aversions:

Journalists hate words like 'mission', 'committed', 'corporate policy', 'excited' or 'awesome'.

The first three are corporate-speak. "We're committed to customer satisfaction." Who wouldn't be? The other two are just ridiculous (you're paid to pretend to be these things). Let the announcement speak for itself

## BE PREPARED



### The right approach

Always be prepared. Know how to get encounters off to a good start and bring the journalist to your agenda. Keep in mind that handling the media is a game in which the best outcome is when you both feel you've 'won'.

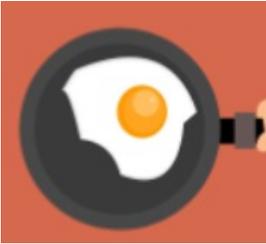
### Structure your stories

Journalists work in a pyramidal structure – the point, the proof, further detail. Work the same way. If you meander, the journalist may write about the wrong points. Make one major point to news writers. You can usually make more to feature writers. Choose each point and its angle based on the audience and the type of journalist.

### Deliver your point(s)

- Identify the benefit and the evidence to support it. If you can find an anecdote, analogy or quote to go with it, all the better.
- Regardless of where a journalist starts, you want to get them to the most appropriate of your (usually three) main points.
- Once you've delivered it, a knowledgeable journalist will winkle out your supporting evidence, otherwise make sure you explain.
- With a knowledgeable feature writer, you can raise other points. Otherwise, close the interview as soon as you've said your piece.
- Follow up asap on any promises that you made during the interview. This is great for building relationships.

## PLAY THE GAME



### Stay safe

Think of what you know as an egg being fried:

- **Safe (yolk):** What you want to say.
- **Secret (white):** What you know but can't share.
- **Speculation (frying pan):** Your opinions.

Keep the journalist in the yolk. Avoid the white and the pan. You will know the journalist, the audience and the topic, so invoke one of them to get back to safety:

- "Does this really interest your readers?"
- "Your readers might be more interested in ..."
- "I thought we were focusing on ..."

### What do they think of you?

Job titles trigger these (possibly unjustified) thoughts:

- **Boss:** A 'name'. Will quote, regardless of quality or accuracy.
- **Techie:** (And ex-techie.) A truth-teller. Will quote unreservedly.
- **Sales:** May be good. Knows, and may be willing to blab, secrets.
- **Marketing:** Unlikely to reveal anything juicy.
- **PR:** A good facilitator. Can't be a named source.

The journalist's perception of marketing could be wrong. If your business card contains the 'marketing' word, you may need to say something like, "In our organisation, the marketing people know exactly what's going on. How can I help you?"

## DANGER AHEAD



### Off duty

If you are genuinely off duty – on holiday, out with the family etc. – then you have no obligation to talk with the journalist. Say, “I’ll call when I’m at my desk.” However, a lot of people get caught out in these situations:

- **Press conference:** Journalists get their real stories before or after the presentations. Not during.
- **Exhibition:** Be alert round the clock. Anywhere.
- **Press party:** They might be having fun but they’re out for whatever they can get. Even if (apparently) drunk.
- **Travelling:** Trains, planes, lounges are public places.

Don’t discuss or show confidential information in public.

### Sidestep danger

If the journalist persists, block them by saying:

- "I can't talk about that..."
- "I'm sorry, that's not my area..."

And, in each case follow with:

- "...but, your audience may be interested in..."

Confident interviewees will reposition the discussion with:

- "Another, more important, concern is..."
- "The real issue is..."

If the journalist won’t follow, suggest closing the interview.  
Few journalists would want to leave empty-handed.

## 'READING' THE JOURNALIST



### Journalistic behaviour

Journalists range along two axes – behaviour and knowledge.

News journalists may play tricks (to anger, depress or please you – if you feel an emotional reaction, be on your guard) while feature writers can be gentle. Expect tough questions from experienced journalists and easy ones from novices.

If they move from these default positions, something's up.

A news journalist being gentle means they have a story. But is it the one you want to see published? An experienced journalist asking easier questions means you've 'won'. A feature journalist getting annoyed means you've moved away from their audience's interest. Ask them what they'd prefer you to talk about.

### Tricks of the trade

As mentioned earlier, journalists will try to invoke your emotions to winkle out what you're thinking:

- **Pleasure:** "They really like me." They may not, they just figure that flattery will work on you.
- **Depression:** "They say nothing I say is interesting." They're just trying to get at the hidden stories.
- **Anger:** "They're flustering me by going too fast/asking too many questions." They're winding you up to get a blurt.

In all cases, treat the emotion as a signal that they're playing tricks. Don't let on that you know. Make sure you react with your stories. If you're good, they'll think the trick worked.

## WIN/WIN



### Keep a sense of perspective

Many journalists aren't horrible; they just want a decent story.

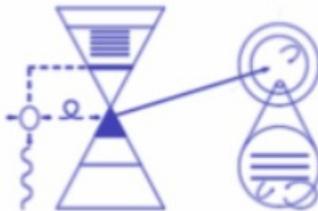
All interviews are an opportunity for you. You need three key messages for your part of the business at all times, together with proof points, analogies and anecdotes, as appropriate. Keep them fresh. It's no good wheeling out the same messages month after month.

You are also likely to have a couple more messages (ordained from above), with their supporting evidence, for the business as a whole.

With these as the arrows in your quiver, you can defend yourself against attacks from a journalist, ensuring that you both leave feeling that you've gained something from the encounter.

### Interactive quick tips

Explore our interactive *Media Skills Architecture*  
It's hosted at [estime.co.uk/ems](http://estime.co.uk/ems)



On the web page, point at any part of the diagram to see the relevant tip. It works in any browser and will probably work on your tablet and smartphone too.

## FINALLY...

If you feel an emotional reaction, good or bad, it's likely the journalist has induced this deliberately, in the hope of provoking an indiscretion. Make sure you respond with what you want to say, rather than with what they're hoping for.

Even with this small amount of knowledge, you can stay safe, well away from blurting secrets or speculating. You can be in control of the interview. You can lead it to a win-win outcome.

### WHY USE ESTIME?

Skilled interviewees can lead encounters to a win-win conclusion

- The reach & credibility of the media can do great harm (or good)
- Learn how to create interesting and publishable messages
- Learn how to get the interviewer willingly 'on-topic'
- Learn how to survive the most common journalistic 'tricks'

#### Testimonials:

"David delivers the best picture ever of how journalists think and behave - really powerful" - **VP**

"The practice will arm you for any possibility in media briefings." – **PR Director**

If you'd like me to run an online or face-to-face workshop for you, please email me.

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