

## Engaging with the media in the face of the coronavirus pandemic



Given the unprecedented and rapidly evolving issues around the coronavirus (also known as Coronavirus Disease 2019 or COVID-19), the public has a real and practical need for information about the pandemic, and about what they can do about it. That public interest translates into a level of media interest that will likely lead to many experts in the public health, medical, government, transportation, and other professions being thrust into the media spotlight.

Most subject matter experts in this position have had little or no experience, and even less training in how to approach this kind of situation. At AirSafe.com, my expertise was in aviation safety and security and not in media relations. Taking a cue from my experiences in aviation, over the last several years I've put together checklists and procedures that help me with the process of dealing with both traditional and online media.

This document contains what I consider the four most important aspects of those checklists and procedures, and should be used to both create written content and help you plan for live radio, television, or podcast interviews. Additional pages contain useful resources that you may want to use to learn more about coronavirus.

### 1. Have a mission statement

You should have a foundation or a reason for providing information to the public. Ensure that whatever content you create or comments you make are consistent with that mission.

### 2. Be clear and unambiguous

While some information related to this pandemic, such as the need to wash one's hands, is clearly understood by nearly everyone, some information deals with concepts and ideas typically used by experts. As an expert, you have likely had years to understand what the words, phrases, and concepts in your profession needs. Your audience is much more likely to understand your message if you do the following:

- Explain any word or term that is not used by the general public
- Use language that would be understood by a non-native speaker (for example, avoid jokes or other specific cultural or geographical references)
- Test your message on someone from outside of your profession

### 3. Put your information into sound bites

The most limiting reality of both traditional and online media is that you are dealing with limited time and limited attention span. This means that although it may have taken years or even decades of effort to develop your expertise, you may only have seconds to share this information with the public.

Sound bites are short statements that are designed to be used during a live radio or television interview. The statement may be short, typically no more than one or two sentences, but it usually takes some effort to meet the key requirements of a sound bite:

- The subject of the sound bite is clearly identifiable,
- When spoken in a normal tone of voice, the sound bite can be stated in under eight seconds,
- It contains a limited amount of information; typically one or two ideas, numbers, or facts; related to the subject of the sound bite, and
- It answers a question or provides a relevant piece of information.

#### Example of a simple sound bite

A simple sound bite typically states one piece of information about a subject:

*China is the country with the greatest number of reported infections*

The subject of the sound bite is China, and the relevant information it provides is how it ranks among nations in the number of infections.

#### Example of a complex sound bite

If there is more than one piece of information in a sound bite, it is important that the ideas are logically connected in some way. For example, the following sound bite uses two numbers to measure different things about the subject of the sound bite, but are logically connected to the sound bite's intent.

*The State of Washington has had about 370 reported infections, and about 30 of those have died.*

The subject, the estimated death rate in the State of Washington is implied by including the number of infections and the number of deaths.

### Sound bite preparation

Sound bites work best if you prepare them ahead of time. For example, if you intend to repeatedly emphasize key points or key ideas (for example, hand washing as a protective measure), it may be useful to create sound bites that represent several variations of the same basic idea and use them in the appropriate contexts.

### Sound bites and frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Any frequently asked question (FAQ) should have a short and well-crafted answer. Put those answers in the form of sound bites.

### Write your sound bites down

Once you take the time to create a sound bite, be sure to put them in writing. If you rely on memory alone, if you don't remember it exactly, you may end up completely changing the message.

### **Why the skill of writing a sound bite is key**

Sound bites are important because they form the basis of many of the most likely media encounters that you may have. The following are a few examples:

- **Articles, editorials, and longer written works:** These kinds of written works have several points to make or several pieces of useful information. Sound bites can either determine the structure of these kinds of written works, or can sound bites can be constructed from these works.
- **Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other social media** - What these have in common is that they work best if they can combine text, graphics, and links to other online resources. A well-written sound bite can entice the reader to connect with longer or more detailed pieces of information.
  - Suggestions for graphics or images: Whenever possible, use images or graphics that are either in the public domain (for example a photo provided by a government agency), has a copyright that you own or control, or where the copyright owner has granted you permission to use that image or graphic.
  - Link shortening services: Because links (URLs) can be rather long, you should use a link shortening service such as bit.ly.com or Google URL shortener.

- Use appropriate hashtags and mentions: To help people to find your message on Twitter and other services, use one or more relevant keywords, hashtags (of the form #[keyword]), or Twitter mentions (of the form @[twitter\_name]) in your tweet.

#### **4. Take action**

This pandemic is having effects on society that would not have sounded plausible even a week ago. If you are in a position to inform the public about this pandemic and what they can do to deal with it, take action now. Sharing your expertise and advice, whether with your organization or with the entire world, should be done today and not tomorrow.

Don't wait for an invitation from the media, practice now by putting it in emails to coworkers, in a Facebook or other social media post, in a letter to the editor, or to any resource that is at your disposal. This practice will be invaluable if and when you get the chance to communicate with a much broader audience.

## **Information resources**

Below is some very basic information about coronavirus, as well as links to additional information. The coronavirus pandemic is evolving rapidly, and you should make the effort to keep informed about what is happening and to seek out additional information that may increase your knowledge and decrease your risk.

The following information and links to additional resources are by no means comprehensive. Consider this information as just the beginning of your education about this pandemic.

### How coronavirus it is transmitted

According to the CDC, the virus is spread by droplets created when an infected person coughs or sneezes. Those droplets may be inhaled or settle onto another person's nose or mouth. Also, transmission may happen when droplets land on a surface and an uninfected person touches that surface and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

A person is most likely to transmit the virus when that person is showing symptoms of a coronavirus infection such as sneezing, coughing, or other flu-like symptoms.

## **Preventing transmission**

There are several simple steps that you can do to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus:

- If you feel sick with the cold or flu, stay away from others
- Stay away from people who appear to be sick from a cold or the flu
- If your hands look or feel dirty, wash them with soap and water
- If your hands look clean, you can use hand sanitizer (that contains at least 60% alcohol) to disinfect them.
- Stay informed about the local COVID-19 situation by relying on official sources such as national, regional, state, or local governments, or on reliable and authoritative sources such as public health professionals and mainstream media organizations.

## Informational resources

CDC: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

CDC: Coronavirus symptoms

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/symptoms.html>

CDC: How Coronavirus spreads

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>

CDC: Coronavirus cases in the US

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-in-us.html>

CDC: Suggestions for mass gatherings

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/large-events/mass-gatherings-ready-for-covid-19.html>

World Health Organization (WHO): Coronavirus disease updates

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

WHO: Coronavirus Information Dashboard

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/685d0ace521648f8a5beeeee1b9125cd>

WHO: Risk communication and community engagement

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/risk-communication-and-community-engagement>

New York Times: US map of coronavirus cases

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>

Johns Hopkins University: Interactive maps of coronavirus infections (best on larger screens)

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map>

Products for managing coronavirus

<https://www.americanchemistry.com/Novel-Coronavirus-Fighting-Products-List.pdf>