

# The Ambassador



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“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Next month, look for guidelines on *Educating the Reporter: When the journalist doesn't know the ABCs of Accounting*.

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## Talking Taxes on TV (and Radio)

by Jerry Doyle

It's the annual event: tax season and the news media may call you to participate in an interview on this year's issues. What is the particular challenge in speaking about taxes on TV or Radio? And, what is different about engaging in broadcast interviews as opposed to print? Let's take each in turn:

### Peer into the Abyss: Handling the Open-Ended Question

The good thing here – and likely the reason you are invited to the program – is that discussing taxes with a professional is appropriate at this time of year. But while it is timely – and unless there have been major changes to the tax code – it is still not hard news. The challenge, then, becomes, how does one address obvious and open-ended interview questions?

Often, a CPA will be asked to appear on a morning talk show during a segment entitled “Filing Your Income Taxes 2007.” The producer or booker may give you precious little information beforehand. He may say that he simply wants you to comment on what is new in the tax code this year, or to provide tips on how to lower the tax burden, or what common deductions most people miss. These are not technically difficult questions, but they are so obvious and open-ended that interviewees may find it challenging to be precise and concise – which is required especially for TV. The best advice is to have a conversation with the producer to develop more precise questions, i.e. questions that you believe are important. If you can't change the first part of the program, the next best strategy is to go in with your own agenda and prepare your responses in advance. Think in terms of “top threes.” What are the top three most important changes in the tax code this year? Keep in mind that those three should be selected based on the audience. For example, if you are speaking in a local morning talk show and the viewers reside in a state that just changed a tax policy, that change should make your top three. What are the three most commonly missed deductions? What are the top three tips on accurate filing? This is an important point for both the host and the viewer or listener. You will see later in this article that we will encourage you to support these responses with visuals. The important point here is to do the work in advance. You certainly know the information, but find ways to customize and edit it to bullet points you can rattle off with ease.

### Broadcast Versus Print Media Interviews

TV/Radio interviews and print interviews share many of the same rules of effective

interviewing: know the reporter, tailor your message to the ultimate audience (viewer, listener), anticipate the questions – especially the tough ones – bridge back to key messages, stay on-point. We encourage you to contact the AICPA or your state CPA society for help in getting to know the reporter and program and preparing for the interview. But, there are additional considerations when appearing on TV and radio:

### **Television**

- *Know the program* – Beyond knowing the reporter or anchor who will be asking the questions, watch the program several times prior to your appearance. What is the pace and flow? Most often it is quite fast and fluid. Be prepared to react quickly and speak in bites. How are guests typically greeted and treated? There may be an awkward moment when you are introduced and you are not sure whether to say “Good morning/afternoon/evening” or wait for the first question. What is the format? Do other hosts or reporters chime in with questions? This is important to know in advance so that you may feel comfortable and ready in the environment. Many morning talk shows aim to convey an easy feeling and flexible format making it likely that the other interviewers may very well address you, too. What is the tone? Most morning shows are very light as are some business shows. But a spot on evening cable news can be a bit more serious. Assess and then plan to match that tone. Is there a chance you will be asked to be involved in the “teaser”? A “teaser” is when the host set-ups your segment before breaking for a commercial. Often, he will ask the interviewee to take part and it can often catch one off guard. Don’t let that happen to you.
- *Dress the part* – Improved camera technology allows for more white or bright colors and striped shirts than years ago. However, soft and warm colors often enhance skin tone. A reputable CPA should dress professionally – sharp, crisp, understated. Avoid wearing flashy or distracting clothing and accessories. Women should avoid patterns and jewelry that call attention away from the conversation.
- *Arrive early, understand the technology* – As often as you might watch the program to understand its flow, format and other elements, you still should arrive early to prepare. Once you’ve informed the producer or booker that you have arrived, get a comfort level for the set and surroundings. Approach a technical coordinator and have him “walk” you through the audio/visuals. Confirm whether or not you will be speaking with someone live or remotely or both. Will you face a camera or an interviewer? Request a fitting for your lavalier microphone and earpiece (for satellite interviews) early and have it tested. If you do not meet the host until just before the segment, take advantage of the “mike check”, the moment when a technical person asks you to say a few words so he may adjust the volume. We recommend stating your name (helps with pronunciation), your firm and 3-5 seconds of what you most want to address. This specific “mike check” at the very least helps the technician adjust the volume and might stimulate the host to ask a question about the content. Ask about protocol, breaks, cues and cuts. Ask about the segment being filmed and shown before and after yours. Find out what is expected of you once your segment is over. Do you stay on set? When do you leave? Are you starting directly following a commercial break? After your segment, does

the program break to a commercial or move on to the next segment?

- *Come armed with visuals and props* – This is critically important and is an extension of the earlier point made about coming in with your own agenda and being visual. If you have any PowerPoint slides or other visual graphics that you can provide the producer before the show, that will help determine the course of the interview and bring a greater comfort level to you. It could be as simple as bullets on a slide or a graphic that illustrates a statistic. Another important point is that even if you have confirmed receipt of the visuals you sent the producer in advance, bring along another copy on disk, your laptop or on a USB memory stick.
- *Appearance for your TV appearance* – Upright, erect and strong posture shows confidence and credibility. Gesture, smile, even feel free to be a bit dramatic. After all, this is television! Among others, one of your goals may include being asked back to the show. So, provide a compelling and trusting presence that audiences want to see and listen to again.

***All of the above is true for Radio, plus:***

- *Vocal Points* – Use your voice to impart conviction and paint a picture in the listener's eye. Because the audience cannot see you, it is even more important to use your voice to animate your comments. Vary your tone and inflection, raise and lower the volume, speak slowly and over-enunciate complicated words.
- *Gesture* – First of all, most of us gesture when we talk. And even though the audience cannot see you, gestures help them to hear you better. When we gesture, our voices have more range and inflection. Gestures also help us burn off anxious energy.
- *Cheat Sheets* – An advantage to the radio interview is that you may prepare notes and bring them with you. This is a great way to stay focused and ensure that you convey all your talking points. Write in bullet form and on index or note cards. You should not bring a script; anything that sounds like you are reading will probably sound stilted and flat. Some hosts will actually ask to see what's on your note cards so they can ask better questions.
- *Call Waiting* – Many radio programs feature call-in questions from listeners. Prepare as you would normally, anticipating the types of questions and how they might be asked and then bridging when appropriate to your messages. Here is one specific tip on addressing questions while on radio: At the beginning, the caller will either be introduced by the host or will introduce himself by stating his name and the town where he lives. Jot this down. When responding, call him by name and try to tailor your answer to his locale. Even if that just means weaving in the town name. For example. "Well Christine, the personal property tax is based on a MIL rate and that number can typically be found at the town clerk's office right there in Westport." It may sound like a simplistic tip, but it works well to ingratiate you with the audience and that kind of attention is what gets you asked back to the show.

While most of the same principles apply when preparing for any media interview, these are some of the considerations for broadcast. Be comfortable in the environment and speak as visually as possible. You may become a regular on the show!

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Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at [cencarnacion@aicpa.org](mailto:cencarnacion@aicpa.org)

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