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Media Training

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The Formula

This rule applies regardless of the media outlet, the reporter, or the subject of the interview. It's easy to understand, but it can be difficult to employ.

1 SATISFY *YOUR OWN* OBJECTIVES

Get your messages out

- Determine your messages well ahead of the interview.
- Tailor messages for the audience of that particular media outlet.

2 HELP THE REPORTER

Get him/her a *story*

- A story is something new, different, interesting to that particular reporter.
- Good stories often contain elements of drama or excitement.
- Reporters like information that benefits their viewers/readers/listeners.

Speak in *"Reporter Friendly Language"*

- Lead with your conclusion.
- Use brief, self-contained phrases instead of long explanations.

The vast majority of people who engage journalists without the proper training apply this formula in reverse, allowing *the reporter* to derive the greatest benefit from the interview.

PRIORITIZE

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Interview Strategy Checklist

BEFORE
the interview:

- Learn all that you can about the reporter and his/her media outlet.
- Find out the gist of the interview and the story, but do not ask for questions in advance.
- Prepare, rehearse, and memorize your messages.
- Anticipate the questions you are likely to be asked, especially the challenging ones.
- For TV, dress in simple, conservative colors. Avoid solid white, solid black, tight patterns and stripes, and flashy jewelry.
- If being interviewed at your own home or office, find a quiet location and turn cell phones off.
- If appropriate, give the reporter a "heads up" on interesting points he or she may want to ask you about.

DURING
the interview:

- Relax! Try to sound natural and conversational without letting down your guard.
- If somebody has been hurt, express empathy at the top of the interview.
- Keep your messages coming!
- Speak in simple, complete sentences. Don't overload the reporter.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms. Your target audience is a reasonably intelligent teenager.
- Feel free to restart an answer at any time (assuming the interview isn't live).
- When being interviewed by a TV reporter, ignore the camera unless told otherwise.
- Remember body language. Don't lock your hands behind your back or in your pockets.
- A reporter will usually conclude an interview by asking, "Anything else you'd like to say?" or "Anything I forgot to ask you?" Use this opportunity to repeat your key message(s) one last time.

AFTER
the interview:

- Politely correct any misperceptions you feel the reporter may have developed.
- Ask the reporter if he or she has everything necessary to write the story.
- Thank the reporter, and offer contact info so you can be reached for follow-up questions.
- Assume the interview hasn't ended until the reporter has left the room or the phone has been hung up.

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When It's Better Not To Answer

One key to media training is understanding the distinction between answers and responses. Every question calls for a response, but certain questions should not be ***answered***. Here are four of them:

1

WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T ANSWER:

You could be wrong! There's nothing wrong with saying, "I don't know."

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD:

If applicable, tell the reporter you will get the information, or the right source, when the interview is over. Never guess or, even worse, lie.

2

WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T ANSWER:

Answering a question you don't fully understand is fraught with risk. You might be providing an answer for a question completely different from the one that was asked.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD:

Ask for clarification before you respond.

3

WHEN THE QUESTION WOULD BE BETTER SUITED FOR SOMEBODY ELSE

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T ANSWER:

It's not in your interests to speak on behalf of those who may not share your media objectives (the competition, the police, your critics).

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD:

Politely tell the reporter he or she might be better off asking that particular party.

4

WHEN THE QUESTION CALLS FOR SPECULATION

WHY YOU SHOULDN'T ANSWER:

Speculation is dangerous. If you turn out to be wrong, your answer may be used against you later.

WHAT TO DO INSTEAD:

Simple. Say, "I wouldn't want to speculate."

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You Don't Say!

Some things are smart to tell a reporter — others, not so smart.
And then there are some things that are downright ***dangerous*** to say.

"No Comment"

- When you say this to a reporter, the reporter hears, "I know something, but I am going to hide it from you."
- Your statement of "No comment" may actually appear as a quote in the story.
- It is perfectly okay to ***have*** no comment. It is not okay to ***say*** "No comment."

"Off the Record"

- Most interviewees – and many journalists – don't even understand exactly what this phrase means.
- Bloggers and less reputable reporters may not honor "off the record."
- Saying something sensitive and asking for it to be "off the record" is taking an unnecessary gamble.
- If you wouldn't be comfortable seeing it in the story, don't say it!

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The Bridge

The single most important tactic in media messaging is proper use of The Bridge. By "bridging," an interviewee can take a question with neutral or negative connotations and use it to deliver a positive message.

1
Acknowledge the Question:

Remember, you need not answer the question. Merely make reference to it as you begin the bridging process.

2
Connect with a *Bridge* Phrase:

A bridge can be made from phrases such as
"even more important…"
"and that's why…"
"in spite of that…"

3
Deliver a Positive *Message*:

Keep your message simple, concise, and memorable.

EXAMPLES

Are you concerned by the low grades your hospital received from the state?

"Assessments are very important to us. ***That's why we are especially proud that General Hospital has been ranked number one in patient care by a private patient advocacy group."***

What are the chances your employees will go on strike?

"We are hopeful our employees will stay on the job. ***In fact, we have put forth a very generous benefits package in an effort to keep negotiations moving forward."***

Can you see why passengers would be reluctant to fly your airline after the crash?

"We understand safety concerns, and we share them. ***For that reason, we have grounded and inspected every jet in our fleet."***

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Get the Message?

Effective message delivery is the very definition of success in any news interview. Prepare, rehearse, and memorize THREE MESSAGES before the interview begins.

AN IDEAL MESSAGE IS A SIMPLE, CONCISE, COMPLETE SENTENCE

"Washing your hands is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of infections."

A SENTENCE FRAGMENT IS NOT A MESSAGE

"Hand washing"

MESSAGES THAT ARE TOO COMPLEX WILL BE DIFFICULT TO MEMORIZE AND UNWIELDY FOR THE REPORTER

"It has been determined that the simple act of hand washing is the single most important way to stop the spread of viral and bacterial infections. Even though it is an easy thing to do, many of us fail to wash our hands thoroughly. As a result, we are unnecessarily exposing ourselves to many types of germs."

Next Steps:

Prepare ***statistics*** and ***examples*** as elaboration or proof points for your messages:

- 80 percent of infectious diseases are transmitted by touch.
- Always wash your hands after using public restrooms, and also before preparing a meal or grabbing a snack.

PLAN AHEAD

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Surprise, You're On the Record!

The ease of digital communication and the rise of citizen journalism have changed the rules of public relations. It's no longer just traditional reporters who have the power to disseminate your words; ***everybody*** has that ability now. With that in mind, it is wise to assume that you are always "on the record."

This includes:

- Speaking with customers, clients, and competitors
- Chatting in a restaurant, bar, or airplane
- Giving a speech or lecture, even without any obvious media presence
- Having a casual conversation at a trade show
- Delivering a webinar
- Posting on social media
- Mingling at networking events

In short, treat every stranger as a reporter and never say anything publicly that you wouldn't want to see in a news article or blog.

Messaging is Universal

It isn't necessary to be evasive or mysterious when discussing business-related issues with an outside audience. Simply use the same messaging techniques taught in media training. An effective media message is usually just as appropriate for non-reporters. So develop your messages ahead of time, memorize them, and have them at the ready.

NOTE: ***It is especially important to stay on message during crisis and other challenging events,*** when others may view you as a source of "inside" information.

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When the News is Bad

Sooner or later, most companies, organizations, and public figures can expect some kind of media crisis. Often it's not the crisis itself, but the way the crisis is handled, that matters most.

Preparing for crisis communications means anticipating the questions you will get. Fortunately, they usually fall into one of four categories:

1 WHAT HAPPENED?

- What is your version of events?
- Who has been impacted?
- Are there any updates?

2 WHAT WAS THE CAUSE?

- How did this happen?
- What went wrong?
- Whose fault was it?

3 HAS THIS EVER HAPPENED BEFORE?

- When?

4 WHAT ACTIONS ARE YOU TAKING?

- What are you doing to fix this?
- What changes are you making to prevent it from happening again?

NOTE: ***You may not know the answers to some of these questions.*** Others may be inappropriate to answer. This is especially true for recent or ongoing crises. In such cases, acknowledge the question, explain why you cannot answer, and then deliver a reassuring message:

Q: Now that you've had this robbery, how will you improve security?

A: "Our review is still in progress, and it's too early to know what changes we'll make, if any. But keeping our customers and employees safe will always be our top priority."

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Talking Your Way Out of a Crisis

Skillful messaging can save your company/organization from a crisis. Careless messaging can turn that same crisis into a catastrophe. And while every crisis is unique, certain media messages have enduring relevance.

SYMPATHY/EMPATHY/SUPPORT

If somebody has been hurt or killed, always begin your media remarks with a statement of empathy or sympathy, even if the reporter's first question doesn't directly call for it.

EXAMPLE: "Our hearts go out to John Smith and his family in the wake of this terrible accident, and we are hoping for a quick recovery."

NOTE: Use caution when it comes to ***apologizing*** for a crisis that may not be your company/organization's fault. Your comments may be construed as an admission of liability. Always consult with legal counsel before using any language accepting responsibility for a crisis.

REASSURANCE

The public will want to hear reassurance that the crisis is under control, or at the very least is being handled aggressively.

EXAMPLE: "As soon as we discovered the data breach, we locked down our servers, brought in a third-party consultant to secure our systems, and began notifying our customers."

NOTE: The more specific you can be, the more powerful your message. Where possible, offer ***concrete examples*** of steps being taken.

TRANSPARENCY/ACCESSIBILITY

Communicating through the media may not be enough to satisfy your stakeholders. If appropriate, offer ways for anyone impacted to interact with you.

EXAMPLE: "We have established a toll-free number for anyone who thinks they may have been victimized." ***(and give the actual number)***

NOTE: Social media accounts must be monitored throughout a crisis. And of course, the time to establish this infrastructure is ***before*** the crisis happens.

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