

Dealing Effectively With The News Media

As Continuity Planners we may suddenly find a camera or microphone in our face when something in our realm is going wrong. While, in many cases, you may work for a company that has a dedicated media spokesperson, this duty may be suddenly delegated to you, or you may be asked to attend media briefings to answer questions with the spokesperson as a technical adviser. Reporters are often seen at DRJ, Survive seminars, or one may actually show up at a BRMA meeting (no, don't skip the next meeting, we have not invited the media).

Most of the crisis management / public relations disasters result from a firm's inability to communicate effectively with the media rather than from the incident that propelled them to public scrutiny. Always be prepared with the facts of the situation when dealing with the media. Their job is to get the facts of a situation quickly and meet their tight deadlines. While few reporters are 'hostile,' their approach to the type of questions asked often depends upon the honesty and sensitivity of the spokesperson to their needs. It doesn't matter to the reporter whether the story makes you look good or bad, but a dull story makes the reporter look bad. Reporters will use a variety of techniques to get you to produce interesting facts and opinions. If you volunteer positive points, the reporter is inclined to use them. The alternative is to make the reporter dig out the story. This does not mean that a reporter has total control over this situation. An effective spokesperson may not control the questions, but can control the message through preparedness and by understanding the basic media interview do's and don'ts.

- Do grant interviews as quickly as possible. If you don't, reporters will get their story from persons who may offer mere speculation, from a disgruntled employee, or from a worker under the emotional strain of just seeing a co-worker killed or injured. Inaccurate information or perceptions are difficult to change once broadcast.
- Do make sure the reporters know who the spokesperson is. If approached by a reporter, remember that your company may have a policy that only the spokesperson is to answer media questions.
- Do ask the reporter what the story is about, if it is not obvious. Ask if they have talked to anyone else and you may ask what the "other side" said in their interview. Follow-up by asking who else they'll interview for the story. Find out how long the interview will last.
- Do establish a warm, friendly, business-like attitude. Learn and use positive body language. Be courteous even if the reporter is obnoxious.

- Do prepare a brief three to five message introduction statement. Remember that interviews can be opportunities. Lead with your most important point. If injuries are involved, establish that the company takes safety seriously, or that the public or workers are not in danger (if true). Re-assure the public that the company does take customer service seriously and you regret that someone's mother-in-law won't get her liver transplant because your on-line auction server went down.
- Do present a consistent and timely account of company policies and activities.
- Do answer Who, What, When, Where, Why, How. Questions may include: who are the victims, what happened, when did it happen, where were victims taken, why did it happen, how many victims were injured/killed?
- Do prepare to respond openly to criticism. Turn negative questions around by giving a positive response. Practice this ability beforehand.
- Do anticipate questions and develop answers. Know your vulnerabilities.
- Do be careful with questions that ask for speculation. The cause of the incident, specific damage estimates, who or what is at fault, or a chronological account of the incident may not be reliably determined at the time.
- Do give yourself time to think by pausing for one or two seconds before responding. Speak slowly after silent moments.
- Respond to a series of 'rapid-fire' questions by picking one that best relates to the point you wish to make. If you lose track of the questions, or become confused, ask the reporter to repeat them one at a time.
- Do keep answers short - use silence effectively.
- Do ask questions that test understanding/acceptance.
- Do be sensitive to time constraints/deadlines.
- Do represent the company in the most favorable light, but speak candidly and accurately. Withholding information that is potentially damaging to the company does not always mean you are not telling the truth. Make sure your information comes from a reliable source. If you need to admit problems, emphasize the positive steps being taken to correct them.
- Do repeat or rephrase questions for an audience before answering (see below).
- Do state your conclusion first when answering a question.

- Do use your own words when answering questions. You don't need to answer at the reporter's speed or tempo, or to sound like a reporter. If you need to think about an answer, do so, but do not delay. Use anecdotes whenever possible and personalize your answers. Avoid referring to 'the company.' Use 'we' or 'your company's name.'"
- Do use "communications bridging" tactics to change the focus of a question to an issue you wish to make and away from the topic a reporter wishes to make.
- Do lead the media "conversation."
- Do commit to follow up with answers.
- Do correct misrepresentations or factual errors immediately, either spoken by you or by the reporter. If after the fact, start with the reporter, not with his or her boss.
- Don't frustrate reporter's need for basic answers.
- Don't let a reporter interrupt your statement. Wait until the reporter is silent, then complete your thought and continue with any other points that you intend to make.
- Don't use highly technical jargon when answering questions.
- Don't talk to or at reporters - talk with them.
- Don't cite competitors by name if your statement is derogatory and stay away from liability issues. Don't talk about who is responsible, nor make any accusations. Whatever you say may become part of a legal proceeding, so be as general as possible.
- Don't make financial or project projections. This can have a negative effect on stock prices or other liability issues. Use caution when discussing construction delays, project shutdowns, or other proprietary information.
- Don't expect every media person to be well prepared.
- Don't be afraid to say you can't answer a question. Responses such as "I don't have that information right now, let me get back to you" and "That's the first I've heard of that, let me check it out before responding" are acceptable.
- Don't respond to questions and facts based upon unknown sources offered by the reporter. Request to examine the source and facts before you are able to comment.
- Don't say "no comment." The public equates this term with dishonesty and deception. As mentioned above, if the media does not get a comment from you or from the company spokesperson, they will seek out someone who will. Most often this person, such as an employee of the firm, will have nothing to offer but

speculation. Rephrasing your response in a manner that avoids 'no comment' is acceptable, but phrasing it in a positive manner gets better results. Instead of answering 'We can't make a statement until we have read the legal documents' try 'We will be happy to make a statement after we read the legal documents.' Other alternatives to 'no comment' include: "I'm not the best source of information on this subject;" "We simply don't have sufficient facts to make a meaningful statement;" or "I'm sorry, it's just not appropriate for me to release that information at this time."

- Don't use trigger words from a question in your answer. Don't repeat an offensive question or negative comment even if to deny it. Hostile questions are often cut from the broadcast, leaving you with the offensive quote.
- Don't attempt to influence editorial reporting by promising or referring to advertising.
- Don't give information that is 'off the record.' Expect reporters to use anything you say. If a reporter wants to talk "off the record," say exactly what you'd say 'on the record.'
- Don't wear sunglasses when being interviewed. You will be perceived as hiding something (besides your eyes).
- Don't argue with a reporter or question their motivations. Your angry or hostile reply to an argumentative question may be aired and the question suppressed.
- Don't answer questions defensively or appear to be attacking.
- Don't use statistics if avoidable. Distribute them to the reporter via printed or graphical means.

While these pointers should help you avoid embarrassing moments in front of a camera or microphone, there are many other things that must be accomplished for an effective interview. There are several books in the BRMA library that will help you to prepare a crisis management plan and keep you from looking silly on the 10:00 news.