

The Media and You – 22 Ways to Get Your Message Across

By SUE STEPHENSON

During a demonstration outside your company's gates, an employee becomes involved in a confrontation and hits one of the protesters. A local reporter who witnessed the incident calls you, the director of human resources. "What's your company's policy regarding violence in the workplace?" she asks. "Will the employee be fired or merely slapped on the wrist? What are you going to do about this?"

Reporters develop their interviewing skills throughout their careers. If you are going to be interviewed by a reporter, you need to develop some techniques of your own so that the experience will be a positive one. To succeed in a media interview you need to first master these skills.

1. Know exactly what you want to say.

You need to envision the story as you'd like it to appear in the newspaper, on the radio, or on television. It's critical that you prepare at least one and no more than five key points. Don't think that because a reporter is conducting the interview, all you have to do is respond to the questions without preparing beforehand.

To help yourself identify the main points, imagine how you would like the headline on the news story to read. What do you want the community to know about your company? And no matter what reporters ask, you need to respond to their question, then transition to one of your key points.

Some obvious transition phrases are "But more important" or "The real critical issue here is" or "This whole project hinges on" In fact, transition phrases are "red flags" to reporters and highlight comments to use in the story.

In the case of the employee hitting a protester, an HR director's message might simply be, "Our company does not condone violence in the workplace." Listing the various training programs your company sponsors to help employees deal with conflict in nonviolent ways would also be helpful in this instance.

2. Communicate clearly.

No big words, no professional jargon, no acronyms, no corporate slang. To test how clearly you communicate, volunteer to be a guest speaker for your local elementary school's fifth grade class. Prepare a 5–10 minute talk about what you do at work (the teacher will appreciate the "career modeling" you're doing for the class), then let the students ask you questions. Their assignment is to write a short story about what you do for a living. When you read the stories, the areas you failed to communicate clearly will reveal themselves. Fifth graders are pretty smart, but they won't know your jargon and slang and they may be too timid to ask you to clarify your statements. Often, reporters will react similarly. Your job is to listen when they're asking questions, realize when their questions reveal that they don't understand you, and answer them in different ways,

until they do comprehend.

3. When being interviewed by a reporter, give brief answers.

If you are being interviewed by a radio or television reporter, you need to get your main point across in 12 seconds or less to get on the air. If you doubt that, watch television news or listen to the radio with a stop watch in your hand and time how long each "source," each "expert," is on the air making a point. Don't be surprised if most sources are on less than 12 seconds. Remember to use simple words and short sentences.

Newspaper and magazine reporters will listen to longer explanations, but by being brief you increase the chances that they'll hear your key points. Too much peripheral information can obscure your message.

4. Be friendly and helpful.

Shake reporters' hands when you meet them, welcoming them to your company. Remember their names and try to use them throughout the interview.

Make sure that the information you give is well organized and interesting. Don't make reporters pry every little bit of information from you. And try to enjoy the experience. The more positive the relationships you establish with reporters, the more likely they are to put a little more effort into making your story a good one.

It's very rewarding to turn someone else on to what you love to do, whether you've developed a tailor-made compensation package, an innovative employee training program, or an HR department that's a profit center for your company. Let your enthusiasm show, and it may infect the reporter and reveal itself in the story.

At the end of the interview, you may want to take the reporter through your facility to show what you've been talking about. Sometimes interviews begin in the office and quickly move to the assembly line, factory floor or research lab as these are better places to help you illustrate your points. If this is a possibility, the people who normally work in those locations need to be prepared for questions from the reporter. Never assume they will do the right thing unprepared. Invest the time to prepare them.

5. Always tell the truth when communicating with the media.

In some cases that means giving your professional opinion—telling it like you see it.

Telling the truth, however, does not mean that you have to reveal every bit of bad news about you or your company. It simply means being honest. Controlling who first gives a story to the media is important. Often, a "bad news" story will sound very different if it's told by management, as opposed to a disgruntled employee. That's one reason for management to deal with bad news stories immediately, to

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get its version of the story in the news before someone else tells a less positive version.

For example, assume that the corporate airplane makes a rough landing late one night. It's better to have a calm, even-mannered corporate spokesperson, perhaps the HR director, tell reporters exactly what he or she knows. In real time, you usually know very little. It is not desirable to have badly frightened, jostled passengers telling reporters what they think happened.

6. Concentrate 100 percent on the interview as it is taking place.

You need to eliminate distractions. If you wear a beeper or a pager, turn it off or give it to a secretary or co-worker during the interview. Tell the receptionist to hold your calls or simply let the phone ring over to your voice mail. Close the door to your office, or schedule the interview someplace where you won't be interrupted.

7. Retain control of the interview.

Use each of the reporter's questions, no matter what they are, as an opportunity to make one of your points. As an HR professional, you may be versed in how to retain control of a job interview, no matter which side of the desk you're on. Those same skills can be used to retain control during a media interview—know what it is you want to say and then steer the conversation in that direction.

8. Own what you say.

Avoid using "we" and instead say, "I think...," "I feel...," "I know..." The "I" statements are more persuasive and powerful than "we" statements.

9. Express your key points from the public's point of view—not the company's, not yours.

Your audience will appreciate them better that way. For instance, two areas people are most concerned about are health and personal finance. Telling your audience how the company's actions will help improve their health or

finances is a good way to hold their interest.

It is worth noting that the way you're dressed, the way you stand, the jewelry you're wearing—all these physical characteristics and more—contribute to your message. In fact, sometimes you are speaking without saying a word. For example, the engineering vice president who was asked by a television news crew to comment on the current union negotiations, didn't want to look like corporate America. So, before the television camera arrived, he removed his suit coat and vest, rolled up his sleeves, loosened his tie, and put his hard hat under his arm. Then he greeted the TV crew outside the building—not in his wood-paneled office—and talked in specific terms about the common ground in the negotiations and in generalities about the areas that still needed some work before a contract could be signed.

10. As a resource for the media, you need to be confident in your expertise.

Many reporters are generalists, knowing a little bit about a whole lot of things, but not a lot about any one subject. When they're covering a story, they are seeking an expert's opinion, your opinion.

11. Strengthen your expert opinion by citing facts.

Facts become stronger when you share your sources. For example, you could simply say, "Television is the most credible news source for most Americans." However, the more powerful statement would be "More people today rely on television as their primary news source now than at any time since this poll began in 1959, when Roper Starch Worldwide began tracking the evolving role of television in the lives of Americans: 72 percent of Americans watch TV, 38 percent read newspapers, 18 percent listen to the radio, and 8 percent read magazines for their news."

12. When being interviewed by reporters, be sure to be patient.

Often you may need to explain a complex issue in a couple of different ways before the reporter truly understands your point. And broadcast reporters may ask you the same

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question several times in an attempt to get a shorter response, one that's usable on the air.

13. Stick to your main points; don't deviate from them.

Knowing exactly what you want to say before you begin the interview can save you from saying something you may regret. One unprepared nuclear scientist, asked repeatedly to describe what happens to humans in a nuclear explosion, tired of the question and finally blurted out, "You can only kill people once!" His impatience with the reporter led him away from the solid ground of his key point, that his "job as a nuclear weapons designer was to ensure that nuclear weapons would never have to be used." He lost his patience with the reporter's repeated questions and he failed to communicate his key points.

14. Answer a reporter's question with a "yes" or "no" only when the "yes" or "no" can stand alone.

If they cannot, if they require further explanation or elaboration, respond instead with your qualifying comment, your explanation.

15. Keep the reporter's deadline in mind.

Some reporters may be working with time constraints of minutes (radio reporters), others have hours (newspaper and television reporters), but some (reporters representing magazines and periodicals) have weeks or months to complete their assignments. Once you are aware of the reporter's deadline, you can respect it and work within the particular time constraints.

16. When you are with the reporter, assume you are "on the record."

Even if the reporter hasn't taken out a notebook, or turned on a tape recorder or camera, everything you say is on the record. In fact, if you are at a social function and happen to be introduced to a reporter, your cocktail party conversation is on the record. Don't say anything racist, agist, sexist; it may become part of the story.

17. Make your points in positive terms, not negative ones.

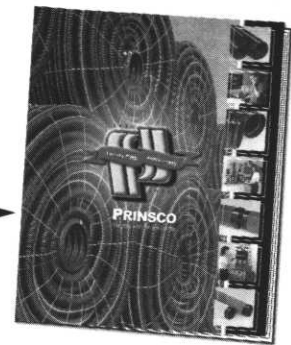
Turn the reporter's negative questions into positive responses. For example, when a reporter asked a nuclear weapons scientist, "How do you justify making weapons of mass destruction?" the scientist responded, "I design nuclear weapons because they are tools for peace. Since the end of World War II we have had peace, due in large part to our strength. And I believe that nuclear weapons are our source of strength."

18. No matter what a reporter asks, respond using your own words, not the reporter's.

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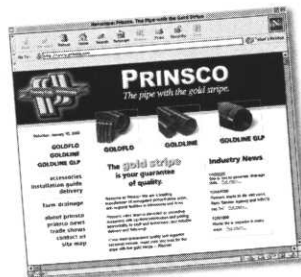
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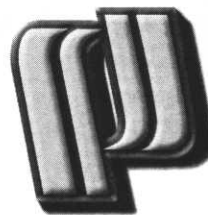
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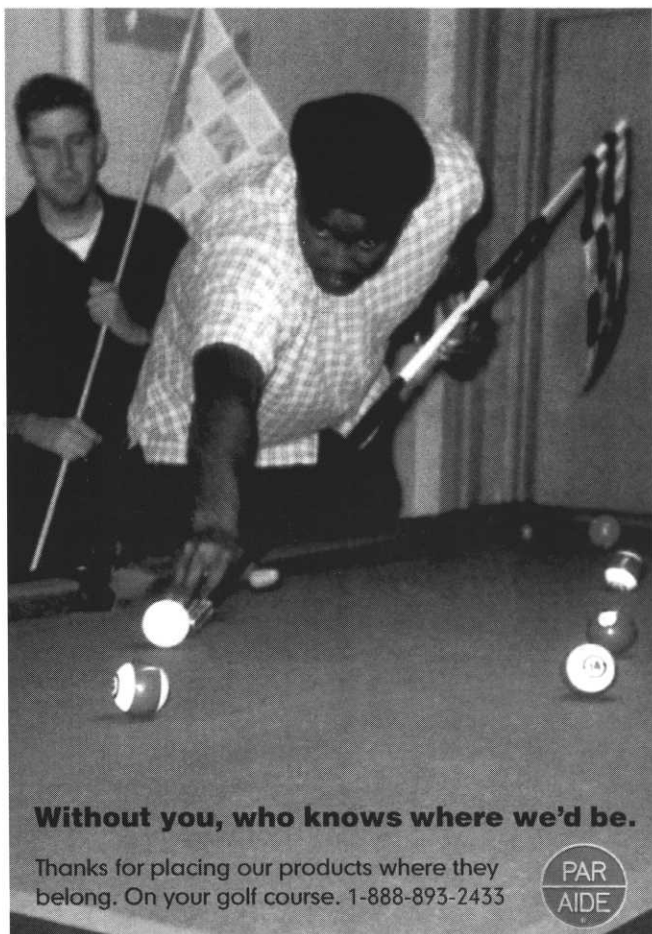
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That's very difficult to do. As children in school, many of us were taught to respond to the teacher's question by repeating it as the topic sentence of our response. That style can be dangerous when responding to reporters' questions. For example, a financial reporter may ask an oil company vice president, "How do you explain last quarter's bonanza profits?" The vice president falls into the trap of using the reporter's words when he responds with, "We didn't have bonanza profits last quarter." If the vice president had used his own words and not the reporter's, his comment might have begun something like, "Our last quarter profits were minimal and due in part to" Prepare your main points and transition to them, no matter what the question, and especially when it's a tough one.

Reporters often ask negative questions, using charged words, because they want exciting quotes, they want a good story. Your challenge is to give them exciting, quotable answers, without using their charged words.


19. When making your points, create pictures in the minds of the readers, viewers, listeners.

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images. For example, to describe the facility where inertial confinement fusion research is conducted, one senior scientist said, "The Nova laser occupies a building the length and width of a football field and is five stories high." Obviously, the Nova laser is much larger than the laser scanners used by grocery store cashiers.

20. Try using metaphors to illustrate your points.

They're especially useful when responding to tough, politically charged questions. For example, a reporter asked a senior fusion scientist, "Thirty-five years ago, fusion researchers said it would take 30 years to figure out how to harness fusion as a viable energy source. It's been more than 30 years. How much longer before fusion is powering our factories and homes?" The senior scientist responded with a metaphor, "If the effort to harness fusion energy were like a journey across the United States, and we started in New York City, heading for San Francisco, we're currently in Denver. We're very close, but we have to climb over the Rocky Mountains yet. We have a few more challenges to solve before we arrive in San Francisco." That answered the reporter's question without the scientist having to quantify how many more years.

21. Sparkle when talking with reporters.

Dull and boring comments do not get in the news; interesting ones often do. When Dr. Erik Storm was the deputy associate director for the Inertial Confinement Fusion program at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, he would tell reporters, "I make stars for a living. I use the world's largest, most powerful laser to create the world's smallest, shortest-lived stars in a laboratory, so we can study how to harness that energy source for future generations." Some of his green-eyed, stick-in-the-mud colleagues would make fun of him, but the facts were that he essentially was a star maker. And he always got in the news.

22. Speak from your heart.

Show how you feel about the issues when you're making your main points. Use more than just your voice—use your eyes, your posture, your hands, your energy level. Use everything at your disposal to make your points.

Once you've mastered these interviewing skills and strategies, you're ready to meet the media. Enjoy the interview!

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(Editor's Note: Sue Stephenson, PHR, was a newspaper reporter for five years and a public relations practitioner for 10 years. She is currently the director of human resources for a small company in northern California, a freelancer and a biographer.)

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