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PREPARE APPROPRIATELY

Do your homework.

Interview the reporter before he interviews you. Find out as much as you can about him, his news organization, and his story angle before you agree to anything.

In a *friendly* way, ask, for example:

“I haven’t met you before. You report for whom? Is this your regular beat? What is your story? I would like to help – can you give me a better idea of what you are looking for? Who have you talked to so far? What is your deadline? Let me see what I can do...”

Know your audience.

Analyze what is important to them. Are they targeted potential customers, current customers, influencers in the industry? Will your staff read this, or your competitors? Craft your key messages so that you will connect with that audience.

How to say “no thanks.”

Based on the information you’ve gathered, determine whether it is in your best interest to do the interview. In those rare cases when it is not, take a pass but keep the lines of communication open.

For example:

“Frankly, we don’t see that as an issue in our industry. But if you’re interested in (positive angle), don’t hesitate to call.”

“That’s outside my area of expertise. Let me put you in touch with Mary Smith in corporate communications.”

Buy a few moments of “think time.”

In most cases, it *is* to your advantage to do the interview – *but only if you’re prepared*. If you’re blindsided by a reporter but the interview is important to you, buy “think time.”

For example:

“You caught me in the middle of something. Let me call you back in ten minutes.”

“I would like to talk to you but I have to do something first. Let’s meet back here in 15 minutes.”

Use that time to analyze the reporter's audience, define your objectives and key points, and prepare your responses to likely questions. Our Quick Interview Preparation Tool will help you collect your thoughts.

Plan three key points

Review your key messages and plan the ideal ones you would like to convey in the interview.

- Will you cite examples?
- Will you need to be particularly persuasive?
- Will you need to use deliberately simple language?

Highlight your three bullets and plan to convey these above all else.

BE IN CONTROL FROM THE ONSET

Define parameters.

As you start the interview, sharpen the focus and define the parameters. In managing the reporter's expectations, make clear:

1. The amount of *time* you can devote to the interview
2. The *subject matter* of the interview

Seize control in the beginning.

Try to (nicely) forestall questions so you can immediately roll out your key messages. This is, in effect, a brief "opening statement."

For example:

"Just before I get to that question, let me briefly outline our position..."

"I think I can save us both some time if I cut to the chase. What is significant here is this..."

"Here is a quick overview before we get into that..."

Don't confuse the reporter with the audience.

Never forget the reporter is a means to an end. You don't have to convince him, you have to convince his audience. Don't let the reporter's level of knowledge or preconceived beliefs hinder the correct message from reaching your audience.

Let the reporter dictate the speed of the interview.

Reporters need time to accurately record notes and choose follow-up questions. After you've fully answered a question, stop. Wait for the reporter to ask for clarification, or ask a new question. You may get into trouble if you rush into the silence with supporting information the reporter doesn't need.

If you hear the click of the keyboard over the phone or the reporter has a tape recorder, be glad. Both indicate a desire to record you accurately.

DON'T JUST ANSWER QUESTIONS

The only reason to do an interview is to get your key points across to an audience you care about. What do you want to tell them? Here are three techniques: steering, hooking and flagging.

Steering

This technique enables you to move off the reporter's agenda and onto your agenda. First, earn the right to steer by briefly dealing with the question. Then use a transition or "steering" phrase to get to your key messages.

- ◆ "No...(response), *but let's put this in its proper perspective...*"
- ◆ "Yes...(response), *but let's not overlook...*"
- ◆ "To the contrary...(response), *but even more important...*"
- ◆ "I don't know that, *but I do know this...*"
- ◆ "(Response), *but that's not the issue, the real issue is...*"

Flagging

Highlight your key messages by using "set-up" phrases emphasizing their importance.

- ◆ "If there were only one thing I could tell you, it would be this:...(key message)"
- ◆ "Let's cut to the heart of the issue:...(key message)"
- ◆ "It all boils down to these few things:...(key message)"
- ◆ "Let me leave you with this thought:...(key message)"
- ◆ "Let me give it to you in a nutshell:...(key message)"

Hooking

You can virtually prompt the next question with this device. Dangle a "hook" in your answer and the reporter may bite.

- ◆ "And that's only the first part of this two-part program."
- ◆ "So that's when we discovered that one simple step could turn the whole enterprise around."
- ◆ "Customers surprised us when they said just one little thing could make a tremendous difference."

MAKE THE MESSAGE POWERFUL

Prove it.

Back up your key points with compelling supporting material, such as third-party endorsements, powerful statistics or moving anecdotes. And, don't make any statements you can't back up. You might believe your product, service or company to be the only one able to make a claim, but if you can't prove it, don't say it.

Define the “so what? / who cares?” factor.

Stress the significance of your message to your audience. Spell out why they should pay attention. Is there a call to action?

Some ways to do this:

- ◆ “We've seen this as a growing trend for two years...”
- ◆ “Our customers often tell us...”
- ◆ “38% of Americans are in this group...”
- ◆ “A recent survey confirmed this...”
- ◆ “It's important that you're covering this topic *now* because...”

Use quotable quotes.

Spend time and thought to make your words “quotable.” Read and listen to quotes included in the media; it will increase your appreciation and understanding of phrasing that gets used, and is remembered. A few ways to do this include making your statement visual, adding an element of surprise, or using numbers in a dramatic way.

Visual – Draw from Everyday Life, Make it Easy to Relate To

- ◆ Ross Waldrop, senior financial analyst at the FDIC, re: uneasy banks may tighten loans
“It's as if you're in a leaky boat, and no matter how quickly you bail out the water, it still remains high.”
- ◆ D. Allan Bromely, former science adviser to George Bush Sr., re: National Institute of Health
“Obviously, every congressman or senator understands NIH (National Institute of Health). Sooner or later, they know they're going to be stark naked on a gurney looking up at a doctor.”

MAKE THE MESSAGE POWERFUL

- ◆ Gary Rhodes, Kroger spokesman, re: grocers' online delivery services
"The supermarket landscape is littered with the skeletons of online grocers that tried to create a viable business model and failed, but our CEO has said all along that we are not going to invest a large sum of money in a business that isn't profitable."
- ◆ Joe Turkovich, California farmer, re: energy crisis
"This is just like a nail in the coffin."

Element of surprise.

- ◆ Fulton County Commission Chairman Michael Lomax, re: smoking ban.
"We're laying out the unwelcome mat for Joe Camel."
- ◆ Sydney Politician John Ryan, re: his experience as an Olympic Games volunteer.
"I'm having the best time. This is like selling drugs to addicts. Everyone is so high."
- ◆ Charles Dawson of Georgia's HERO roadside assistance program re: cell phone dangers on the road.
Cell phones can be a 'wonderful tool' if you're stuck in a bad situation, but "a radial arm saw is a wonderful tool, too. If it's not used carefully, you can lose a finger."

Effective use of numbers.

- ◆ American Pizza Council's comment on National Pizza Week.
"Americans consume an average of 22.5 pounds of pizza each year. We as a nation eat about 90 acres of pizza a day and could fill Yankee stadium more than eight times."

DON'T WANDER INTO NEGATIVE TERRITORY

Everything is "on-the-record."

Anything you say can and will be held against you, including off-hand remarks before or after the interview. Even if the reporter has not written it down, he can use it. Going "off-the-record" or into "deep background" is playing with fire.

Honesty is always best.

Do not lie, exaggerate or bluff. "I do not know" is a legitimate answer. If you have said something in error, correct it. Refuse to speculate or hypothesize.

Avoid “no-comment.”

Explain why you can't respond: “That's proprietary” or “That's before the courts” are perfectly good explanations, when delivered well. Show common courtesy that the reporter is doing his job, and you're doing yours.

Don't give your competitors ink or airtime.

It's extremely rare that we would recommend using your competitor's name in any interview. Why waste precious time on them? Keep your time and audience's focus on *your* business.

AVOID CREATING NEGATIVE QUOTES

There are two main reasons interviewees end up unhappy with their quotes: they've echoed a reporter's negative phrase or created one of their own.

Don't echo a reporter's negative words.

If a reporter asks you a negative question, don't repeat their words in your answer. Instead, re-phrase your answers in the positive. Which would you rather read yourself saying?:

If the reporter says, “So, tell me how your company is rebounding from this terrible blow,” you have a choice between saying:

1. “I wouldn't say we've taken a terrible blow...” or,
2. “Actually, our sales are stable and we're meeting all customer service goals...”

Here are some strong examples of successfully redirecting to a positive message:

A Home Depot manager who had no sleds to sell during a snowstorm.

“But we can teach you how to build them.”

Cindy on TV's “Brady Bunch,” re: If Robert Reed (TV Dad) was gay.

“Nobody's business. The point for the public to remember is if AIDS can happen to Daddy Brady, it can happen to you.”

AVOID CREATING NEGATIVE QUOTES

Don't create your own negative words.

Don't say anything that you don't want to plant into the mind of the reporter or audience. Here are some dramatic examples:

- ◆ Cherokee County Sheriff, re: allegations he's having an affair.
"There's been no affair, no affair; I think he's jumped off the deep end. Where's his proof? This is malicious; it's political. They want to erode my support in the churches and in the community. What's next? I'm a homosexual?"
- ◆ Southern Bell, re: growing number of unlisted numbers in Miami.
"I hate to say this, but there's probably more crime in some areas of Dade county and maybe that's why people have unlisted numbers."
- ◆ Peter Vesey, CNN executive, re: threat of BBC's new global service as a serious competitor to CNN.
"The BBC is giving the impression that we're in a life and death struggle for the eyeballs of the world and that's just not the case."

CLOSE WITH CONTROL

Give fair warning.

Keep an eye on the time and remind the reporter when it is close to your deadline. Always give him an opportunity to ask two more questions, so it does not appear that you are ducking out.

For example:

"As I said to you before we started, I have a conference call at 11 a.m. Unfortunately, it is nearly that time now. Do you have another question or two before we wrap up?"

Summarize.

Bring the interview full circle by briefly recapping your key points. Politely but firmly end the interview. Don't take any more questions.

For example:

"Thanks for you time. But I would like to emphasize just once more; what is important here is..."

Make sure the reporter can reach you by phone if he needs clarification of something you have said. But don't start doing a new interview when you get this kind of call. You risk "scooping" yourself and undermining your original strategy.

Use Edelman.

Once you've done the interview, we cannot change the content unless it is factual clarification. If you wish you hadn't said something we won't be able to take it back. However, after your interview, we can call the reporter back to influence the outcome.

Particularly if you're uncomfortable with any aspect of the content, we can clarify details on that subject, and even send additional support materials. A little post interview "snooping" on our part goes a long way to ensure coverage that makes us all proud.

PRINT INTERVIEWS

Contrary to conventional wisdom, print may be the most difficult type of interview. Yet the vast majority of interviews you do will be with print reporters, and most will be done by phone.

What makes print so difficult is that it appears so simple—just you, the phone and a disembodied voice. In this set-up, it is too easy for the newsmaker to get comfortable and complacent, as if he were chatting with a colleague or friend.

Don't let your guard down. Generally, the print reporter will be better versed on your issues than his colleagues in the broadcast media. It is likely he has had time to research you, your company and your competitors by scrolling through news databanks.

Moreover, anything you tell the print reporter may well end up in those same news databanks, because print is the medium of record. Your quotes may end up shaping the perspectives of hundreds of other reporters for years to come.

To assert some control in this interview process, ***get uncomfortable***. Do the phone interview standing up or the in-person interview in a conference room instead of your office. As in any edited interview, keep the length of the interview fairly short.

Use notes to keep you focused on the key message points. Do not allow the reporter to bog you down in minutiae or lure you into unproductive areas. If he needs detail, refer him to the background material Edelman will have sent him in advance.

Be aware of the image you are projecting. Over the phone, a print reporter can describe your voice ("...he retorted snidely"). In person, he can describe your body language ("nervously tapping his pencil").

Finally, ***slow down and pause*** so the reporter's pen can keep up with you. Let the reporter dictate the speed of the interview.

BROADCAST INTERVIEWS

Your strategy hinges on whether the interview is live or taped. Each has unique advantages and disadvantages.

Taped or edited interviews.

Force yourself to remember that no one is watching. There is no audience—yet. While everything you say and do is grist for the mill, ultimately about 90% of your interaction with the reporter will end up unused and unseen.

This means you can politely negotiate off-camera, you can pause to think, stop and rephrase your answer and steer aggressively to your key points. **Repetition is vital.**

In a taped interview, the reporter's questions are almost never used. That's why it is imperative to **stick to your positive agenda** and not get sucked into the reporter's negative or hostile agenda. Only your **answers** make news.

You have some control over the amount of time you spend with the reporter. **Keep it short**—this forces you to focus. To a large degree, if you control the time, you control the content.

Live Interviews.

Everything you say, smart or dumb goes out to the audience. The advantage is that your remarks can't be edited "out of context" or dropped from the interview.

Of course, the interviewer controls the length of the interview. Most newsmakers find live TV goes much too quickly—interviews typically run less than three minutes.

Another advantage is that in live TV, the interviewer may try harder to appear "fair." He does not want his audience to perceive him as a "bully."

The live interview will appear to be a conversation, but in reality it should be a chess game as you **respond to the questions, then move to your key points.**

INTERVIEW ATTIRE

1. Dress conservatively. You don't want your attire to distract the audience from your message.
2. Men look best in navy or charcoal suits. Avoid double-breasted suits if you are seated. Shirts should be a solid color—light blue is best. A maroon tie adds interest to the head shot. For men, high socks and shiny shoes are important for the wide shot.
3. Women look best in tailored outfits. Pastels and brights make a head shot more visually appealing.
4. Avoid high contrast plaids, checks or dots. Shun black, white or a combination of black and white.
5. Avoid large or flashy jewelry. It reflects light.

6. Corporate pins or lapel buttons are too small to be seen clearly and only frustrate the viewer.
7. A multi-strand necklace or bangles can clink together and ruin the audio on TV or radio.
8. Never wear light-sensitive glasses. They become dark glasses under the bright studio lights. Heavy frames obscure crucial eye contact. Best are frameless glasses with non-reflective lenses.
9. Take bulky items--airline tickets, glasses—out of your pockets. Get a smooth shoulder line by pulling your jacket taut and sitting on the tail of it.
10. Wear a matte facial powder. It cuts shine on the temples from hot TV lights. Men should also use it to reduce “five o’clock shadow.” All women should be made up for TV since the bright lights can wash out facial features.

“A, B, C, D,...Go”

As a quick reminder to confirm that you’re fully prepared for an interview, step through four concepts, led by the first four letters of the alphabet.

Audience

Consider the readers/viewers of the media outlet and their role in your marketing needs.

Bullets

List the key messages you want that precise audience to receive.

Context

Consider the angle or topic the reporter is covering, and how to make your points within that context.

Demons

Remind yourself of any bad habits, pitfalls or other demons you don’t want to appear.