

# Media Smarts:

## *What every executive needs to know when a reporter comes calling*

■ BY AILEEN PINCUS



The mere thought of being interviewed by a reporter is enough to send shivers down the spine of even the most accomplished executive.

There's a good reason for that. Individual careers, as well as company stock prices have vaulted to new heights-- or crashed to new lows--on the basis of what someone said to a reporter.

Think of the press release HOT POCKETS brand sandwiches sent reporters in the wake of the tragic events of September 11th-- linking a return to normal American life with their new line of sandwiches. The resulting publicity couldn't have been what the company had been hoping for.

Remember the criticism tennis star Martina Hingis drew for her (pre-media training) description of opponent Amelie Moresmo as "half a man."

Many blame "media sharks" for high profile cases of reputation implosion. A closer look reveals less a taste for blood, than a pronounced indifference on the part of the media for protecting people and institutions bent on committing professional suicide.

In this day and age of media proliferation, with more cable, broadcast, on-line, and print media outlets, you have more of an opportunity than ever before to get your company's messages out through the media. Here are some of the rules to follow when the media comes calling:

### #1 Do your homework:

If you have a communications department, use it! Reporters will not use channels to get to you unless you leave them no choice. Insist your communications or public relations department be the first contact for reporters, for the simple reason that it gives you time to find out vital information such as who the reporter is, which outlet the reporter works for, and why the reporter is seeking your input. If you don't have a communications or p.r. department, make sure you ask the reporter those questions yourself before proceeding. No responsible, professional reporter will refuse to answer such basic questions.

### #2 Know what you want to say:

Sounds basic enough, right? You'd be surprised at the number of executives who miss the opportunity to communicate a positive message about themselves and their companies through the media. The typical interviewee simply waits for the reporter to ask the questions and hopes for the best. The reporter has no interest in delivering your message for you, unprompted. Instead, ask yourself who will read, hear or see the story, and what message you want to convey to them.

### #3 Know how you want to say it:

Give them a choice, and reporters will go for the snappy quote or 'sound bite' over the carefully chosen, detailed explanation every time. It's not what you say, but the way you say it that is going to make all the difference when speaking to a reporter. Distilling your points down to their bare essence takes some practice, but unless you want the reporter to do it for you, you'll have to be succinct. If it helps you get there, remember you don't have to be simplistic to keep your message simple. (See rule number 2).

### #4 Know when to stop talking:

Media interviews aren't "conversations." Say what you mean to say and then stop talking. It's all the explanations, qualifications and by-the-ways that often get executives into trouble. (In politics, it's called "staying on message". Scorn all you want, the interviewee who stays on message is an interviewee far less likely to be drawn into areas of trouble.)

### #5 Answer the question:

Don't try to finesse your way out of answering questions you'd rather not answer. If there are areas you won't discuss, tell the reporter immediately what they are and why. (i.e. Never say, "No comment." Say, "I can't talk about that because there's a lawsuit pending, but here's what I can tell you:") If you know you're going to face some tough questions, practice, practice, practice what you want to say. Otherwise, you might get caught up in the moment and say something you may regret.

Finally, remember the proverbial directions to Carnegie Hall: "practice, practice, practice!" On-line media outlets are different than journals, magazines or newspapers; radio is different than print; television is a medium unto itself, but all media reporters share a common goal of searching for a story to tell. Your job is to give them one that benefits you as well.

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