

The Scoop

When the press calls, give an interview that tells a story and offers meaningful information.

By Karen Friedman

There is a sign that hangs in my office. It says; "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

As a reporter for more than twenty years, I interviewed countless intelligent, articulate people who had a lot to say, but didn't always know how to say it. They spoke out on behalf of their companies and organizations but frequently talked about what they wanted people to know instead of addressing what the listener really cared about.

For example, if a reporter is assigned to cover a story on a multi-million dollar highway project, she isn't interested in the technical details of the entire project, but she does want to know how the project will affect people in the area.

Understandably, having a camera pointed in your face or knowing your answer is being recorded can make even the most seasoned spokesperson uncomfortable. They fear being misquoted, having their words taken out of context or being blindsided by unexpected questions. After all, everyone knows reporters are only interested in ratings, right?

Wrong. The truth is: reporters don't think about ratings. That's management's job. Reporters think about telling the story.

They think about how to make that story as interesting as possible so people will keep reading or watching. Reporters don't care about interviewing the brightest bulb in the bunch. They want the person who can help them tell the story.

Engage Your Audience

You've probably seen these people on television—the interviewee who delivers a quick quip, interesting anecdote or important fact that makes you stop and take notice. They appear natural, conversational, energetic and unrehearsed. They engage you as soon as they speak.

Like an expert driver, they typically ignore the reporter's question and grab control of the wheel, spinning off in a different direction. What is it they have in common? Are they part of that deep pool of executives who have been programmed by media trainers? Perhaps. But learning how to deliver key messages practiced in coaching sessions doesn't make someone a good spokesperson.

The key to your success isn't knowing how to deliver a "1-2-3" learned in media training. The real key is learning to connect so your words are relevant and meaningful to an audience you typically can't see or hear.

Get to the Point

For example, let's say you're a scientist trying to explain a new storage disk that can hold more information than ever before. It is natural for you to want to share details of the process. So you say: "This 5.25-inch storage disk has a holographic coating that can hold a terabyte of data." While that may be true, it is far more compelling to put the information into perspective by telling the reporter what it means to their

audience. If you say, "The entire Library of Congress is about 20 terabytes, so you could put all of it on 20 of these disks that could fit in a shoebox," you will help the reporter make sense of the information for the reader.

While it is critical to develop key messages and prepare responses for difficult or unwanted questions, reporters want you to answer questions, not spout messages. They want you to appear animated, not coached. They want you to talk about your product or service, but they are turned off if you start promoting. So, how can you bridge the gap give them what they want, but make the most of every interview opportunity without sounding media-trained?

You need to understand three simple objectives. When reporters cover stories, they want to know:

1. Who cares?
2. Why do they care?
3. How is the reader, listener or viewer affected?

Reporters do not have time for volumes of information and background. They want the bottom line—quickly! So rather than memorizing message sentences, think about talking in concepts and prepare messages that evoke emotion—that make people care enough to listen.

Be Sincere

Reporters need sincerity in order to tell a story. They want you to speak from the heart so you reach through the screen or come off the page to make people see what you saw, hear what you heard or feel what you felt. This doesn't mean you need to sob or tell a journalist everything you know. However, when you speak, you should look for opportunities to humanize the information so people can relate to what you're saying.

Think about using analogies and examples to enhance your message. I recall covering a space exhibit and asking a scientist to explain a certain technical process. Rather than spouting off data, he told me that one day this technology "would save the lives of our grandchildren."

Listeners remember impressions, not facts.

Finally, be yourself. If you don't know something, say so. Reporters will respect your honesty. If you're serious about improving your skills, seek media training that focuses on standards and values. But remember that words without principle are simply words without meaning. Listeners will see right through them and right through you.

Karen Friedman is one of the leading communications coaches in today's business world; her techniques are successfully used by thousands of people across the globe. Founder of Philadelphia-based Karen Friedman Enterprises Inc., she counsels spokespeople, newsmakers and executives to make the most of every interview, appearance and presentation. An award-winning television news reporter and anchor, Friedman has repeatedly received the International Association of Business Communicators Recommended Speaker designation. For more information, contact her via her Web site at www.karenfriedman.com.

Five Media Success Strategies

1. Talk to your grandmother.

Think of your audience as a long lost friend or grandparent. Smile and try to speak simply and conversationally like you would if they were in front of you.

2. Speak from the heart.

Be passionate. Look for opportunities to personalize and humanize the information so what you say really means something to the audience.

3. Explain your subject.

What is clear to you might not be clear to your audience. You are the expert, so it is up to you to make sure they understand what you're talking about.

4. Be knowledgeable.

The better you prepare, the easier it will be to stay focused, give meaning to your words and handle interruptions or questions.

5. Keep to the point.

Say what you have to say as simply as possible, then stop! Too much information can create confusion and misunderstanding.

—*Karen Friedman*