

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SPOKESPERSON?

I remember talking to Dr. Ross for a long time. My nine-week old son was sick and had been examined by many doctors. After recanting the baby's history once again, I looked at this doctor and asked: "Do you want to examine him now?"

The surgeon smiled and said, "Of course. But even before I examine him, I think I know what's wrong."

This seemed so odd and I said so, to which he replied: "By listening to mothers, I usually learn most of what I need to know." I've never forgotten Dr. Ross because he saved my son's life. He also exemplifies what makes a good spokesperson. Before he speaks, he listens.

Every day thousands of people speak out on behalf of the companies and organizations for which they work. Yet, few do it well. They talk about what they want people to know instead of addressing what the audience cares about. They answer questions but never deliver messages. They dodge questions without providing any further information. They say too much. They say too little. They lie. They don't understand what reporters need and how the media works. They repeat negative words. They talk industry jargon. They have poor eye contact. Their body language doesn't match their words. They think the media works for them. They wing it. So, what qualities serve a spokesperson well?

Rebecca Rosser Yearick, Director of Communications for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation says spokespeople must be credible. "Credibility should be based on experience and knowledge, demonstrated by your delivery and dynamics." Rosser says it can make you or break you.

While Rosser's experience has proved her right, not every knowledgeable and experienced person makes a good spokesperson. For example, I remember interviewing a spokesperson for a charity prior to a fundraising event. It was a simple story about the purpose of the fundraiser. The spokesperson knew everything there was to know about her organization; it's history, volunteers and financial solvency. Yet, she was incapable of explaining how the event would benefit anyone outside her organization. As a result, her organization lost an opportunity to showcase their charity and event.

Good spokespeople understand that people care about what affects them. They know that a reporter assigned to do a story on a multi million-dollar highway project isn't interested in the technical details of the entire project, but rather they want to know how people in the area are affected by the construction. Good spokespeople leave their egos at home and speak in the context of public interest and concern.

"A good spokesperson knows their subject and isn't looking for more ink than their client," observes media and political consultant Larry Ceisler. "Too often a spokesperson's ego gets in the way and that ego is what the public remembers."

Despite a sincere thirst for knowledge and a quest to be better informed, most readers, listeners and viewers will not take time to study the products and services the spokesperson represents. Instead, they will form instant impressions of companies and agencies through spokespeople who are quoted in newspapers or interviewed on TV. So in reality, most of what the public knows or believes comes from a spokesperson's ability to quickly and effectively connect with an audience through a reporter.

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That's why it's essential for spokespeople to prepare. Reporters will interview a spokesperson because that person can provide information for a story. Therefore, it is important for the spokesperson to gather information and prepare message points in advance in order to provide the reporter or audience with interesting facts.

“ A spokesperson needs to deliver messages in small, easily digestible increments, says Leslie Hare, corporate communications director for Sanofi Pharmaceuticals. Hopefully they are relevant and entertaining as well.”

That means they need to talk in people terms. This means learning to make their points quickly and not wait for a reporter to ask a question that will allow them to deliver their message. If the reporter never asks that question, the spokesperson has lost an opportunity to get his point across. People want to believe a spokesperson. They will listen to that person because he or she knows what they're talking about.

“ For me the biggest driver is commitment and passion, observes Frank Donaghue, national spokesperson for the American Red Cross. You really have to believe in what you're saying and not let anything divert you from that.”

As the American Red Cross's spokesperson following the events of September 11, 2001, Donaghue has spent countless hours talking to the media, community, volunteers and worldwide audiences. A former priest and current CEO of the Southeastern Pennsylvania American Red Cross, he easily captures audience attention by his ability to weave a story. No matter what the subject, tells personal stories that bring the message to life.

Those interviewed for this article quickly agree even the most knowledgeable and articulate spokesperson must be engaging or run the risk of putting their audience to sleep. They also point out there is a fine line between “engaging” and “sales-like”. Gail Ferrari, spokesperson for Unisys says spokespeople need to convey overall messages with authority, but appear enthusiastic on an appropriate level.

Presidential advisor Roger Ailes once wrote: “ The “magic bullet” of personal communication is the quality of being likable.” Perhaps this is best observed by remembering the highly publicized Exxon Valdez spill. For days, viewers witnessed graphic pictures of dead geese and sea lions. Environmental groups were all over the airwaves, but Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl was conspicuously absent. When he did appear on ABC's Good Morning America several days later, he was scowling; defensive and accused anchor Kathleen Sullivan of creating a public relations nightmare. If Rawl had shown concern and compassion, he would have been much more likeable which in turn would have softened the blow for Exxon.

People want spokespeople to be human. They want to relate to them. They want to know that spokespeople care about the same things they care about. Only then, will an audience feel comfortable enough to believe the spokesperson and trust what they're saying.

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While a spokesperson that has experience inside a news organization or political campaign is probably better equipped to deal with pressure and deadlines, it is not a prerequisite for the job. All spokespeople however, regardless of past experience should be able to put the following tips into play:

- **B**elieve in what you're saying.
- **E**liminate industry jargon if you're not talking to an industry audience.
- **A**ttitude creates a lasting impression.
- **G**ive sincere and honest answers. If you don't know, say so.
- **O**pinions don't count. Be able to back up statements with facts.
- **O**ff the record is not advised.
- **D**eliver clear concise messages in terms audiences can relate to and understand.
- **S**how care and concern during difficult situations.
- **P**ut your audience first and provide information from their viewpoint.
- **O**nly provide information that is confirmed.
- **K**now what you want to say in advance and deliver that message regardless of what questions are asked.
- **E**xamples, anecdotes, visual images, stories and metaphors make your message memorable.
- **S**how energy and enthusiasm.
- **P**roactive is better than reactive. Don't wait for someone to come to you.
- **E**asily accessible and available.
- **R**emember not to lie or speculate.
- **S**mile when appropriate so people think you want to be there.
- **O**wn what you say and give it meaning.
- **N**ever say "No Comment" even if you have nothing to say.

Finally, even if a spokesperson is not prepared to answer every question posed to them, it is important not to get defensive. Credible spokespeople often appear opaque, meaning they make it seem as if no question is too difficult to answer. Yet, those who make it seem so easy don't always come by it naturally. They've made mistakes, but have improved with training and practice. They've learned to build relationships with the media and to keep their cool. But, the best spokespeople also know when to stop talking and start listening. They've learned that the audience comes first.

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