

## **HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?**

### **Become your audience to make a difference**

If you're looking for another article about the dos and don'ts of interviewing, perhaps you should stop reading. Almost any savvy public relations person can spout off a few helpful and memorable techniques, but that will not make you a media darling instead of a media dumping ground.

Since I covered local and national news in ABC Philadelphia six years ago, the media hasn't changed much. They still speculate. They still try to out beat the competition. They still ask tough questions and they still want real people that readers can understand. The only change is the speed in which the news can be delivered.

#### **DON'T BLOW A GOOD OPPORTUNITY**

That said; you might assume that I am another one of those coaches big on teaching people to talk in sound bites. Actually, for starters, I'm just big on getting people to talk period. Over the years, I've stood at the scene of many a story and asked how did that happen? An organization had such a great opportunity to tell their story, but either declined comment, letting the media define the story for them, or slammed the door on a story that was begging to be told. In almost every case, companies and spokespeople are scared. They simply don't understand what the media needs and how they can tell their part of the story.

I remember the day a three-year-old girl we'll call Amanda was coming home from a Philadelphia hospital for the first time in her young life. Born with many complications, the child had not been able to sit, walk, breathe or swallow on her own. The parents were told little Amanda might never leave the hospital but thanks to incredible therapists and God's will, on this blustery March day, this miracle child was going to walk out of her home since birth. What a story!

So, out she comes, cameras clicking, our tape caught it all as she clutched her mother's sleeve and was all giggles and smiles as she walked the short distance from the hospital door to the waiting car. We couldn't have scripted it better. Yet, when my photographer and I walked up to do an interview, the hospital said there would be no interviews. I protested and explained not only did we need the interviews to tell our story, but we wanted to talk to the doctors and therapists, videotape the room where Amanda had lived, take pictures of the machines that kept her alive. No one at the hospital seemed to understand that without these elements, we really didn't have much of a story.

#### **WHO CARES?**

For starters, try thinking like a reporter and ask yourself the same questions a reporter asks when they cover a story. Who cares and how does this story affect my audience?

For example, I recall covering a space exhibit and asking a scientist to explain a certain process. Rather than spouting off data that was relevant to him, he told me that one-day this technology "would save the lives of my grandchildren." Reporters don't care how

great your technology is, but rather, they want to know how that technology can improve someone's life.

### **BECOME YOUR AUDIENCE**

So, the next time you prepare for an interview, close your eyes for a second and imagine that you are your audience. Then ask yourself the following questions:

1. What would you, the reader, care about?
2. What would you, the radio listener, ask if you were putting the story together?
3. What, would you, the television viewer want to see if you were watching at home?

Reporters ask questions they think their audiences want answered. In reality, you're not even talking to a reporter. You're talking to the reporter's audience. So, don't assume the reporter knows what you're talking about. If you do, you've left it up to them to interpret, communicate and translate for you. Reporters look for spokespeople who are:

**PASSIONATE:** Reporters need to see what you saw, hear what you heard and feel what you felt.

**CONCISE:** Stay away from too many details. Use simple descriptive words and analogies that help illustrate your point.

**SINCERE:** Work from your own script. If someone helps craft your messages, deliver them in your own words and style.

**INFORMATIVE:** Use an interview to get your message across. Answer the question, then transition to your key points.

**CLARITY:** Forget the industry buzzwords.

**PREPARE:** Understand why they're talking to you and what people want to hear so you can address their needs.

**CONTEXT:** Talk in concepts and ideas that mean something to the audience.

When you begin to implement these suggestions, you will find yourself talking in those sound bites or quotes that once seemed so elusive. Reporters are simply storytellers. But they can't tell a story that they don't understand.

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