

MAKING THE MOST OF A BAD SITUATION

How to Consistently Communicate with Clarity and Class

By Karen Friedman

You may never meet John Stossel or have to answer questions from a New York Times reporter, but facing the media without preparation is like letting your accountant perform a medical procedure on a family member.

True, media interviews are not brain surgery, but those interviews do shape public perception about you, your company or your product. How you communicate is directly related to your company's image and your own success.

For example, a few years ago I covered a story about a person with Aids who sued a health club. Lawyers advised club management not to talk to the media. Instead of explaining why they couldn't comment, club managers ignored media phone calls, ducked from reporters who waited at their door and one employee called a cameraperson a name. We had a field day. Make no mistake about it, reporters love confrontation! If you want to get on the six o'clock news or on the front page of the paper, then scream at us or run away from our cameras. It works every time. The reporters were not deliberately trying to make club owners look bad, but they were trying to cover the story. They simply reported what they saw and heard. If management had explained why they couldn't answer questions and realized reporters had a job to do, the story would have been far less sensational.

Additionally, there is no such person as an objective reporter. I believe most reporters try to be fair, but like you, they come to the story with opinions, attitudes and pre-conceived notions of the so-called truth. Just because you won't talk to the reporter doesn't mean they won't do the story. Sure they will. They'll find another interview, speculate or rely on the person who will talk. By cooperating and feeding the media information you want reported, you actually maximize your opportunity to have your story told accurately.

Reporters are quick and work on tight deadlines. Good reporters try to ask the questions that the public would ask. They play on your emotions because that's what you'll remember. They take very complicated information, tailor it and turn it around for public consumption in minutes. Most spokespeople know their stuff, but are not as fast on their feet as a fast reporter.

Media training helps you prepare messages and deliver those messages clearly and concisely. More importantly, a good media trainer will help you understand what reporters want so you can connect with an audience of one or one thousand. Regardless of how important you think your product or service may be, the reporter is not interested in promoting you. She is interested in telling a story that affects her audience.

The key is learning how to communicate with that audience as if you were speaking to one person.

While there are many newsroom insiders checking and double-checking to make sure reporters present fair and balanced stories, they are not there to protect you. The only one looking after you is you and your media trainer.

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