



## Say It Isn't So

**Are these 12 media myths killing your public relations plan? Find out how to get media-savvy--fast.**

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By Gwen Moran

Dan Hoffman had some bad interviews years ago, back when he was heading up operations at an ISP based in Hong Kong. He would read articles in which he was quoted and sometimes find that the published version of the interview had very different information than what he thought he'd discussed with the reporter.

So when Hoffman, now president and CEO of [M5 Networks Inc.](#), a \$10 million, New York City-based provider of outsourced telephone systems, got a call to appear on Bloomberg Television, he decided he'd better get some help. Hoffman, 36, called his PR agency to schedule some media training.

"A lot of people think that doing interviews effectively is a piece of cake," says former broadcast reporter Barbara Laskin, president of Laskin Media Inc., a New York City media training firm. "That's why I got into this business. I was a reporter and cared about getting the story right, but with today's fast deadlines, you can't always assume that the reporter is going to figure out what you meant to say if you're not clear about it from the start."

Being unprepared is just one of a host of mistakes entrepreneurs make when dealing with the media. Whether the result of popular misconceptions, bad media training or simply having no idea what it takes to be a good source, here are a dozen of the most common myths about being media-savvy.

**Myth #1: It's important to put a positive spin on everything.** Not every situation is positive, says David Margulies, who heads up [Margulies Communications Group](#), a strategic PR and crisis communications firm in Dallas. In order to be truthful, you can't always put a bullish slant on the circumstances.

"The example I use in my speeches is the airline executive who says, 'Sure, the plane crashed, but it was right on time when it hit the mountain,' " he explains. "You need to deliver the information the audience needs to know." He advises being honest and sharing the information that is necessary and targeted toward your audience. "Stating the factors that contributed to the crash and giving a careful explanation of what will be done to prevent it from happening in the future would be a better response."

**Myth #2: If you don't want to answer a reporter's question, change the subject.** A popular media training technique is called "the bridge," and it works like this: If a reporter asks you a question you don't want to answer, you say something like, "That's a great question, but I think the more important point is . . ." That kind of question dodging, says Laskin, is one of the quickest ways to earn a reporter's ire.

"It's not a bridge to nowhere," says Laskin. "Even though the bridge can be an effective technique to insert your key messages, you still need to answer the reporter's question. If a reporter asks about your bad sales last quarter, you can answer the question and still include the information that's important to your company by saying something like, 'Sales were disappointing; however, our new line, which we're working hard on, is going to give us returns,' and explain how."

**Myth #3: You should participate in every interview that's requested of you.** No way, says Margulies. Before you get on the phone or in front of the mic and start talking, you need to know the context of the story. "Find out what, specifically, the story is about," he says. "There are some stories you don't want to be involved in, and some stories where there might be legal implications."

Margulies recommends getting some background on the topic of the story and deciding if there's a good business reason for doing it. For instance, it might be a good idea to participate in a profile of your company in an industry trade publication. However, if a reporter is doing a general story that isn't really relevant to your business or your key audience, and which could position your business in a negative way, you may want to pass on participating in the story.

**Myth #4: Reciting how many other media interviews you've done impresses journalists, producers and editors.** "One word: overexposed," says [Karen Friedman](#), head of [Karen Friedman Enterprises Inc.](#), a media training firm in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. Friedman says that most reporters are looking for fresh voices and ideas. "In many cases, if you rattle off that you've been quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and on all the major networks recently, the reporter might think that you have nothing new to say on the topic or that your story's been 'done.'"

Instead, advises [Friedman](#), say that you're an experienced interviewee to let the journalist know you're familiar with the interview process. That will likely make him or her more comfortable with you as a source. If you're asked for particular outlets in which you've been featured, then provide them.

**Myth #5: A good news release is the best way to get media attention for your company.** Suggest sending out a one-size-fits-all news release to Victoria D'Angelo, owner of D'Angelo Home Collections Inc., a \$4.5 million home accessories designer, product developer and distributor in Orangeburg, New York, and she'll give you a passionate lesson in Marketing 101. "You can't send

out one news release to the media any more than you can send out one set of options to customers and expect them to purchase your products," explains D'Angelo, 49. "A number of books give you the idea that you can print a magic flier and the world will respond. The generic approach is a waste of time."

D'Angelo has found more success with creating customized pitch letters for magazines and talking points for interviews. The secret, she says, is finding out which topics are of interest to the media and putting that information in the easiest format for the journalist to use. Says D'Angelo, "If you're not willing to do the homework, you can't expect great results."

**Myth #6: Mention your company, product or book as often as possible.**

"This is one of the examples of media training gone haywire," says Friedman. "It's annoying when the expert mentions the name of the book in almost every sentence, and I'm convinced that it usually backfires." She advises mentioning the book when it's appropriate, trying for two or three mentions in a broadcast or one credit in a print piece.

**Myth #7: Whenever you don't want something printed or broadcast, just say it's "off the record."** Saying something is "off the record"--usually used when a source gives background information to put something in context and doesn't want it to be attributed--is risky because a journalist doesn't have to abide by it, says Laskin. "The truth is that reporters dig. That's what they should always do. If you're naive enough to give them sensitive information that shouldn't be shared publicly, you can't be sure they won't use it. If you say it, it's fair game."

**Myth #8: Answer every question so that you look like the expert.** It's OK to say that you don't know something, says Friedman. "It's far better to say, 'That's a good question. Let me check on it and get back to you,' or 'I don't have that information right now, but I'd be happy to follow up and get it to you' than it is to bluff or lie. If a reporter senses that you're not telling the truth, he or she will just dig deeper to find out. And if they find out you're lying, your credibility is shot."

**Myth #9: If you advertise in a medium, they'll give you better coverage.** When D'Angelo founded her company, she pored over many books to learn about marketing her products. She knew the difference between PR and advertising, and emphasizes that it's critical not to confuse the two. "You'll quickly alienate journalists if you suggest they're influenced by advertising," she advises.

Friedman says that mistaking the objective of the editorial department, which is to inform readers, with that of advertising, which is to promote products and services, is a common mistake that business owners make. "Many editors will run in the other direction if you try to use that argument," she says. "Ethical media don't let advertisers influence editorial content. And it will backfire if you try to do so."

**Myth #10: The bigger the words, the smarter you sound.** Jargon and overblown language can get you jettisoned as a source, says [Friedman](#). "Some people think that using conversational language is 'dumbing it down' and that they won't be perceived as smart, articulate executives."

Actually, the opposite is true, she says. Using obscure industry terminology or overly complex language increases the chance that the journalist will misunderstand the information and report it wrong. Simple language is almost always best.

**Myth #11: Never show emotion.** Similarly, says [Friedman](#), it's important to appear sincere and believable, whether the news is good or bad. "Sometimes, especially in difficult situations, interviewees forget to be human beings," she says. "They forget to empathize. They forget to show concern. Or they're afraid that if they show emotion, they might be perceived as weak."

While she doesn't advocate falling to pieces in front of the camera, [Friedman](#) says that showing an appropriate level of emotion can make your message much more believable. If you're enthusiastic, show it. If you're relaying sad news, it's OK to show that, too, she says.

**Myth #12: Media training is what you need most to be successful in media relations.** "Probably the most common misconception I encounter is that media training is a stand-alone component," says Margulies. "The best way to deal with the media is to have a process. The interview isn't the whole event. It's the preparation you do before the interview that can make the biggest difference."

[Friedman](#) agrees. "You need to have a solid plan in place for dealing with the media, developing relationships and getting comfortable with the process. That's how you put a successful media-relations program in place."

### **5 Rules to Live By**

While there's plenty of useless conventional wisdom about dealing with the media, there are also some rules you should never break:

**1. Respond promptly.** "Remember that these people are usually on tight deadlines," says Barbara Laskin, president of Laskin Media Inc., a New York City media training firm. Even if you're unable to do the interview, say so in a timely manner.

**2. Never say "no comment."** If you cannot answer a question, provide a reasonable explanation instead, says David Margulies, founder of Margulies Communications Group, a strategic PR and crisis communications firm in Dallas.

**3. Never lie or speculate.** "Aside from the fact that lying is wrong and unethical, it will come back to haunt you," says [Karen Friedman, founder of Karen Friedman](#)

[Enterprises Inc.](#), a media training firm in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. It's always better to tell the truth and explain why you did what you did, even if your explanation is shaky.

**4. Know the medium's audience.** Every media outlet is different, says Margulies. "Every audience wants you to address WIIFM-what's in it for me."

**5. Stick to what you know.** Do not try to be an expert or comment on an issue about which you are not fully informed, says Margulies.

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