MANAGING PUBLIC AFFAIRS
How to Conduct a Successful Media Interview

Mary Munter

Few issues have caused as much concern among managers over the last decade as business-press relations. The quality of a company's relationship with the media can have a decisive impact on its profitability. This article offers a number of practical suggestions for managers to assist them in improving the effectiveness of their own communications with the media.

You no longer have a choice in the matter: business is news. Public interest in the environment, consumerism, and the economy make it impossible for business people to hide behind phalanxes of secretaries and wide desks. Good press relations can increase your company's success; bad press relations can spread untruths, decrease popularity, and hurt profits.

Dealing with the press has transcended the publicity department and is a necessary communication skill for many business people. Just as in any other kind of communication, your first question should always be, "Is it appropriate?" Is the interview necessary? Are you the correct person to be involved? Do any company policies impinge on what you can say? Once you have decided to deal with the press, this article outlines some of the basic techniques for improving your ability: how to prepare, what to say, how you look and sound, and how to deal with tricky questions.

How to Prepare

As Lewis Young, editor-in-chief of Business Week, notes, "Before the annual meeting, the CEO will spend days rehearsing, answering hypothetical questions that his key staff people put to him. On the day of the meeting he appears knowledgeable, in control, deft and impressive. I am amazed at how many CEOs just show up for an important media interview, even though the interviewer is far more skilled at asking questions than anybody who will be at the annual meeting." An effective media interview may look
relaxed and informal, but it has been carefully prepared. Preparing for a
media interview involves four steps: anticipate questions, plan your re-
sponses, analyze your audience, and practice in advance.

**Anticipate Questions** — To analyze the questions, first discover whate-
ever you can from the reporter about what you will be discussing. If you are
called on the phone, you might ask what the interviewer will cover and if
you could call back later. If you are speaking on a talk show, you might ask
what areas you will be discussing. Do not expect reporters to give you a list
of questions written out in advance. Usually, however, they are willing to
let you know the general topics of discussion.

Perhaps even more important than eliciting clues from reporters or their
staff is to brainstorm possible questions. If you were the reporter, what
would you ask? If you were the reader of that newspaper or journal or
listened to that program, what would you be interested in hearing about?
Anticipate questions. Ask colleagues and potential audience members to
anticipate questions.

As a part of your brainstorming, be sure to prepare for attacks. Hilton and
Knoblauch, in their book *On Television!*, note “If there is one question
you don’t want to be asked, you can be sure they will ask it.” Imagine the
worst. List all possible problem questions.

**Plan Your Response** — After you have analyzed what you are likely to be
asked, analyze the interview from the opposite point of view: What do you
want to communicate? Think about the main messages you hope to get
across and about the details that will support your main points. As Lewis
Young says, “Rule number one in working with the media is give them
some news.” Think of ideas that will interest, benefit, or appeal to your
audience. Plan what you want to say.

One of the most prevalent problems business people have in dealing with
the press is that they allow themselves to become passive respondents, not
active advocates. As news correspondent Robert MacNeil advises,
“Know what you’re going to say, and use whatever questions you are
asked to say it—briefly, along the way, you can actually address the
questions put to you or not, as you choose.” Structure your main ideas into
effective answers for ready use. This means short, crisp statements. If
you are being quoted in an article or on a film clip, the reporter will need
short statements, usually no longer than eighty-five words. If you are on a
talk show, you will want to repeat your short statements throughout.

In addition to structuring some snappy statements that advocate your
main ideas, research some facts to make your interview interesting. “If the
corporate executive has something to say,” Chester Burger points out in
the *Harvard Business Review*, “he must present it to the reporter in an
interesting way.” Two useful methods for adding interest are use of
statistics and anecdotes.
Use three rules of thumb to make your statistics effective. First, they should be easy to grasp: "The latest Gallup poll shows that 78 percent of Americans agree with me on this issue." Second, they should relate to your audience's interest: "This system will save the consumer forty-two dollars a year." Third, they should show broad trends: "Five years ago, we spent $7,000 on safety controls; this year, we are spending $525,000 on those controls." Make sure your statistics are not too complex (note that figures that make sense to a reader may not make sense to a listener), and do not use more than two statistics per sentence. Say "60 percent are for the bill, 10 percent against," not "60 percent are for the bill, including 75 percent of the city dwellers and 33 percent of the women, and 10 percent oppose it if services are cut more than 50 percent."

In addition to appropriate statistics, come up with some anecdotes or stories. Business people have been trained to trust only the statistically significant; readers or listeners, on the other hand, may be persuaded by the individual or specific.

**Analyze Your Audience**—One of the problems associated with media interviews is that you are dealing with two audiences: the reporter and listeners or readers. You must keep both of them in mind.

Many business people assume the reporter will be hostile. This stereotype of Evil Media is just as unfair as the oft-bemoaned stereotype of the Evil Business. Instead of concentrating on negative prejudices of the media, try to enter the interview with a sound attitude.

Consider, first, reporters in general. Most of them are serious, hardworking professionals, just like you. Their job is to find newsworthy stories that will interest their audience. They are under time pressure to meet deadlines, commercial pressures to increase advertising revenues, and competitive pressures to scoop their rivals. They must compress what you say to fit space or airtime. They want to come up with something arousing and engaging.

Consider also the individual reporters. What do they know about you? What do you represent to them? How do they perceive your expertise? What do you know about their age, their training, and background? What are their opinions and interests? What are they likely to agree with? To disagree with? Are they expert business reporters or general reporters for whom you may have to simplify and define terms?

Next, consider your readers or listeners. Who are they? Middle America watching a general talk show or specialists reading a technical journal? What do they know about you, your topic, and your relationship to your topic? Once you have established their level of expertise, be sure to talk in terms they will understand. Unless you are dealing with colleagues or specialists, avoid business jargon or any terms your audience might not understand. Instead of saying, "The BOD recommended product re-segmentation to improve the ROI," you might say, "The board of directors
recommended we sell different products in order to increase our profits."

Finally, tie to your readers’ or listeners’ benefits. Why should they read or listen to you? If possible, tie your message to their needs (financial, social, prestige). Solve problems your audience might be facing. Your success as a communicator depends on your ability to reach and appeal to your audience as much as it does on your ability to make brilliant and logical statements.

Practice—Knowing what you are going to say and saying it are two altogether different matters. Practice your interview out loud. Useful practice techniques include: having a friend or colleague play the role of the reporter; practicing in the studio or a facsimile; speaking into a mirror to improve facial expression; speaking into an audio tape recorder to improve vocal expression; or practicing with a videotape recorder to improve body language. If you are speaking on television, be sure to arrive at the studio early enough to get used to it. Rehearse on set to learn cues and see the equipment; rehearse with various camera shots; explain any visual aids to the camera crew.

What to Say

One of the most prevalent problems business people have with the media is their inability to get across what they want to say. They simply react to the reporter’s questions. In the words of Chester Burger, “They fail to make the points they wanted to make, and then they blame the reporter. Usually, it is their own fault. They have been playing what is called the ‘ping-pong game.’ The reporter asks a question; they answer it. He asks another; they answer it. Back and forth the ball bounces but the executive does not know how to squeeze in what he regards as his important points.”

To overcome this problem, state your main points emphatically and bridge from the question to your points if necessary.

State Your Most Important Points Emphatically—Many business people are used to leading up to their main idea, giving reasons and examples first, stating it last. In dealing with the media, however, it is important to state your main idea first, following it with arguments. Why should you state what you want remembered first? People tend to remember, assimilate, and comprehend better when the main idea comes first. In media interviews, you have additional reason for a direct approach: the ends of your statements may very well be cut, either by the writer or the film editor. In the words of one communication trainer, “Your statement is an inverted funnel: the major point at the top, the amplification further down, because it won’t be used.”

You must be concise. News—especially television—is a headline medium. Business people are used to having sixty to ninety minutes to present their point. If you are quoted in the news, you usually must state your point
in twenty to thirty seconds. Practice stating your main points with a timer. Make your points emphatic by providing the film or print editors with clear transitions or "flags," such as "The most important point is—."

**Bridge to Your Ideas** — In addition to stating your main points emphatically, say what you want to say instead of just responding to questions by using the "bridge" technique: answer the question briefly; form a bridge to your own idea, by generalizing something about your response or the question; and state your important idea. For example:

**Q:** In 1981, XYZ Corporation refused to comply with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee requests for information. Why is it that XYZ appears to be hiding something?

**A:** Perhaps it appears that way, but that is the cost of our integrity to our stockholders. Besides, XYZ has released information in many different circumstances, so it's not as if we were being secretive about our operations as you suggested. For example, we have released statistics which prove that....

Other typical bridges include: "Let's consider the larger issue here," "Before I get to that, let me fill you in on—" and even "I don't know about that, but I do know—."

**How to Look and Sound**

Nonverbal communication, according to Ray Birdwhistell, noted authority on the subject, accounts for more than 65 percent of what gets communicated. On television, remember that your audience is likely to remember how you appear longer than they remember what you say. If you are talking on the radio or by phone, your voice can be equally as important. Even in media situations where you will hear or read your quotes only via the reporter, how you look and sound can have an important impact on the reporter.

**Use Your Body Effectively** — Naturally, you want to avoid looking either insecure or arrogant. These rules for effective body language may seem obvious, yet I have seen hundreds of videotapes that reveal participants in media interview role-plays making these mistakes. The first rule is to avoid any kind of body language that looks defensive. Typical problems include: clenched fists, hunched shoulders, tightened facial expression, hands in front of (or anywhere near) your face, and lack of eye contact. Rule number two is to avoid any overly aggressive body language, such as gloating, arrogant glances, or unsympathetic facial expression. Instead, use relaxed body language: sit comfortably and professionally (crossing your legs is fine); use the same kind of relaxed gestures you would use naturally in conversation; relax your facial expression.

In addition, if you are appearing on television, you have two other aspects of body language to keep in mind. First of all, establish effective
eye contact. Obviously, do not read your notes word for word. Eye contact is one of your biggest advantages on television, so use it to its fullest. In general, look at the reporter or other panelists; occasionally—for heightened emotional impact and emphasis—look directly into the camera (imagining a person there) with the red light on. Second, always assume you are on camera. Do not, for example, smirk or mop your brow when someone else is talking. You may be recorded for a reaction shot. Finally, avoid nodding unless you agree with the point.

Use Your Voice Effectively—To use your voice effectively: use expressive inflection; keep your volume appropriate (avoid yelling, which makes you look too aggressive, and dropping off in volume, which makes you look unsure); maintain the appropriate rate (avoid speeding up if you get nervous or angry); avoid filler words, such as uh, er, and ya know, and enunciate clearly.

If you are using a microphone, you must keep in mind four other voice techniques. First, remember to speak conversationally, as though you were addressing a small group of people. Second, speak into the microphone, keeping your distance (which can vary from two to twenty inches) constant. Control your breathing; avoid gasping or wheezing into the microphone. Finally, avoid unwanted sounds such as rattling your paper, drumming your fingers, scraping your chair, and jingling coins.

Dress Appropriately—When you are appearing on television, dress unobtrusively. Hilton and Knoblauch suggest wearing “clothing you would expect to see on a bank vice-president.” Generally, that means solid colors—grey, blue, beige. Avoid tweeds, stripes, and patterns which appear to jump around on the screen. Avoid white, which may glare, and black, which absorbs light. Other than a watch or wedding ring, avoid jewelry, especially if it is jangling or distracting. Men should be sure to wear long socks, darker than their suits. Women should be sure to wear something they feel comfortable sitting in.

Control Your Attitude—Perhaps the most important ingredient in how you look and sound is your attitude. Never gloat over a successful answer or you may be skewered on the next question. Don’t look aggressive. Don’t use sarcasm. Although it’s important to be professional and competent, it’s equally important for business people to avoid looking arrogant and unsympathetic.

How to Deal with Tricky Questions

No matter how well you prepare, speak, sound, and look, you may receive some unexpected—and even unfair—questions. As a Business Week article advises, “Expect some curve balls.” This section suggests some techniques for dealing with unfair questions and questions you cannot answer.
Unfair Questions—One of the most prevalent unfair questions is known as the “loaded preface”—a damaging preamble to the question. The unwary interviewee may respond to the question itself instead of challenging the preface. For example, “The widget business is under suspicion in many quarters for price fixing and bribery. Our sources confirm these suspicions. Ms. Biz, can you tell us what it’s like to be one of the few women in this industry?” The question here deals with women in the industry, not price fixing and bribery. Ms. Biz should not let that loaded preface stand unchallenged; her failure to refute would imply consent. She should either disagree with the preface or acknowledge that some people may feel that way, then bridge to her own ideas.

Another example of unfair questions is known as the “either/or” question. In this type of question, the reporter poses two unacceptable alternatives: “Mr. Biz, you are one of the few minorities at Widget, Inc. Is this due to discrimination or poor recruiting?” Mr. Biz should refuse to choose either one of two alternatives if they are both unacceptable.

Two other unfair questions involve unfair speculation. The “what if” question asks a question based on something that hasn’t happened yet. For example, “I know it hasn’t been announced officially yet, but what will you do if you are asked to serve as the next executive VP?” The irrelevant question asks you about material totally unrelated to the subject of the interview. For example, you are being interviewed on several legal matters pertaining to your business, and you are asked about your views on legalizing marijuana. With either of these types of questions, refuse to answer, making the irrelevance clear and bridging to your own ideas.

Another unfair question involves “false relationship”—assuming that because an event precedes an outcome, it necessarily caused it. For example, “Widget’s stock went down $3.65 as soon as you were appointed to the board. Would you care to comment on this?” Beware of false causal relationships and don’t let them go unchallenged.

A final example of an unfair question to be aware of is the “popular prejudice.” Here the reporter appeals to the popular idea, rather than the specific situation. For example, “Don’t you think it’s un-American for Congress to bail out Widget Inc.?” Interviewees should try to define or challenge words like un-American and bail out before moving on to their own points about the subject.

Questions You Cannot Answer—In some instances, you may feel it is inappropriate to answer a question. Unless you are a highly skilled politico, never, never answer “off the record.” Some reporters won’t respect their promises; others may include the quote without your name; at the very least, the information will be planted in the reporter’s mind. Therefore, if you do not wish to answer, try “I’d rather not answer that question” instead of the brusque “No comment.” Better yet, if possible, explain why you would rather not answer.

In other cases, you may not be able to respond because you don’t know
the answer. In these instances, never hazard a guess. Never lie. Instead, tell the reporter where to get the answer, or, better yet, offer to get the answer yourself.

Failure to practice these techniques of preparing, speaking, using effective nonverbal behaviors, and handling tricky questions can hurt you and your company. Merely using these techniques, however, will not be enough to make you successful. In the words of Lewis Young, "To me, the best way for a company to have good media relations is for that company to perform its business function well. To provide a good product or good service at a reasonable price—the economic function of a corporation."

References

Bibliography