

PE Tip Sheets Nos. 3 through 6 comprise a series entitled, "A Media Relations Primer." Tip Sheet No. 3 offered ideas on how to develop a media relations program. Tip Sheet No. 4 presented the basic tools you should have in your media relations tool kit. Tip Sheet No. 5 explained media interview techniques. This final Tip Sheet in the series, Tip Sheet No. 6, provides advice on how to deal with problem journalists.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 6:

A MEDIA RELATIONS PRIMER (PART 4 OF 4)

BY

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No matter what I say, they get it wrong. Heard this one before? Have you also heard the most common angry explanation: "I was misquoted."

When a seemingly good interview turns out badly in the paper or on TV, it's easy to blame it on a kind of "them against us" scenario. Remember the old saying -- there is always two sides to the story. So, when dealing with problem journalists, always keep in mind that factual and responsible reporting is the job of both "them" and "us."

STRATEGIC DECEPTION

Most organization officials and journalists alike work hard at developing relationships built on trust and respect. Sometimes, despite the best efforts of everyone, journalists seem to distort the news and (perhaps intentionally) make you and your agency look bad. But do journalists intentionally mislead?

In times of war, strategic deception has been used extensively. It can be defined as the intentional manipulation, distortion or falsification of information to mislead an adversary. Is it possible that journalists employ this tactic? Some may.

The operative words here are "adversary" and "war." Adversarial relationships lead to unfavorable outcomes for all parties (and sometimes war).

But more often, misleading reporting results when we assume both the good will and the skill of the journalist, which can sometimes be more a presumption than an assumption. Lack of good will and skill often results in "bad press."

Taking lack of good will out of the equation by following a few simple techniques can disarm the ill intentioned journalist. And as Sir Winston Churchill said, "Nothing is so exhilarating in life as to be shot at with no result."

Lack of skill, on the other hand, is harder to deal with. But, in most cases that result in bad press, the cause is ignorance, not bias. Luckily, ignorance can be dealt with in a variety of non-confrontational ways – ways that, incidentally, can complement the mission of your agency in disseminating information to the public.

WHEN GOOD JOURNALISTS GO BAD

So we agree that good and truthful journalism by skilled journalists remains the standard against which we judge the media. What can we do when good journalists go bad? Consider the following five point plan.

Five Point Plan

1. ***Talk with the journalist first.*** Explain exactly why you are concerned. Point out specific passages in news stories, features, or editorials. Do it on the phone or in person, as soon as possible after the item in question is printed or aired. Don't mention threats or penalties. Listen to the journalist's response. Describe how you feel about the situation (angry, embarrassed, disappointed) and ask the journalist how he or she feels. Give the journalist the benefit of the doubt (at least the first time). Give feedback the next time the journalist writes or airs something about you--especially if it seems to indicate that the situation, from your perspective, has been corrected.
2. ***Discuss the situation with a friend or colleague.*** If the situation persists, have a confidential talk about it with someone you trust--preferably a third party who is not affected by the subject of the news item. Seek their advice as to whether you are being too critical or sensitive, and ask for their evaluation of the seriousness of the situation. Ask them if they think you are justified in taking corrective action.
3. ***Talk with the journalist's editor or boss,*** either in person or by phone. Be calm and analytical. Explain exactly what the problem is, as well as the results of your discussions with the journalist. Ask if others have complained about the journalist's reporting. Expect the editor to defend the journalist to a point and don't press for corrective action on the spot. Give the editor a chance to look into the situation, talk with the journalist and get back to you. Listen carefully to the editor's feedback.
4. ***Continue trying to work the situation out.*** Don't panic or feel paranoid, especially if the situation gets worse in the short term as may well happen. Continue to speak specifically with the journalist to make it clear what you expect. Continue to test your feelings and instincts with third party friends. Keep in touch with the journalist's editor.
5. ***Take action within your organization to rectify the situation*** if nothing seems to work after a few months. Make efforts with other journalists to get your story to the public, or even better develop direct communication links with the target publics to get your message across. Treat the problem journalist with special care. Tell your staff to refer all inquiries from that journalist to you. Tape conversations with the journalist or have a third party present when you talk with the journalist. You may want to check with your agency's legal counsel to make sure you are not

violating any of the journalist's rights -- such as access to public information. Tell the journalist what you are doing and why and make it clear that you are not seeking preferential treatment, that you only want the journalist to treat you professionally and impartially.

WHAT ABOUT US?

Now comes the "us" part. If you thoroughly know your subject and if you have confidence because you have prepared and practiced for the most difficult of interviewers and questions, you can help the journalist report factually and honestly. Even though you are dealing with a professional using that person's medium of communication, and sometimes you are on his or her home turf, you have some important and unquestionable advantages over the interviewer. Be mindful of the following techniques.

- ◆ ***Don't be pushed or pressured into making a decision at that very moment*** unless, of course, you are familiar with the program or publication contacting you and already know that you would like to participate. Buy yourself a bit of time to think about the offer, but be available before their deadline.
- ◆ ***Before replying, give yourself ample time to decide if you are the right person for the interview***, if the program or publication is a good match for your message, and if your appearance at this time would be most advantageous to you and your organization.
- ◆ ***Remember that you are not obligated to solve the reporter's deadline problem*** if doing so might damage you, your message, or your organization. Usually the person calling you doesn't expect an immediate answer unless that person is working on an urgent news story for that day's broadcast. A reporter may try to use a deadline to try to pressure you. If the story is truly urgent, but you don't have an answer, ask for the deadline time and make sure that you respond--however incomplete your response may be--by the deadline.
- ◆ ***Take the time to check out anyone who purports to be a reporter or journalist***. Never do an interview over the telephone until you have verified the person's credentials. You can do this by calling the place where the person is employed.
- ◆ ***Avoid at all costs dismissing the media caller without the courtesy of an explanation***. If you are able, help the person find another possible interviewee, perhaps a person with a similar viewpoint or someone better served to handle the particular interview subject.
- ◆ ***Never respond, "No comment."*** If a media person contacting you is seeking a comment from you to use as a quote on a topical issue, or if they want a quick interview on a current sensitive matter, give the reporter the respect of an answer. To be associated in any area of the news with the words, "No comment," or, "An organization spokesperson refused to comment," is to be perceived by the public and the media as having something to hide that is very negative, not in the public interest, or downright dishonest. Publicity of this kind is exactly what you and your agency don't need.

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