

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. This Tip Sheet No. 5 will detail media interview techniques. The final Tip Sheet in this series, Tip Sheet No. 6, will address dealing with problem journalists.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 5:

A MEDIA RELATIONS PRIMER (PART 3 OF 4)

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We all can think of some pretty memorable interview faux pas and misstatements. One such infamous misstatement that has stuck in my mind for years occurred when President Reagan was shot and General Alexander Haig, then U.S. Secretary of State, exclaimed on national TV with a sweaty upper lip, "I am in charge, here, in the White House," despite the fact at least two others who would precede him including the Vice President were alive and well. Many faux pas are the result of one thing – lack of knowledge of the subject matter or conditions leading to the interview.

In addition to having the facts, how does one prepare for media interviews? First it will help you to understand the journalistic process.

THE JOURNALISTIC PROCESS

You should know that being interviewed by the media, even with a single question, makes you -- sometimes unwillingly -- part of the journalistic process. While normally all we see or hear of this process is the polished final result, knowing some basics about the process will help.

- ◆ Except on small weekly papers, the journalist you talk to is only one link in a chain. He or she usually reports to an editor, who may be responsible to a managing editor. This means that the story the journalist writes passes through a number of hands, and may not be the story that gets printed.
- ◆ The crucial fact here is that not only are the journalists not likely (with exceptions) to be expert in the subject you're talking about; they also lack your emotional concern with it. Tomorrow they'll be covering something very different.
- ◆ Journalists have time constraints that may conflict with yours. They are usually on a deadline. Always respect their deadlines and they will likely be more cooperative with you in return.

THE MEDIA ISN'T THE MESSAGE

Remember that successful interviews are message driven. Here are the nine basic rules to follow to keep “on message.”

1. Don't have more than three main points. More than that is too confusing.
2. All messages should support your organization's main goals.
3. Messages themselves are not necessarily soundbites; they are ideas you are trying to get across.
4. Messages are reinforced by soundbites, phrases, statistics and anecdotes.
5. Messages take time to create. Don't rush the process.
6. Messages don't change frequently. For messages to have impact they have to be repeated over and over again.
7. Messages can be tailored for specific audiences, while still remaining constant. (See rule 6)
8. Consistent messages should permeate all of your communications efforts, not just your media interviews and communications.
9. Messages must be simple. They are ideas that can be explained in a sentence or two -- if it requires a paragraph or two, keep working.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are basically two types of interviews. One interview occurs as a result of fast-breaking conditions. The other is scheduled and gives you more time to prepare.

Impromptu Interviews

The impromptu interview is undoubtedly the most nerve racking and generally occurs when something goes awry. In the fast-breaking and controversial news situation, you are generally unprepared for the call or the questions. It can be a naked feeling. But in fact, any situation can be handled tactfully and without losing face if you are prepared and trained to combat disaster calmly and politely. Although there is no way that every possibility in a media contact can be anticipated, there are some basic things that you can do to be better prepared.

- ◆ If it is a matter in which you might anticipate a media inquiry, your position should be drawn beforehand. It should be written and distributed to key people in your organization who might get a call from the media. Preferably, as mentioned in Tip Sheet No. 4, a specific spokesperson should be designated.
- ◆ Because people not used to dealing with the media are frequently surprised when they see that statements made in all innocence look very different in print than they did when they were spoken, there is an advantage in writing out a position beforehand.
- ◆ Usually, it is not advisable to give the media a statement "off the record." While journalists may respect your request, they are not going to like you for it unless it serves as legitimate background for them to understand something that you can say on the record. Journalists, remember, make their living on what they *can* print--not what they *can't* print.

- ◆ There is nothing more challenging to a journalist than to hear someone say "no comment." It is a red flag. On the other hand, if you were to smile, and say in a friendly way, "I would like to help you, but I am not prepared to discuss that with you," they will get the message that you won't discuss it. It's OK to draw the line in the sand on matters you do not wish to or can not discuss.
- ◆ It helps to keep people informed -- and to have them keep you informed -- of potential situations where the media may be involved. If everyone is alert to potential problem and there is preparation beforehand, then the likelihood of being misquoted -- or worse, being quoted accurately in a misstatement -- diminishes substantially.

Scheduled Interviews

The first time I was invited to an interview on a morning TV talk show, I immediately conjured a vision of myself with General Haig's infamous sweaty upper lip while stuttering and stammering my way through responses to the interviewer's devious questions and fidgeting all the while. Not a pretty picture. So what did I do? I prepared by:

- ◆ ***Being well briefed.*** This may mean rereading a few memos, or, in the case of a major interview, building a briefing book with the help of others in other departments, and learning its contents.
- ◆ ***Anticipating questions.*** Not just the easy ones, but the tough ones, too. In an in-depth interview, you are not likely to anticipate all the questions, but the more the better.
- ◆ ***Getting the answers down very carefully.*** This is where that "I was misquoted" syndrome is avoided. The less you have to say on the wing, the better you are going to like the way the story comes out.
- ◆ ***Rehearsing.*** Unless you are a former Secretary of State, with experience in being interviewed almost daily, the more you rehearse the fewer mistakes you're going to make.
- ◆ ***Listing the key points*** you want to make, in order of importance. You may not get to make them all, nor will you be assured that they all get printed, but that list of points is the spine of the successful interview.

LEADING THE INTERVIEW

If you are careful, and skillful, you can lead the interview. How? By crafting your answers, *even if they are not always directly responsive to the question.* This is how it works. Consider the following exchange.

Question: Do you plan to construct another wastewater treatment plant?

Reply: Yes. We will use four criteria in selecting the site for the new plant.

You see, now the interviewer must ask you what those criteria are. Keep it up, and you'll be very subtly running the interview.

There may be controversial and potentially hostile questions posed during the interview. The objective should be to remain politely aloof and uninvolved, without fostering animosity with a member of the media with whom you might want to deal in your own behalf sometime in the future. What do you do when the interview takes a turn for the worse? Consider this exchange.

Question: There have been many complaints from neighbors of your regional wastewater reclamation facility. Will odors plague neighbors of this new plant, too?

Reply: Odors associated with wastewater treatment occur most often during upset conditions. We have implemented a source control program that is meant to eliminate conditions that could lead to an upset condition.

Once again, you have led the interviewer to his or her next question, which is, "Tell us about the source control program." You have fended off the controversial question and subtly gained control of the interview again.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Ok. Now you have prepared, you know your stuff and you are ready for your 15 minutes of fame. Keep these tips in mind.

- 1. Remember Your Appearance*** -- Viewers will decide within eight seconds if you appear credible. You want them to pay attention to what you say, not what you wear. Dress conservatively; distracting clothing gets in the way of your message. For women, bright colors are best. Avoid all white or cream ensembles and heavy jewelry. Wear every day make-up. For men, solid suits in grey or navy with a cream or other light colored shirt work well. Be careful when choosing a tie. Check, hounds tooth and complicated patterns create optical illusions on TV and distract viewers.
- 2. Arrive Early*** -- Make friends with the crew and with the person interviewing you.
- 3. Maintain Eye Contact*** -- During the interview, always look at the interviewer and not at the camera. Looking around the room or at the camera makes you look shifty and hurts credibility. Sit only halfway back in the chair and lean forward -- this keeps your body upright and projects a look of engagement. Avoid nervous twitches like clearing your throat, tapping your foot, rolling your eyes, fiddling with your hands, etc.
- 4. Minimize Gesticulation*** -- Hand movements should be small - it is best to keep them in your lap.
- 5. Always Assume the Tape is Rolling*** -- Sound is recorded when the tape is rolling, so be aware of what you say even after the formal on-camera interview because it may end up on the air.

BASKING IN THE WARM AFTERGLOW

After the interview, write a note to the person who interviewed you, thanking them for their time and

attention. Regardless of how the story comes out, you want them to know you appreciate the opportunity to talk about your message.

Review the interview. The best way to get better at interviewing is to review your performance and then make a list of what you'll do better or differently next time.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675>