

Executive Challenge

Facing Today's Reporters - Is it Worth It?

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With this year's series of corporate scandals still fresh in the minds of reporters and producers, the news media are eager to hold even more wingtips and black pumps to the fires of public scrutiny. In such an environment, the urge to stay out of the news may be a strong one. But that strategy is also loaded with pitfalls, missed opportunities to connect with shareholders, regulators, legislators and other prime audiences through a highly credible medium (news), being chief among them.

Complicating the issue is the fact that much current public relations advice to CEOs and other senior executives falls short of providing an adequate rationale for getting in front of the news media. That's not an indictment of professional communicators. Like accountants, lawyers and engineers, communicators often have a native understanding of their profession that doesn't immediately register with others. In most cases, PR advice about encountering the news media isn't necessarily wrong; often it simply doesn't go far enough to be truly meaningful to the executive already loaded with stress aplenty.

The fact is, now more than ever you should be taking advantage of media opportunities to correctly position your organization in the minds of your audiences. Playing ostrich right now has the potential of lumping you in with those who have committed corporate sins, even if you have not.

Still skeptical? You should be. So let's look deeper into the thinking behind your decisions to entertain the news media or avoid them. Consider these questions:

- **Do you distinguish between your personal identity and that of your organization?** Most senior executives identify strongly with their organization. The thought of a reporter lobbing critical, even accusatory questions seems like a personal attack. The instinctive response defense, a move that will scuttle an otherwise good media opportunity in the time it takes to say, "roll camera." It seems easier just to stay out of a reporter's viewfinder. When professionally administered, media training helps you sort out the "ego" issue, allowing you to view even the toughest of reporters' questions as launching platforms for your company's messages.

- **Are you hanging on to worn out baggage?** Is there particularly bad experience with the news media in your past? If so, what did you do with that experience? Generalizing that negative experience to all news media and all of their representatives is a common reaction. In the wake of being "burned" by a reporter, it may seem logical just to shut the door. Yet, you probably often see other executives who consistently do

- **Have you evaluated your attitudes about the news media?** Even if you've never been burned, you may have some hardened attitudes towards the news media. Take a few moments to examine your perceptions of the media. Make lists if you are so inclined, but put those perceptions into actual words. Think of those things you dislike about the news media and those things you truly appreciate. Resist any urge to censor yourself with either list, but see if you can make the lists the same length. What good does this do? First, it helps you make specific what otherwise may be vague perceptions, attitudes on which you may be basing unrealistic expectations about the news media. Second, most executives who really think this through recognize that they actually have a more balanced view of the news media than even they realized. Finally, once you ferret out these attitudes, even without changing them, you will find it much easier to prevent negative perceptions from intruding into an actual news interview where they can damage

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well interview after news interview. Think they've never flubbed one? Don't believe it! The same thing has happened to lots of people, including those in some critically important positions. The only difference is that they decided to remain engaged in the process of shaping public opinion about their organizations.

• **Can you evaluate news media risks from a true business perspective?**

Executives often see only the risk involved in a news interview. A misstatement, a quote taken out of context, a hostile reporter, all seem to argue against taking the chance. There are genuine risks involved in all encounters with the news media, just as there are with any other justifiable business activity. And just like those other business activities, there are steps available to mitigate those risks. But how would you know what they are if you've never paused to learn them? A one-day media training session can give you the tools you need to minimize those risks and maximize the opportunity for influencing audiences.

your performance. Media training gives you the perfect outlet for this self-examination.

• **Do you know whom you really want to address through the news media?** Some executives get caught up in the notion that giving a news interview is doing the reporter a favor. Make no mistake, if a reporter truly believes he or she has a good story involving your organization, that story will become news whether you take part or not. Your real motivation for giving a news interview has nothing to do with the reporter's wants and needs. It has everything to do with communicating the messages your audiences need to hear. Customers, clients, shareholders, financial analysts, regulators, lawmakers and a host of other potential audiences are all out there just waiting for your insights. Their decisions affect you and your organization. With basic interview skills training, a little practice and a well-prepared agenda, you will have everything you need to influence those decisions in your favor.

One fact you can always count on is that people - including members of your key audiences - believe what they read, hear and see in the news. News has credibility you can't buy with any number of advertising dollars. Yet many senior executives allow that value to slip away all because of some ancient history with a reporter or unexamined personal perspectives on the news media. In today's economic environment, business leaders simply cannot afford to lose the economic value of news media credibility. [a](#)

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