

## New rules of media relations

Remember the mantra of all media training for executives in the 1980s? "Just get your three Key Messages out. You've got a live microphone, a TV camera and an audience. Never mind what the reporter's question is!" Some PR agencies still stick to this dated mantra. The result of these "conversations" on-air was predictable: disjointed and confusing!

Frustrated anchors and reporters at all the major Canadian and US networks are pushing back on over media-trained corporate executives. Increasingly, I'm hearing: "That's fine Mr. X or Ms. Y, but you didn't answer my question. My question once again is ...." Viewers, too were annoyed.

Here are the new rules of media relations, as we see them:

1. **Just answer *the* question.**

Answer *the* question that was asked by the reporter. Don't deflect. Don't fudge. Don't obfuscate. Otherwise, you risk alienating the reporter and, in some ways, insulting viewers. Have a conversation that makes sense.

This means more work for media relations professionals. They need to figure out what the likely questions will be, then figure out what the organization and the executive are prepared to say on *those* subjects. In particularly sticky situations, media relations people need to confer with the legal team to figure out what can be said without compromising the organization's position. It gets complicated.

Of course, if you find that you won't be able to answer most of a reporter's questions, it is better to pass on the interview.

2. **Reporters live and die by their BlackBerrys.**

This means several things to PR people. You can reach reporters directly much, much faster today than sending a news release on Canada News Wire. But it also means that you (or someone in your organization) has to manage everyone's e-mail addresses. Your message is only as good as your updated lists!

It means that you can get your message out right away: more and more, reporters are reading responses to issues live on-air. So, short-and-punchy is better than droning on. And forget formatting: cutting-and-pasting copy from MS-Word directly into the body of an e-mail is the way to go. Reading attachments is getting easier on Smartphones, but it's still a pain.

3. **You can run, but you can't hide.**

To a large degree, media relations is like a savings account: you make regular deposits in the Bank of Goodwill. This allows you to make withdrawals occasionally, if the organization goes through difficult times. The media might cut you some slack, but only for a short while. Ultimately, who can defend your organization if not your executives?

4. **Your three Key Messages are still important.**

Work your Key Messages into the conversation; don't have your executives blurt them out at the earliest opportunity. Again, this means more skill for media relations practitioners and more skill for company executives.

Ultimately, it means more rehearsals to weave Key Messages at opportune moments so they look and feel natural, not disjointed.

5. **Return phone calls faster than ever before.**

E-mail and cell phones make it easier than ever for a reporter to get a source—and sometimes any source will do. There is always someone who is only too happy to take your place in the limelight. But the question is: will that help or hurt your organization's position?

If you want to be quoted, be available; if your organization has a news story "in play," be on stand-by, all day and all night. It's a 24-hour news cycle. "News frenzies" are the new normal.

6. **Relationships, relationships, relationships.**

The paradox of the Internet, Google, e-mail, social media, and BlackBerrys is that personal relationships among media relations professionals, executives and reporters are more important than ever. The flood of mass communication and easy access means that it is critical to cultivate relationships with reporters, editors, and producers that follow your industry.

Your organization and its executives need to build reputations with reporters as credible and accessible sources. Here are some ways to cultivate relationships with reporters:

- Establish your organization's executives as subject matter experts by sending useful pieces of information to reporters: short pieces, with passages highlighted.
- Send reporters industry news even if there is not an article that will feature your executives. They will come to rely on your insight and will call you in future.
- Introduce reporters to other potentially useful sources. You'll show that you're connected.
- Reporters love feedback on their articles; provide insight when you comment on a reporter's specific article.