

Keeping the Wolves at Bay: Media Training

Fourth Edition



Jonathan Bernstein

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Welcome to Keeping the Wolves at Bay: Media Training

This is the 4th edition of *Keeping the Wolves at Bay*, always the most popular download from our Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc. website. It has been modified to reflect evolution in the media, massive changes brought about through world events, and special challenges presented by global activism. While some things have changed, the best practices of effective media interviews remain the same. Your job as a spokesperson is to get your key messages across no matter the interview type, location or timing. How to do that in today's fast-paced and threatening communications environment is the focus of this update.

Speaking of threats...I'm completing editing of this manual as we come up on a full year of living with Covid and the world – and our clients' – scramble to adapt. Nothing in this crisis, however horrendous, changes the relevance of the best practices described herein. If anything, the principles of how to get messages to your stakeholders no matter what's going on are even more important now.

This manual, as with our *Crisis Manager* newsletter, is written for those of you who are crisis managers – whether you want to be or not.

Thank you to all who have helped broaden my knowledge and experience through a myriad of right-way and wrong-way responses to crises.

Jonathan Bernstein
Monrovia, CA
January 2021



Note: Any unattributed quotes in text boxes like this are the author's. Or at least he thinks they are.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT MEDIA RELATIONS

Many who read this manual for the first time have already had some experience giving media interviews, usually to friendly reporters. Some have already discovered, painfully, the differences between a friendly interview and one given about a sensitive subject, where the interviewee is on the proverbial “hot seat.” In a crisis situation, it’s often impossible to completely avoid taking some damage to reputation, the bottom line and/or business continuity, but it is possible to optimize the results of crisis-related media relations.

There are some other benefits to this process. Formal media training will:

- Help you develop and refine key messages, to see what really works under the stress of simulated interviews (and good media trainers will make you forget it’s simulated).
- Optimize your chances of achieving balanced coverage. You’ll notice I say ‘optimize’ – there are no guarantees in this arena (and if someone in my field offers you a guarantee, switch consultants).
- Improves skills that transfer to many other types of public speaking – e.g., community presentations, testifying

at hearings or in court, giving webinars, etc.

- Allows you to identify who’s an effective spokesperson in general, and who, specifically, may be better for different types of interviews. It also shows you who, perhaps, should not be a spokesperson at all.

In the 20+ years since I published the first edition of this manual, I have seen a dramatic difference in the results of my media training when trainees read the manual pre-training. I think it would have the same result no matter who conducted the training, or even for those of you practicing at home in the mirror, so I encourage you to take the time to make that happen.

Media relations is, of course, only one component of crisis communications, one of many methods of getting messages to your stakeholders, both internal and external. In times of crisis it’s absolutely essential that your communicators be trained in all those methods. And that they practice their skills regularly or they erode.

Now study this text like your organization’s future welfare —and/or yours — depends on it, because it might.



The principles of crisis management always apply, but principals don’t always apply them.

Understanding the Media

Here's a pop quiz even before you read on.

When should this manual be studied?

1. Now.
2. At least once monthly.
3. Within 24 hours prior to any media interview.
4. All of the above.

No one is naturally a perfect media spokesperson. Some are naturally better than others, but everyone's skills can be improved ad infinitum.

If I'm an amateur athlete with little formal training, would I expect to be able to compete for a favorable outcome with a trained professional athlete? Think of a reporter as that trained athlete who has either a general or specific outcome in mind when they come to interview you, and the skill to achieve that outcome. You need to be trained in how to compete at their level, ideally finding an outcome that's balanced and even mutually satisfactory. They get a good story, you're satisfied with how you come across.

Something else to consider, with apologies to my former English Comp teachers for using a double negative, but there is no such thing as non-communication. If you choose not to speak to the media, it gets reported as, "YOUR NAME refused comment." Which the public hears as, "you're guilty...you're covering up...you're scared," etc.

This manual is not a substitute for media training. It is designed to accompany media training for your primary spokespersons, to provide them with a means of reminding themselves of what they learned in training, and to start those who haven't undergone training on the road to media relations enlightenment. I make it mandatory pre-training reading for all my clients. Oh, and the answer to the pop quiz is '4.' But you knew that.

What Do I Mean by "Media"?

Once upon a time, there were three types of media: print, radio and television. Reporters were almost all trained journalists. When a crisis broke locally, it often stayed local unless it was earthshaking news, and even then, it could take hours, even days, for major news to reach audiences globally. Deadlines were usually during "normal working hours." Sounds like a fairy tale these days, right?

Today, the lines between forms of media have completely blurred. All media have a strong online presence, and for many that is their primary presence, to the point at which some print newspapers have moved completely to the Internet. Radio and television stations feature a lot of print copy at their websites, print outlets have audio and video coverage at theirs. Social media influencers often have as much or even more credibility with followers than traditional media. Rumor and innuendo are amplified by hundreds of millions of voices on the ever-growing variety of social media platforms. And news travels instantaneously, worldwide and is on demand 24/7.

Concurrently, the ranks of trained, experienced journalists have shrunk dramatically with the revenue declines at most major traditional news outlets as they were forced to compete for advertising dollars with all the non-traditional online media as well as each other. Many of those that remain have become more and more tabloid-style in their coverage, with minimal interest in fact-checking or ethics. Which makes it all the more imperative that spokespersons know how to get their points across no matter who they're speaking with and not expect any interviewer to coax the right messages from them.

One fundamental rule of effective media interviews hasn't changed, however. Either the reporter manages the flow of the interview, or you do. You might not have known the latter was even an option. Now you do! More on that soon.

Inside the Minds of Journalists

Believe it or not, reporters would probably find it as scary to be in your mind as you would to be in theirs. The catch is that they're paid to be in yours and will do their best to get there.

Reporters may, in fact, come into interviews with a bias – personal, based on their own experiences and belief system, or 'employer based,' reflecting their media outlet's political leanings, attitude towards certain types of organizations, etc. However, with rare exception, they are not usually out to 'get you.' They're merely doing their job

and trying to receive as much recognition for it as possible. Just like you, right?

A reporter wants a story that's newsworthy and that appeals to their editor and audience. There is a journalistic code of ethics at www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp, but it allows for behaviors you may or may not deem acceptable while in pursuit of a story. Empirically, journalists don't seem to review that code very often. However, we have used it as a tool in discussions with editors and reporters to ask them to cease and desist from unethical practices.

Your job is to tell your side of the story. You are in conversation; you have to know to whom you're speaking. The reporter is asking you questions they think the audience will want answered. That means you must speak through that reporter to your stakeholders, giving them what you want them to know in terms that will be meaningful to them.

By employing the information in this manual, you will improve your ability to balance a story – but remember that 'balanced' does not equate to 'the story came out the way it would have if you wrote it yourself.' It means you got a fair shake, even if people who completely disagreed with you also were treated fairly. By definition, a totally balanced article is still only 50% 'your side' of the story. And true journalistic balance is as rare as an honest politician.

You may find this surprising coming from the author of a media training manual, but as a crisis management professional I advise

clients that the traditional media is not your most important stakeholder group, because it is the least reliable means of accurately communicating information. However, media outlets are an important stakeholder group and one gateway to those who matter most to you – typically your employees, customers, investors, community leaders, the general public, etc. In some specific situations, such as natural disasters, both traditional and social media can be important methods of getting your message out. And it's true that whether you cooperate or not, reporters will write their stories – so why not do your best to optimize the results?



Crisis preparation has to incorporate the concept that crises don't respect time zones, holidays, vacations or sleep schedules.

GETTING READY TO BE INTERVIEWED

Attitude and affect play as big a role in media interviews as do the words you use. After all, 80-90 percent of communication is non-verbal, unless you're a mime. Some of the pre-interview techniques suggested in this section may be best done in a very private space – your office, your bedroom, somewhere you can safely be alone and uninterrupted. In a pinch, your author has been known to meditate in a bathroom stall before an interview or speaking engagement. Hey – it works!

The Five Conundrums of Media Relations

Remembering these sometimes-frustrating realities will help keep you out of trouble with inquiring minds that want to know. These don't describe the interaction with all reporters, but you're still safer if you assume they're true every time.

1. A reporter has the right to challenge anything you say or write but will bristle when you try to do the same.
2. A reporter can put words in a naïve source's mouth via leading questions (“Would you say that...?”, “Do you agree that...?”, “Do you feel that...?”). For example, a reporter asks, “Do you agree that this was one of the worst accidents in the company's history” and you either said yes or even just nodded, the reporter could write, “Mr. Smith agreed that that this was the one of the worst accidents in the company's history.”

3. The media will report every charge filed in a criminal or civil case, with coverage focusing far more on the allegations than on responses by a defendant. This also turns a civil complaint into a very effective crisis communications tool – for plaintiffs.
4. The media usually carries a bigger stick than you through its ability to selectively report facts or characterize responses, and via the public perception that, "If I saw it in/ on the news, it must be true." However, this issue has been further compounded in by the phenomenal number of people who now seem to think that major news outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, even *Time* magazine, are "faux news." While the media that are ACTUALLY sharing "faux news" of the Donald Trump variety are perceived by almost half of America as credible.
5. "Off the record," often isn't and, "No comment," is usually interpreted as, "I've done something wrong and don't want to talk about it."



I've been trying to tame our press corps ever since I got into politics and I failed miserably. They get to express their opinions – sometimes in the form of news.

President George W. Bush

Pre-Interview Relaxation

If you're nervous and tense, while some reporters will understand and be empathetic, others may become suspicious that your feelings result from guilt. They will, at least, attempt to test such suspicion and then you're already in for a tougher interview.

Your goal is to learn to be as relaxed in the presence of a reporter as you are in your home. Assuming, of course, that you are relaxed at home. If you have a favorite relaxation exercise that takes little time and does not involve mind-altering substances (which affect the judgment center of the brain and therefore are not the best way to improve the results of media interviews), by all means use it. Optionally, here are some simple relaxation techniques that will help you release nervous tension.

- Deep breathing – an oldie but a goodie. With your eyes closed, take deep, long breaths – inhale through your nose, hold it a few seconds, then exhale slowly through your nose. Repeat five to ten times.

- Stretch the whole body, gently (says your author, who could end up at the chiropractor's office if he doesn't do it gently) and in accordance with your doctor's orders (sorry, I hang around lawyers a lot). Interlock your fingers and stretch your arms in front of you, then in back of you. To the extent that it's comfortable, lean forward and just let your upper body hang down –don't try to touch your toes, per se, just hang and then curl your body backup slowly. Breathe deeply the whole time.
- Meditation – Learning to meditate pays big dividends not only for media interviews, but for all business and personal activities. Contrary to popular belief, one does not need a guru or yogi to learn meditation. There are some excellent guided meditation recordings that require nothing more than your attention. With regular repetition, you will be able to recall the 'feel' of being in a meditative state, highly relaxed, at will. Very useful right before you talk to 20/20's Diane Sawyer or 60 Minutes' Leslie Stahl.



The readiness is all.

William Shakespeare

Attitude is (Almost) Everything

Compassion. Confidence. Competence. Humility. If you want your stakeholders to respond well to you in a crisis, you must demonstrate all four of these qualities, and that's as much a matter of attitude as it is the words you choose.

However, there is now a "Dark Side of the Force" when it comes to attitude, where cruelty and arrogance are far more evident than compassion or humility, and where competence is mostly talked about, without evidence. That Dark Side has been epitomized by the communications practices of the Trump White House and, I have to admit, it works in terms of reaching their very specific stakeholders. But I cannot and will not ever condone or recommend this unethical approach.

Look at crisis-related spokespersons on any TV news broadcast, and you'll quickly figure out who understands how to demonstrate appropriate attitude of either kind, and, just by their indifferent presentations, may well communicate quite the opposite of the intended messages.

MEDIA TACTICS – DANCING THE DANCE

Imagine you're going to a dance with a blind date, and you have some specific moves in mind that you'd like folks to see. But your date, unless you demonstrate otherwise, believes that they are going to lead every dance, and unfortunately their most eye-catching moves aren't going to make you look good.

Get the picture?

If you understand media tactics, and how to respond to them appropriately, you can optimize the chance that you'll get to lead most of the dances. If you let them lead, you're likely to wind up unhappy with the results.



That reporter interviewed me for over an hour and didn't even use the most important information I gave him.

Typical statement by an executive who has never been media trained

Talking Without Saying Anything

Given that non-verbal communication comprises most of your message, it's important to know what you're 'saying' with your body and voice, and to practice that just as you practice delivering your key messages. Here's how some of your nonverbal communication could be interpreted by a journalist, by TV viewers or by an audience at a public presentation.

1. **Defensive** – crossed arms, leaning away from the interviewer, or even (and I've actually seen men do this), suddenly moving your hands in front of your groin area when asked a tough question. I call that one the 'soccer defense.' Also flinching when asked a question.
2. **Guilty** – eyes shifting around a lot (you may just be thinking, but they don't know that), heavy sweating, voice changing from smooth to squeaky.

3. **Angry** – tense voice, clenched fists, throwing any object, using expletives (unless you're Eddie Murphy or Chris Rock, in which case you're just being conversational).
4. **Nervous** (and therefore possibly guilty)– shifting position a lot, licking lips frequently, smiling or laughing at inappropriate moments.
5. **Arrogant** – looking down your nose, 'talking down' to the interviewer, using \$100 words when simpler terms will do (and be better received by your stakeholders).
6. **Cool, Calm and In-Control** – clearly comfortable in your seated or standing position, constant eye-contact with interviewer, expression appropriate to the situation, voice calm and clear, treating the interviewer as an equal and an important means of relaying your messages to stakeholders.

While there are many perfectly sound reasons why one may demonstrate some of the negative message behaviors listed above, you'll seldom get a chance to explain that to your audience.



In a vacuum, the media will create its own reality.

Kim Perry, Kim Perry Marketing

Message Development and Delivery

The time to develop messages on any subject, including potential crises, is long before you have to use them in media interviews. That gives you a chance to refine, test and practice. Yes, practice, just like those professionals called reporters who have usually spent years in training. It's important to practice beyond a media training session (which is akin to spending a day with a good batting coach or golf instructor), in which the trainer's knowledge doesn't just automatically transfer to you.

Here are some rules for successful message development and delivery:

- 1. Make sure your messages fit the needs of each of your stakeholders.** The fact that they meet your needs is not a sufficient test of their efficacy. A developer of low-income housing may not be someone who lives in or has ever lived in low-income housing. It would be prudent, therefore, for a developer engaged in crisis or issues management within that market to test messages with representative homeowners or renters.
- 2. Remember that you don't have to answer questions directly as asked; you can choose to deliver your own messages first and then answer the question.** And some slick interviewees can distract a reporter from the original question altogether. Just watch live TV interviews about breaking news events and you'll quickly spot those who are good at this.
- 3. Have messages planned to fit every category of question.** Not every possible question, because that's impossible. I'll write more about that in the next section.
- 4. State your most important messages up front and find ways to repeat them, verbatim or re-stated, throughout an interview.**
- 5. In a crisis situation, messages must make it clear that you have compassion/empathy for the impact of the crisis on all affected stakeholders, internal and external.**
- 6. If you don't say it, they can't print or broadcast it.** OK, it's possible that they'll make quotes up in print, but believe it or not that actually happens very seldom in traditional media coverage. Usually, when someone claims, "I never said that," they're wrong. I'm not saying they're lying, just that their memory is likely to be faulty or they don't realize that they have been led into giving an attributable quote via a leading question.
- 7. If a reporter asks to record an interview, ask if you can do the same thing.** This greatly increases the likelihood that the reporter will listen to/watch the recording very closely to ensure there are no misquotes. However, if a reporter is not recording, it would usually be considered rude if you asked to record.
- 8. This is a hot one. After you've done the interview, email the reporter a note thanking them for their interest and saying, "Just to sum up, these are, in my opinion, some of the most important points we discussed."** Give him/her your top three key messages. Make sure you do it before the reporter's deadline! This reduces the likelihood of being misquoted, particularly if a reporter is relying on his/her own notes.

Categorically Speaking

For any given crisis, a reporter – and the general public – could ask hundreds of different questions. But when you really examine the questions, you'll find that they almost invariably fall into one of no more than a dozen categories. Hence, your job as spokesperson is to communicate your organization's most important messages, right up front, and then also have messages keyed to categories of questions.

For example, let's consider the following fictional scenario:

Major media outlets in three states have been reporting a growing number of E. coli patients being treated by hospitals over the past three days. To date, 50 have been reported ill and three patients – two elderly, one a young child – have died. News coverage to date has not identified a common element other than all patients had dined out – at a wide variety of restaurants – during the week preceding the first reported cases. At 8 a.m. this morning, the manager of the Best Practices Manufacturing Plant in the region was contacted by a representative from the National Center for Disease Control (CDC) and informed that the common element in the illnesses thus far was that every restaurant at which victims ate had been supplied food processed through their plant.

What are the logical categories of questions Best practices could receive at this point?

1. What happened that could have resulted in E. coli contamination?
2. What are the food safety practices at the manufacturing facility?
3. What is the plant/company health and safety history?
4. What is the company going to do now?
5. What is the risk to consumers – will more people get sick?

The messages that could cover all of these categories (and also comply with crisis communications principles) might include:

1. Our thoughts are with the victims and their loved ones.
2. We are cooperating fully with the CDC's investigation and defer to them for any update on the situation.
3. While no definitive cause of these illnesses has yet been proven, the safety of consumers is our highest priority and we will take whatever direction the CDC feels is in the public interest.

4. Best Practices has a 20-year history of stellar performance in the area of health and safety and nothing like this has ever occurred in the past (assuming it hasn't, of course).

This manufacturing plant is in full compliance with all applicable laws and regulations (again, assuming that this is the truth).



If communication is not your top priority, all of your other priorities are at risk.

Bob Aronson

How, then, would we combine the two and use them to respond? For example:

Q: Why did your plant have E. coli contamination?

Categories: What happened. Food safety practices. Plant health/safety record.

Your reply: All of the messages listed above.

Q: Do you know what happened?

Category: What happened.

Your reply: Use messages 1, 2 & 3.

You'll notice that in both cases, you will have important messages you wish to communicate no matter what is asked, while at the same time you should attempt to be at least somewhat responsive to the core question.

Keys to Media Interviews

A useful and potentially entertaining way to learn the following “Keys to Media Interviews” is to read them through a time or two, then start closely observing people being interviewed on TV – the good, the bad, and the, “Oh my God I can’t believe they said that.” The best of them will score high in their use of the information below.

1. **Be helpful to reporters.** They have come for a story. Define it for them. Be as open, frank and engaging as possible without revealing any sensitive issues your organization might have. Reporters know you have boundaries, but they will ask anything. And if you give them openings, they will keep asking. The bottom line is that you can be in control without appearing to be defensive, hostile or evasive.
2. **Have the reporter tell you what topics and story angles they want to cover. Set a time limit.** Do not leave the interview open-ended so that the reporter can continue to grill until you say something you regret.
3. **Use the techniques previously provided in this manual to get yourself into a calm, purposeful state before an interview.**
4. **You’re the expert unless proven otherwise – know your subject.** The reporter will come with their agenda. You need to have yours, which is to communicate your most important messages no matter what is asked.
5. **Be honest.** If you aren’t, you’re likely to (a) get caught, sooner or later, and (b) suffer far more than you would have otherwise. More on this later.
6. **Do not volunteer specific figures or facts that you don't want revealed.** You are not obliged to respond to questions just because a reporter asks them.
7. **Don’t guess or speculate.** Ever. If you are asked something you don’t know, or that you are not comfortable answering, tell the reporter you are uncertain, that you will have to do some research and get back to them. It’s OK to politely refuse to speculate, as well.
8. **Be concise with your answers.** Talk in headlines; state your conclusions first, e.g., “There has been an accident at our plant, everyone is safe, emergency responders are on the scene and we are assisting them as requested.” Then, if time permits, give more background information.

9. **Use anecdotes, when possible, to support and/or illustrate your message points, particularly anecdotes that involve real people, versus hypothetical situations.** When a major restaurant chain endured a food contamination situation that sickened dozens of people at some of its restaurants, the CEO went to the states where this occurred after the problem was contained. When he spoke, one of his strong message points was *“We’re not just company spokespersons, we’re our own best customers, we eat at (name of restaurant) all the time, and we’re going to have lunch at the local (name of restaurant) today.”* The media loved it and it was well-received by the public.
10. **Don’t use jargon.** Jargon and arcane acronyms confuse your stakeholders –a surefire way to make any crisis worse. Let’s check out these gems, taken from real life:
- a. The rate went up 10 basis points.
 - b. We are considering development of a SNFF or a CCRC.
 - c. We ask that you submit exculpatory evidence to the grand jury.
 - d. The material has less than 0.65ppm benzene as measured by the TCLP.

To the average member of the public, and to most of the media who serve them other than specialists in a particular subject, the general response to such statements is, “Huh?”

11. **While reporters instinctively distrust “no comment,” most journalists seem to (however reluctantly) accept “legal considerations” as a justifiable reason for withholding information.** “Competitive” and “ethical” considerations are also usually accepted by the media without much challenge, as are “personal privacy rights.” Be careful not to overuse such shields as an excuse for saying nothing. Journalists will pick up on that and redouble their efforts to find alternate sources for their story. An example of excuses that don’t work is included in the text box on the next page.

Target Corporation Misses the Bullseye

Some years ago, Reuters reported that Target Corporation had refused to allow shareholders to ask questions at their annual meeting. That puzzled me, since I thought one of the primary purposes of annual meetings was shareholder communication – and any PR intern knows that effective communication is two-way.

Realizing that media coverage is not always accurate, I tracked down Target spokesperson Douglas Kline, identifying myself as editor of the email newsletter *Crisis Manager*, describing its purpose and audience. I asked him to tell me what really happened. He confirmed the Reuters report with a fascinating and educational response:

“Our financial relations people have said repeatedly that there are many other and better opportunities to interact with shareholders,” Kline said.

When I started to ask for more information, he interrupted me with this gem:

“Target doesn’t communicate with trade publications or niche publications such as yours, so, I really have nothing to tell you.”

My reply? *“That’s OK Doug, you just told me plenty.”*

12. **Be prepared to turn questions so that you get your point across.** Remember, no matter how the reporter poses the question, you are in control of the answer.

13. **Don’t repeat an allegation or other negative statement in the context of denying it, as in the following examples from the hilarious Bimbo Awards**
(<https://spaethcom.com/blog/All>):

- a. **“We’re not some demonic cult like we’re portrayed to be,”** said Sen. Doug Jones, D-Ala., when commenting on his 20-point loss to Republican Tommy Tuberville.
- b. **“Like, we’re really actually not criminals,”** was the defense made by a White House official declining to explain the details of the Trump Administration’s compliance with the Presidential Records Act.

14. **Take your time before answering questions.** Pauses are effective. Even in a video news interview, unless it's live, all the pauses will be edited out and only your answers used.
15. **When awaiting questions, maintain a neutral or, if appropriate to the situation, pleasant expression.** Do not look guarded or defensive. A good reporter – and good news camera operators, an increasingly rare breed – watches your face all the time for tell-tale expressions.
16. **Do not repeat, or nod your head affirmatively, to a false premise or misleading question.** Immediately correct the questioner politely and firmly.



Beware of Predators

Predators prefer weak prey. Better than that, they like unsuspecting prey. I'm not talking about a jungle water hole scenario. Just ask anyone who's ever been surprised by the roar and sharp teeth of a skilled plaintiff's attorney who attacks from in front of media microphones!

The Price of Dishonesty

There are four ways to engage in activity which the court of public opinion will consider to be lying:

Act of commission – delivering false facts e.g., saying black is white.

Act of omission – leaving important information out of your communication.

Exaggeration – for the purpose of obfuscating the truth.

Understatement – for the purpose of the truth.

The tendency to stretch or fictionalize the truth during media interviews is so strong that it deserves special mention. I'm not talking about the blatant lie to cover up a criminal act, but the more mundane lie that comes from pure ego. From the pages of my Crisis Manager newsletter, here's one such example:

When Creativity Didn't Help the Writers Guild

Talk about creative writing! Some years back, then-Writers' Guild President Charles D. Holland had been attempting to explain why there didn't appear to be any proof that he served in an elite Special Forces unit or that he had attended college on a football scholarship, both claims he made while being interviewed for a profile in the Guild's in-house magazine. His explanations became a *classic* example of how impossible it is to lie when modern tech makes it easy for tall tales to be fact-checked.

For example, Holland claimed to have served with the 7th Special Forces Group at Ft. Bragg, but a military record check by the *LA Times* demonstrated that he was in the National Guard in Illinois and Massachusetts during a three-year period when he was earning a master's degree and law degree. Not much time in there to sneak away to Ft. Bragg and participate in special ops. His National Guard duties were listed as military policeman and assistant postal officer. Records also showed subsequent National Guard and Army Reserve duty in Massachusetts and California.

In an interview with the *LA Times*, Holland claimed that *"there are aspects of my military records that are readily available and aspects that are not. Anybody who is questioning my military records does not have the full picture and they never will. I'm not at liberty to discuss the aspects of my military record that are not readily available."*

Of course, maybe they weren't available because they didn't exist?

Ben Abel, a spokesperson for the Army Special Operations Command at Ft. Bragg, told the *LA Times*, *"If it wasn't in his official record when he got out of the military, I wouldn't have a lot of confidence that he was assigned to Ft. Bragg or that unit."*

Let me add to that that my Army records will show you that I trained as an Area Intelligence Specialist and held a Top-Secret security clearance. It won't tell you what I did, specifically, but will confirm the essentials of my training and where I was assigned (e.g., in my case, my last two years were at Ft. Meade at US Army Intelligence Agency's HQ).

So how about that alleged football scholarship? Not surprisingly, the University of Illinois had no record of him playing.

When Creativity Didn't Help the Writers Guild (continued)

"I played wide receiver under a different name," he told the newspaper. And he gives the Times that name. The paper tracks down the person who played by that name at the time Holland went to school – and that person, the actual football player, turned out to be an account executive for a pharmaceutical company. And he didn't know Holland!

Now here's the pièce de resistance. A couple of weeks after the story broke, the Writers Guild Board of Directors met to decide what should be done about the false information and to hear Holland's personal's explanation. Board member Lisa Seidman told the *Times* she wasn't especially bothered by the discrepancies, because....(are you ready for this?)....

"We're storytellers. It's what we do for a living!"

Positioning

There's always a way to position messages in a manner optimal to your interests. There are some tricks to position in order to avoid the label 'spin doctoring.' Consider the case history below – an amalgam of actual situations with which your author had experience. The object is to demonstrate the wrong way and the right way to manage media and citizen concerns about a corporate mistake. Situations are not always this black and white, of course. But you will always profit by being honest, testing your messages (if at all possible) with representatives of your key stakeholders, practicing staying on message, and being prepared to adapt your messages to rapidly changing circumstances.

Positioning is helping your stakeholders understand your message the way you intended it to be understood. Spinning is using words to obfuscate the truth.

CASE STUDY: Zelon Manufacturing.

Zelon Manufacturing (a pseudonym) sailed through its local permitting process in Indiana, largely thanks to the reputation of its parent company in another state. Shortly after start-up of operations, however, area residents began to notice, and question, what they considered to be unusually dense plumes of smoke from the site's stacks, and an unpleasant odor downwind, resulting in negative media coverage. Local environmental officials investigated and found that Zelon had installed equipment that was larger and more powerful than originally specified and, in general, had added to, or modified, quite a bit of the manufacturing process since receiving its permit. It had also failed to apply for the necessary permit revisions. Zelon was told to reduce production by 50% pending completion of the State investigation and a public hearing was set for months later

This Would Have Been the Wrong Way

When residents first called Zelon, their senior management played 'hot potato' with the callers, most of them claiming they were the wrong person to speak with. They had no internal PR person. When an exec did comment, he would deny that anything was wrong, and no one at the company notified even their own outside counsel of the inquiries. Internal discussion was that, *"These are just local crackpots who would go away."* One of the 'crackpots' then called the local press.

The media, when calling in to Zelon, was ignored at first, resulting in a highly critical story which concluded by saying, *"Zelon executives refused to return calls"* Then the plant manager called the paper's publisher and yelled at him, claiming that there were gross inaccuracies in the coverage. This yielded predictable results. Internal discussion centered around their awareness that they had, quite deliberately, made changes in the manufacturing process which, they thought, didn't require further permitting, based on what had been done in other states. A decision made without outside expert opinion.

Zelon showed up at the first public hearing armed with 'the facts,' to be met by hundreds of angry local residents who insisted on testifying. Zelon's response to their comments and questions was to provide strictly factual answers, as if the situation was a criminal trial. No compassion for the feelings expressed by the public.

Zelon met with years of skeptical responses from regulators, judges and the general public before being allowed to return to re-permitted full operation.

This Would Have Been the Right Way

When concerned citizens first called Zelon, the plant manager immediately invited the callers for a site tour. Before they came over, he huddled with legal and PR counsel to get some good key messages and be warned away from saying anything which could put the company at legal risk. Citizens visited and outlined their concerns, which the plant manager promised to investigate immediately. Satisfied for the moment, the visiting citizens did not call the media.

Zelon's internal investigation revealed that they might, in fact, have screwed up by failing to get the new equipment and processes re-permitted. Zelon conferred with legal and PR counsel and agreed to publicly inform area citizens, the media and regulators, simultaneously, of their error and their desire to rectify the situation.

The company, giving regulators a couple of hours private notice, invited local media over for a briefing on their entire process at which they revealed 'news' that they had made a mistake which they were going to rectify immediately –and that, in the meantime, they were voluntarily cutting back production 25% until all were satisfied that emissions were still within safe limits and were properly permitted. The concerned citizens who had first contacted them were invited to the press conference and publicly thanked.

They all lived happily ever after.

Guidelines for Confrontational Interviews

There are going to be in-your-face reporters, just as there are in-your-face lawyers, salespersons, etc. Remember your goal – achieving balance. Here's how:

1. **Analyze any sensitive issues and anticipate the hostile questions before your interviews.** Plan your main points and what you want to say.
2. **Conduct in-your-face practice right before doing an interview.** Have you ever seen football players pound each other on their helmets, and their padding, just before a game starts? They're not only getting themselves enthused, they're reminding their bodies what it feels like to get hit hard. It somewhat desensitizes them to the physical discomfort of play. Just so, before an interview you think could be confrontational, an in-person or telephone or webcam practice interview with your in-house or external PR person, or with a colleague, will take the sting out of hard questions and boost your confidence.

3. **Establish areas of agreement.** Example: A former employee of Widget Corporation sold confidential customer information to email spammers. Customers were outraged. But there were some subjects on which Widget and their customers could agree, and on which Widget centered part of its media relations strategy:

- a. Customer records should be highly secure.
- b. Spamming is bad.
- c. We want to catch the spammers and put them in jail.

Who was to blame, how it happened, etc. were, of course, other topics needing attention, but by aligning themselves with their customers' common interests, Widget was able to restore focus on solutions versus the problem.

4. **Defuse emotional questions by politely asking for clarification of non-specific, inflammatory, accusing words such as: 'hedging' and 'pussyfooting.'**
5. **Learn phrases that defuse questions.** For example, "I'm sorry; I really want to understand your concerns. Could you go into more detail?"
6. **Assume that, at best, you will deliver three key message points.**
7. **Keep reinforcing your main points in a firm, polite manner.**
8. **Avoid answering speculative questions.** Don't go off on 'what if' adventures. Say things like, "There is no responsible way to speculate" and, "I prefer to deal with what I know."
9. **Use specific information to support your position: facts, statistics, examples, the judgment of an expert, your own experience, and analogies.**
10. **You are not there to defend yourself; you are there to communicate the messages of your choice.**
11. **Keep your answers succinct.**
12. **Immediately and politely refute any incorrect statements or rephrasing of your statements.**
13. **Remember, nothing is 'off the record.'**
14. **Don't feel you have to fill embarrassing silences; that's the interviewer's job.**

You do not – ever – have to accept abusive or insulting language. Respond to it firmly but politely, e.g., “That is an extremely insulting comment. If you would like my cooperation, please be more polite.” If the rudeness persists, fire a warning shot, e.g., “If you continue speaking to me like that you will force me to end this interview and explain to your editor (or news director) why I did so.” And then back that up with action if the foolish reporter continues misbehaving.



Treat the media as you would any other watchdog. Stay calm, be friendly, let them sniff your hand, and never turn your back.

Anonymous

Question Turnaround

You can make your points regardless of the questions you are asked. Virtually any question can be turned to your advantage.

Many people have experienced frustration when dealing with difficult questions. Once I witnessed a trade union leader actually shout during a tense interview situation, “Let me answer my questions first, then I’ll answer yours!”

1. When asked a loaded question, defuse it first by disagreeing with the premise and then turn it around. Remember, you don’t have to accept abuse.

Q: “What do you think about your company’s immorally high profits?”

A: “First, I didn’t think reporters were in a position to render moral judgments – please desist from such language. Second, I suspect that most of your readers (or viewers, or listeners) think that making a profit is a good thing, it keeps them employed! The real issue is how much good we are able to do for our employees, our customers and the community as a result of being successful.”

2. If you are asked questions and need time to tell your story, then say something like this:

“I really can’t answer that question without explaining some of the background first.”

3. Even if you've made a mistake, humility and honesty can go a long way toward earning forgiveness in the court of public opinion.

"We didn't do the right thing in this case, which we very much regret. We're making up for it by _____, and we've taken steps to prevent it happening again."

Be polite, direct and firm in your convictions – just clearly state, and stick to, your message. Let's suppose you're dealing with someone who has a history of writing nasty blog posts about you. Now you're on a radio talk show, or even in a non-interview situation like a public hearing, and they have a question for you. You may feel like getting nasty, but it's better to stay calm and avoid mudslinging. Your anger will only make you more vulnerable.



Remember, they aren't lemons. They're essential components of lemonade.

Making Lemonade

Context reframing is looking at the same set of facts in a very different way to create an alternate position. It is a change of emphasis.

Used tires are an unsightly mess in a landfill and stink to high heaven when they catch on fire – but make them into fuel for a cement kiln, where they are destroyed with extremely high efficiency, and the context is quite different.

A real estate development can be perceived as an insult to the natural setting that existed before it was built– or as a major economic boon to the community.

A decision not to go ahead with the governmental project the public thought was important can be positioned as a broken promise – or as an example of government prudently adapting to changing fiscal conditions.

Whoever frames the context first has an advantage. However, even if someone else framed it first, you can always reframe it – better! To do this you need to know the stakeholders who will be considering the various comments and understand what works with them – not just what *you* think is clever.

Keys to Acing that Interview

Here are some tips for any interview situation:

1. **Remember that a reporter's assignment is to find a story, an angle, a news hook, something to entice an audience and further their career.** Journalists are after news that will earn their story high visibility. It's their job to dig. Appearing hostile, provocative or even misinformed are tools of the trade. Don't take it personally (easier said than done). It is your job to be objective. If time permits, and it usually does, use the Internet to find stories the inquiring reporter has written or broadcast in the past. It will give you valuable insight into the journalist's competence and any biases which could hurt or help you. You can usually find the reporter's bio online as well. This research, and the next two bullet points, are tasks often performed by your in-house or external public relations representative.
2. **Always set a time limit to the length of an interview, because a reporter will sometimes try to keep going just to see if you'll say something you'll later regret, and because you really don't need a lot of time to get your key messages across. We usually recommend allowing no more than 15 minutes, 30 at the outside, for interviews related to crisis situations.**
3. **It's OK to ask a journalist, ahead of time, for the focus and direction of his/her story.** You may hear some of the questions you'll be addressing in the actual interview. Caution! Even many allegedly trustworthy reporters have been known to give misleading responses that can lull you into the sense that an interview won't be challenging. Nonetheless, you can usually garner some useful information from this type of inquiry.
4. **When you are being interviewed, even for print media, project the image you want the reporter to see and hear, including following the time-honored media relations axiom that you are 'on' from the time a reporter is first in your presence until the time you are sure that is no longer the case.** I have known journalists to pull stunts such as leaving an audio recording app on their phone or computer while they left the room, ostensibly on some sort of break, but actually hoping to catch someone saying something they didn't want made public. TV cameramen, as well, might look as if they've dropped a shoulder-held camera to their side – but that doesn't mean it's not still recording! Be sure to ask, "Have you stopped recording?"

5. **If it's natural to you to use gestures as part of your communication, by all means do so, but don't force them - you'll come across, particularly on video, as stilted and uncomfortable.** We have all seen speakers who are clearly pushing themselves to use their hands, carefully raising a finger to say, "Point One" and, "Point Two" and wagging their index finger to say something is 'no good.' It's a bad look, so don't force it if it's not natural.
6. **Space-filling and distracting phrases – e.g., "uh," "um," "you know" – should be avoided.** You may be unconscious of such speech patterns and the degree to which you engage in them. That's one reason why recording media training, and practicing until you refine your speaking style, is so valuable.
7. **Assume that everything that you say and do in the presence of a reporter is 'on the record.'** Reporters, at least good reporters, are watching and listening to you constantly, as well as hearing what any of your associates in the immediate vicinity might be saying or doing. "Off-camera, Mr. Wilson confided that there was much about this story his lawyer wouldn't let him talk about," said the reporter, looking right at the camera.

Data and statistics make a strong impact and can help your credibility because the reader has a chance to study the information. Turn that data into digital graphs and charts – the media loves them. Other graphic aids such as video and digital photos that support your messages are also useful if they are not full of organizational 'hype.'



Flying below the radar is no guarantee that a missile isn't about to hit you in the ass.

Special consideration for different types of interviews

There are some special considerations for interviews depending on whether they're audio-only (typically phone) or some form of video (e.g. live TV camera or Zoom).

1. **The lines between types of media are blurring.** Historically, print coverage has been more in-depth than TV or radio reporting, but with all media being, de facto, multi-media, that distinction is blurring. It is not unusual for one, shorter version of a story to appear on the air and a longer version of the story to appear in print at the TV or radio station's website, with the story repeated in various formats and with added commentary across social media.

2. **Print reporters tend to be the best prepared.** Their level of preparation and research will be directly related to how much time they have before a story filing deadline. With 24/7 demand for news, most daily reporters have no time to “dig.” So, ask what their deadline is and, if it’s near, pull out all stops to make it easy to understand the situation-at-hand. It has been very gratifying, as a PR consultant, to see a reporter interviewing one of my clients and frequently referring to materials we supplied pre-interview.
3. **Journalists report color, too.** Don’t forget that print journalists also often report what’s known as ‘color,’ such as how you’re dressed, talk they heard at your office before or after the interview, the attitude you seemed to have towards them, e.g., “Smith started sweating and shifting in his seat when asked about his company’s recent mistakes.”



It takes a lifetime to build a reputation and only a few seconds to destroy one.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Video Interviews

In a video interview, every aspect of communication, verbal and non-verbal, will be detectable by the audience.

1. **The camera and interviewer are merely gateways to your real stakeholders.** You should communicate as if you’re face to face with those stakeholders, whether they be your customers, clients, investors, or all of the above. Make a point of maintaining eye contact with the interviewer. Ask up front if the interview is live or recorded. If the former, what you say is what they get. If the latter, you can actually ask an interviewer, “Can we do that again?” if you feel you’ve communicated less coherently than you’d like. Usually a reporter will agree so such a request, although it’s up to their editor which ‘take’ to use.
2. **Dress appropriately.** It used to be that you had to completely avoid certain colors, such as ‘dress white,’ because the combination of TV studio lights and older camera technology made white shirts or blouses wash out, visually. Now, the rule of thumb should be to dress as your most important stakeholders would expect to see you – and then a little better. Think ‘important job interview’ or ‘your board of directors is visiting.’ In some parts of the country, business casual might be the norm, which is OK as long as that’s also the ‘norm’ your stakeholders expect of you. It’s always better to err on the side of conservatism. However, if you are a ‘personality’ whose identity is tied to very outré fashion, disregard this advice.

3. **Sit correctly.** In a seated interview, sitting erect and occasionally leaning in connotes enthusiasm. Slumping or slouching communicates boredom or lack of self-confidence.
4. **Stand balanced.** If you are standing, maintain a balanced 'ready' position – think 'boxer's stance,' but not quite that exaggerated. One foot in front of another, feet shoulder width, knees slightly bent. Rest your hands comfortably, a position that is different for all of us. In a standing interview, be particularly aware of your hands. I like to keep one hand in my pocket and use the other for gesturing. Two hands behind you look very nervous, or very military. If you are a member of the Armed Forces (a) thank you for your service and (b) 'at ease' is probably just fine. If you are a civilian wanting to look relaxed, it doesn't work.
5. **About facial habits.** Some of us have 'facial habits,' movements that can lead a video interview watcher to misunderstand what you're saying. Are you a 'nodder,' bobbing your head when listening intently to someone? To you this means, "I hear you." To viewers who don't know you, it could be interpreted as, "I agree with what the interviewer is saying." That can lead to you nodding while the interviewer is reciting a list of heinous allegations about your organization. And perhaps you have a habit of rolling your eyes up, or shifting them to the side, when thinking about an answer? In an interview, that can come across as evasive. Learn, from practice on-camera, about your own facial habits and whether they can be misinterpreted.
6. **Have B-roll.** When the media is in a hurry, as in a crisis situation, you can actually help them do their job and ensure that some of the images they use are favorable to you if you have pre-recorded, broadcast-quality video of relevant material – e.g., the inside and outside of your facility(ies), your CEO (e.g., standing talking to someone), your products, etc. That's called 'B-roll,' for background roll, in Journalism/PR jargon.
7. **Sound checks.** There will be a sound check before the interview to ensure that you can hear the interviewer (through a small earpiece) and also that they can hear you wherever the interview is being recorded. Pay particular attention to whether you can hear the engineer's test communication well; you don't want to misunderstand anything the actual interviewer is saying, so ask for higher volume if needed.
8. **Special Considerations for Ambush Interviews.** A video crew may try to catch you unawares, e.g., coming in or out of a location. The appropriate initial response is, "Gosh, I would be willing to give you an interview, but not right on the spot. What's your deadline and where can we meet?" If they have no other option to offer you and insist on comment then, you have to make a judgement call as to whether you know the messages to deliver – hopefully, even if the interview was a surprise, the subject matter is not, and you've already done message preparation and work.



Doing an interview without defining your objective and your messages is like driving to an unknown destination without directions or a map. It's anybody's guess where you'll end up.

Interviewing Yourself

I'm not, of course, referring to the discussions we all sometimes have with ourselves, hopefully not out loud, but rather to the concept that we can now all be our own reporters, directly delivering the news to the same stakeholders reached by traditional media.

During crisis after crisis in recent years, CEO's and governmental leaders have used "talking directly to the camera" videos to carry their persona directly to stakeholders via social media.

Paid online advertising and earned social media, as well, can carry YOUR message, YOUR way.



It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things ."

Leonardo Da Vinci

PRACTICE MAKES...BETTER

I would love to be able to tell you that, with regards to media interview skills, ‘practice makes perfect,’ but that would be disingenuous, a fancy way of saying it would be a lie.

No amount of practice will make you a ‘perfect’ interview subject. Similarly, one or two sessions of media training, alone, will not leave you with lasting skills in this area unless you practice them on your own.

Some job descriptions – e.g., politician, celebrity, Fortune 100 CEO – have a lot of real-life interview practice built in. Those individuals and subordinate spokespersons are going to get plenty of opportunity to refine their skills via actual interviews. But most of the people I have trained aren’t in that kind of job; instead, they are designated spokespersons who may not have to handle a really hard media interview for years after their initial training. However, just like an Army recruit who may never have to use a firearm for years after going through initial training, they still have to maintain their skills so that if needed, they are intuitively available.

Methods of Practice

All methods of practice should:

1. Simulate a situation/scenario that, realistically, could occur to you/your organization.
2. Simulate one or more of the types of interviews described earlier in this manual.

3. Include some method of recording and playing back performance for self or peer-critique.

There are a wide variety of ways to simulate interviews realistically enough for spokespersons to practice and improve their skills. These include:

1. **Re-enact Media Training.** Recreate the conditions under which you were media trained, i.e., a video recording device (phones are often used these days) and someone to conduct the interview. If you have luxury of having someone play camera operator, all the better.
2. **Practice ‘Phoner’ Interviews.** Let yourself be interviewed by telephone, which is the mostly likely scenario for most interviews, with video becoming increasingly likely when a crisis is particularly newsworthy.
3. **Staff Meeting Practices.** Take 15-30 minutes at a staff meeting and put one or more spokespersons on the spot, with other staff members playing the role of media at a press conference.

4. **Webcam-Based Practice.** You don't necessarily need to have a media trainer return for a full training session to just get some 'brush up' practice periodically. Instead, connect with your trainer of choice for an hour or two by webcam periodically. That's not only useful for routine practice, but also for spot practice right before you have to give an important interview.



The Athenians, alarmed at the internal decay of their Republic, asked Demosthenes what to do. His reply: "Do not do what you are doing now."

Joseph Ray

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Media Training the Untrainable

By now you are aware of how invaluable media training is for anyone who must 'dance the dance' with journalists, particularly with regard to sensitive issues. But what do you do when your primary spokesperson, despite many hours of training and practice under the direction of someone skilled in that specialty, still seems likely to create more wreckage than they are supposed to prevent?

There are a few variations to this problem:

1. **The primary spokesperson isn't taking well to training, but there are other potential spokespersons.**

I have often trained corporate executives who are part of a two- to four-spokesperson team. Not all crises, and not all media, merit involvement of the CEO or president, but they are usually one of those trained. Other senior execs by virtue of their position or knowledge are also usually trained – to include legal counsel (believe it or not, sometimes we DO want the lawyers to comment, specifically on matters of law). In fact, part of what the training helps determine is 'who speaks to what subjects.'

Sometimes, the lead spokesperson cannot be trained to an acceptable level of performance in the time available. There are many possible reasons, the most common of which, in my experience, are fear of the media, hatred of the media, and/or passion about the topic that overrides good judgment. In those cases, I'm candid with my client and suggest that an alternate spokesperson take the lead. I know of more than one CEO who, after media training, pulled himself off the spokesperson team because he knew he'd do more harm than good.

Another approach, with multiple spokespersons, is to provide a panel to speak to the media consisting of a lead spokesperson – typically the CEO –and others who might serve as experts on specific subjects. The CEO is the quarterback, deciding who should answer any given question. This approach takes practice to ensure it works smoothly.

2. There's truly only one person who should speak about the crisis, he/she does very poorly in training, but he/she is willing to 'play to his/her weakness.'

There are spokespersons who come across woodenly, or with a habitual facial expression that miscommunicates what they're actually thinking, or who are perpetually nervous because they fear being on camera or have some other mannerism that doesn't respond to training.

In such situations, there are only two smart options – either that person shouldn't give interviews, or they can play to their weakness.

Imagine your reaction, as a viewer, when a somewhat wooden CEO starts off his comments to a TV reporter like this:

"First, I want to admit that I'm just not very comfortable on-camera, but I know this situation really calls for me, as CEO, to step up and speak out. So, I hope everyone out there is forgiving of my style and focuses on my message, which comes from my heart."

It elicits empathy from most of the audience for a broadcast interview. You can even say the same sort of thing to a print reporter, so that they are less likely to misinterpret your discomfort as coming from guilt or some other motive contrary to your position.

3. There's truly only one person who should speak about the crisis, but that person insists they can 'handle it'.

Pray. And hope there's a competing crisis and no one's paying attention.

When the Media Goes Too Far

Everyone expects journalists to be pushy, to report facts less-than-accurately at times and to insist on a level of access to information that makes both attorneys and PR professionals cringe.

To a significant extent, that's their job and those of us who respond to the media engage them and hope for some balance in the resulting coverage.

Sometimes, however, reporters and/or the media outlet they serve go too far. They cross the line from aggressive to offensive. They insist on publishing facts that have already been corrected by reputable sources. And when they do, there is recourse other than just taking it in the teeth.



The longer you talk to a reporter, the greater the chance you'll say something you regret.

When Reporters Get Offensive

In an actual situation that occurred to one of my clients, a reporter for the *Arizona Republic*, assigned to coverage of an ongoing business crisis situation, apparently got frustrated at his inability to obtain interviews with certain representatives of that business. The journalist called the administrative assistant to one of the business' outside attorneys and insisted on talking to the attorney. When she, appropriately, told him the 'party line' that all media calls were to go to the PR director of the business (where he'd already called without success), he threatened her. He said that he would publish her name as the one responsible for information not being available to the public.

She contacted me and I advised her boss, the attorney, that the reporter was in gross violation of journalistic ethics and suggested that the attorney write a polite, but firm letter to the paper's legal counsel, explaining what had happened. He did and, after some communication back and forth, the paper not only apologized to the assistant in writing, but gave her a free subscription— and the reporter became the subject of an internal investigation. His bullying tactics stopped.

When the Media Ignores the Facts

If a spokesperson for an organization in crisis has repeatedly communicated demonstrably accurate information to the media only to see it not used, or has made statements that are repeatedly misquoted, the same tactic of having legal counsel communicate with legal counsel can often make a positive difference. Usually, you'll want to establish a trail of evidence first, showing that you have, in fact, taken every reasonable action to get the facts corrected. You've sent polite written corrections to the reporter(s) involved. You've met with him/her in person to explain your perception of the problems. You've met with his/her supervising editor. And the problem persists.

If a media outlet's editorial bias is so strong that it won't cooperate even if threatened with more formal legal action, it is time to remember that the media is not your most important stakeholder group. Why? Because it's the least manageable and it has an agenda of its own. There are a lot of ways 'around' an irresponsible media outlet. The primary means is being your own media, publishing a web page that tells the story your way and using social media and online advertising to drive traffic to the site.

You should also consider whether the stakeholders important to you or your client are actually being negatively influenced by the media coverage. And is it their primary source of information on the subject? I have known of cases where, when asked, stakeholders tell client organizations that they don't believe the media coverage and think reporters are on a witch hunt. It could well be that, by simply increasing positive

and accurate direct communication with stakeholders (more phone calls, letters, meetings, etc.) about a crisis situation, you will balance out the inaccurate negativity in the press.

Remember: we're not at the mercy of the press as much as some members of the press would like us to believe. At its core, 'the media' is just people like you and me. People in every profession 'break the rules,' they violate the ethics and responsible business practices to which they allegedly subscribe. Reporters and editors are no different. And not only do we have ways to respond but, if we don't, we're tacitly encouraging the rule-breaking. If you want some guidelines to help you determine if a journalist is being unethical, read the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics at: http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp I mentioned earlier in this manual. Sadly, some media outlets have turned into nothing more than loudspeakers for extreme views, and they are unlikely to give a damn about ethics.



Make the plan idiot proof and someone will make a better idiot.

Anonymous



BERNSTEIN CRISIS MANAGEMENT, INC.

Crisis Management, Response, Prevention, Planning & Training

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Bernstein founded his consultancy in January 1994. His crisis and issues management experience has encompassed a wide range of industries and subjects, to include accounting, architecture, associations, banking, charities, education, environment, financial services, food (retail and B2B), governmental organizations, health care, housing, hospitality, insurance, labor & employment, litigation, manufacturing, product recalls, professional services, real estate development, religious institutions, securities, security, senior housing, and white collar crime. He is a self-admitted “Internet nerd,” online since 1982, who has pioneered strategies and tactics for Internet-centered crisis and reputation management.



*Jonathan Bernstein,
Chairman & Founder*

His past experience includes corporate, agency and non-profit public relations positions, preceded by five years of investigative and feature journalism — to include a stint with investigative reporter/columnist Jack Anderson. He is a veteran of five years in U.S. Army Military Police and Military Intelligence operations.

Bernstein is the publisher of *Crisis Manager*, a first-of-its-kind email newsletter written for “those who are crisis managers whether they want to be or not,” currently read in 75 countries, and manages two industry leading blogs on the same subject. His *Keeping the Wolves at Bay: Media Training* manual has been described as “an outstanding foundation for preparing individuals and organizations for effective crisis management.” He also authored *Manager’s Guide to Crisis Management* (McGraw-Hill). Bernstein is frequently interviewed by national and international media outlets about various “crises du jour.” A *PR Week* feature story entitled “The Crunch-Time Counselors” identified Bernstein as one of 22 “people who should be on the speed dial in a crisis” and *Business Week* featured his perspectives in an article entitled “Masters of Disaster.”

Bernstein is the son of a career American diplomat and was raised in six countries (France, Italy, Nigeria, England and Korea) and, as such, brings a truly international perspective to his consulting. He is also a father, grandfather, folksinger and is very active in community service. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Speech Communications, *magna cum laude*, from the University of Maryland.

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