

Communication Strategies

Everybody wants positive media coverage about their organization and their cause, yet many have concerns about speaking with the media. This fear can be eased if you know what to do and how to handle an interview. Public affairs consultants Art and Eric Samansky recently offered some tips on presenting yourself and your organization to the media—some do's and don'ts of a media interview and some basics of speechwriting and presentations.

Art Samansky offered the following advice for communicating with reporters.

TOP TEN RULES FOR MEDIA COVERAGE

1. *Stay On-the-Record*

Always stay on-the-record with every reporter. Make no exceptions to this rule. Never tell a reporter that your comment is “not-for-attribution” or “off-the-record.” If it's something you don't want to be quoted as saying, just don't say it.

2. *Tell Your Story*

What do you want to say? Why do you want to do this interview? Develop your message and your story before the interview. Answer the reporter's questions, but also take the opportunity to tell your organization's story. Treat the reporter with the same respect you expect.

3. *The Rule of Three, Plus the Nightmare Question*

When you tell your story, use the rule of three messages: Develop three short, strategic messages that define your organization and its goals. Make sure that these messages tell your story and that they differentiate your organization from others. Your messages should be free of buzzwords, jargon and phrases. Be truthful and accurate.

The nightmare question refers to the one thing, or

things, a reporter could ask that would cause you to blanch. Before the interview, figure out what these might be and how you would reply to these questions.

4. *Stay on Message*

This is not to say that you should ever ignore a reporter's question, but always bring it back to your three points.

5. *Say What You Mean the First Time*

Some people have a tendency to start a sentence, then stop and change their thought mid-stream. This is likely to cause confusion and a possible mis-quote. Think about what you mean to say before you start speaking. If you believe you have fallen into the stop/start mode, stop and say something like, “Let me stop and start over and make myself clearer.” And then make one clear, declarative statement.

6. *Never Lie, Spin or Joke*

Lying can cost you your job or your organization's reputation because the truth will surface, sooner or later. A joke heard at a cocktail party just won't translate into print, and may be inappropriate in any event. As for spinning—trying to make something appear to be other than what it really is—just don't do it.

7. *Avoid Jargon*

There are numerous expressions you use in-house that shouldn't be used with a reporter. Keep in mind that a reporter has a limited amount of time to spend with you and if you use jargon and acronyms, the reporter may not take the time to ask what you mean and think he or she will get to it later. “Later” probably won't happen; the reporter will find another source, and you may lose your chance to get your message out.

8. *Don't Say It, Can't Quote It*

If you don't mean it, and don't want to see it in print, don't say it.

— continued on page 4 —

Communication Strategies — from page 1

9. Think About What You Are Going to Say

This goes back to point number five. Think about what you are going to say and how your comments will be received by the community and your constituencies. Remember that most interviews won't lead to more than one or two quotes. You also need to think about how what you will say will be received in the context of a newspaper's stand-alone quote. If you get a phone call from a reporter asking to talk, you can ask to meet in person or you can ask if you can call back. Find out the deadline, and ask about the information the

reporter is seeking so that you can gather the material, think about your response, and respond in a timely manner with useful information.

10. No Comment Is Never the Right Answer

Saying "no comment" is like taking the Fifth Amendment: everyone will think you're guilty. A "no comment" almost always reads as, "Yeah, it's true." You have to say something, such as, "As a matter of policy, we do not comment on rumor or speculation." But this must be your policy at all times: you can't have the policy in place only when you want it.

R

e m e m b e r
what a reporter does for a living. He or she is probably on an assignment with a tight deadline, and your organization is most likely only one aspect of the story. The reporter is not there to tell your organization's story. And, a reporter is not there to make your organization or you look good. A reporter is there to gather meaningful information from you and inform readers about

a development; otherwise she wouldn't be there.

During an interview, be aware of your surroundings. This includes how you are dressed and the things in your office. Even your raised eyebrow can be interpreted by a reporter to mean something, so be cognizant of your facial expressions and body language.

If your organization receives negative press coverage, don't automatically rebut it. First, sit back, reflect, and think about whether the story even needs a response. Not all

stories do. A denial won't make bad news go away, and, in fact, may prolong the story by causing another story highlighting the issue, again. And remember, if a story hangs around for some time, other media outlets may start to pick up on it. Is there some truth to the bad story? Think about your "good" story—what are your good points? How can you tell that story? Should a negative story be published, whatever you do, don't hide from the press.

Reprinted with permission of the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York, Inc. www.npcny.org
Daniel J. Myers, editor and writer, *New York Nonprofits*

SPEECHWRITING & PRESENTATION

The following are a few of the points Eric Samansky made on speechwriting and presentations.

In preparing your speech, you need to know who the audience is and what they want to hear about. What do you want to accomplish with the speech, and what is the rationale for giving it? To make a speech that leaves an impression, you have to have the right message and you have to use the right language.

There is no one right way to write a speech: some writers use a linear method while others use a more artistic approach, almost as if painting or working with clay. Regardless of method, the first draft should start with the big idea and the overarching concept. Recognize that in subsequent versions your original concept may be changed or replaced by another as you research the topic and work through the information. Don't get too caught up in details in your earliest version, but have the basic facts and figures at hand. The finer details will be worked out in later versions.

By the second draft, the speech should have a beginning, middle and an end. Make a test-run on a friend or colleague and reconsider every point in your speech. Samansky recommends that the rule of three also applies to speech writing: make sure that there are three overarching points.

Edit, and edit again toward the final version. Is everything accurate? Does the speech accomplish the objectives? Present your speech to colleagues who will tell you the truth. How will your remarks reflect on your organization? Do others in the organization need to see it first to make sure that it accurately reflects the organization's views? During practice runs, fine-tune it to remove words and phrases that cause you to stumble. Give yourself stage directions: when to pause, when to emphasize a point, etc. Finally, Samansky warns, don't fall in love with your own words. If a word or phrase has to go, it has to go.

The length of a speech will depend on many factors. But good speeches rarely exceed 15-20 minutes. If your speech is in a program of consecutive speeches, you also are going to have to develop attention-getting conveyances to get the audience's attention before you get to your big theme. Jokes, however, are not the best way to go: you never know whom it may offend.

If you use slides during a speech, never read from them. The words printed on a slide should only be a theme on which your remarks expound. Hand motions during a speech or presentation should not be overused: do use them, however, to emphasize or to stress a point. In addition, keep

them within an imaginary box (chin to waist, and shoulder to shoulder).

Leave behind your cell, pager, Blackberry or any other electronic device that could distract you or your audience while speaking. And, always assume that if you can see a microphone it can hear you—it's on and everyone will hear your every word—including an aside meant only for the person next to you.

If your speech isn't fully written out, you should at least have an outline that you will follow. This kind of an outline can also be useful especially if you are told at the last minute that the time for your speech has been reduced. Regardless of whether you are using a text or an outline, in your remarks always ask the audience to "do" something within their power and ability, such as support a position, policy, program, or volunteer time or contribute funds to an effort.

Art and Eric Samansky are public affairs consultants with The Samansky Group. They can be reached at 516/293-2094. Their website, at www.samanskygroup.com, includes information on their programs, as well as their publications and guides that are available for purchase.