

MEDIA Interviews: How to Prepare Yourself and Your Staff for the Unexpected Crisis

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There are many reasons you should be prepared to talk to the media; a hotel opening, renovations, a new chef in the restaurant, all of which give you enough time to practice and get your messages across. But what if the unplanned happens, such as a crisis? Are you prepared to talk with the media? Is your staff?



Warren Buffett was quoted telling his Salomon Brothers employees, "If you lose money for the firm, I will be very understanding. If you lose reputation for the firm, I will be ruthless." Everyone at your hotel represents the brand, it's important for all employees to understand who talks to the media and what to do when the media comes knocking on your hotel doors.

A media interview, when conducted properly, can be a great opportunity to get your messages across. But like any other business initiative, it is important to put a plan in place that covers these three aspects, including:

1. Who talks to the media - designate a spokesperson.
2. What to do if media calls or stops by - communicate to your staff so they know who should take the call or visit.
3. Be prepared in advance - practice for the unexpected.

Although each interview varies depending on factors such as format, audience, and location, you can learn basic techniques for more effective media interviews. With preparation and practice, whether this is your first time or you're a highly experienced spokesperson, you can become a more effective communicator ensuring that your hotel's reputation stays intact even when you're caught off guard.

There are a variety of types of interviews, the ones where you have more than a day to prepare, the ones with only an hour to prepare, and the surprise call. I'm going to focus on what to do when there is a reporter calling without an invitation. The goal is to get

you and your team prepared for the unexpected. If you master this, all other types of interviews will be a breeze.

How to Practice for the Unexpected

Talking to the media, especially unexpectedly for any type of crisis is never an easy thing to do. It takes communication professionals years before they are considered experts. Practice doesn't make perfect, but it can lead to it. I'm going to focus on the techniques we use with our clients that can lead you to perfection, even for the unexpected.

1. Perfect your elevator pitch and communicate your key messages with your employees.
2. Know your pain points so you can talk about them effectively.
3. Create scenarios of all reasons you might be interviewed.
4. Know who your audience is so you best understand how to communicate your message.

What to do if a Reporter Calls

If you don't have a public relations firm for a quick key message refresher, take a few moments to assemble your points and, if you have time, double-check the accuracy. The number one rule for any media interview is to be honest. If you don't know an answer simply say so, do not make something up and do not lie.

Unexpected interviews tend to be brief, so you should not count on being able to express every point you want to make. Rather, this is where your elevator speech comes in. During the interview, identify the few points, or "key messages," that are most important to your company, and reiterate these points during the interview in a few concise thoughts.

Don't Forget Your Own Agenda

The most common mistake made during an interview is to become too fixated on the questions that you lose sight of your own agenda points and become a passive respondent. Don't feel obligated to answer every question specifically. The most effective spokespeople listen to the bigger issue behind each question, and address that issue as they choose.

There are certain techniques to keep in mind, particularly when confronted with a difficult or irrelevant question:

- Restate the question in your own words.

- Answer with easily understood examples.
- If you are uncertain about your facts, say so.
- Use the questions to emphasize your key messages.

You want to be able to deal effectively with question and answer sessions for any media appearance. And to do this you must maintain in control. The questions belong to the interviewer, but the responses belong to you. So, use them beneficially to get your point across while still answering the questions at hand.

You can do this because you know your business best, so you should be able to anticipate key questions. Determine the points you want to make, and prepare in advance how to use the opportunity to state your own objectives. In fact, ask the reporter for questions in advance. They rarely tell you they haven't prepared any and are always willing to share.

One way to manage your pain points in advance is to create scenarios you can practice and visualize handling. Some scenarios I've seen include:

- Calls from reporter to get a reaction or quote on a story about an unhappy guest.
- Camera crew comes to your location unexpectedly to discuss construction issues.
- A call from reporter for insight on a positive or trend story.

For any scenario you can be prepared by staying on top of the industry so no statistic catches you off guard. This means reading industry news but also knowing your audience and reading what they are reading.

Body Language

Besides what you say and how you answer the questions there are other factors that come into play when doing a media interview. Body language and nervousness all will come across in the final airing or article.

Keep in mind your positive eye contact. This means looking the reporter in the eye while you listen and while you speak, not at the ceiling, floor, or someplace else. If it's a television or video interview, you can do this by focusing your attention on the reporter, not the camera. Leaning forward, smiling, and nodding are all good signs of positive body language which can help make you and the reporter more at ease.

Nervousness affects everyone whether they say so or not. One good trick is to remember to breathe from your diaphragm, rather than your chest. Nervousness creates added adrenaline in your system. It can make your voice sharper, but also make you speed up. Keep your voice controlled and talk 10 times slower than what you feel is normal. Trust me, it will sound ridiculously slow in your head but it's still going to be too fast for the listeners and viewers.

Setting up media interviews based on timely information is one of the top tactics to employ in a public relations campaign. There are a variety of types anyone can practice for a scheduled interview, but in the hotel industry, we know there are going to be surprises. With practice and open communication with your employees surrounding your key messages, everyone can be prepared for the unexpected giving you no reason to get ruthless.

Gini Dietrich is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Arment Dietrich, Inc., a firm that uses non-traditional marketing. The author of Spin Sucks, Gini has delivered numerous keynotes, panel discussions, coaching sessions, and workshops across North America on the subject of digital marketing tools. One of the top rated communication professionals on the social networks, Gini was recently named the number one PR person, according to Klout and TechCrunch, on the channels, and number one on Twitter, according to TweetLevel. Ms. Dietrich can be contacted at 312-787-7249 or gini.dietrich@armentdietrich.com

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