

*Keeping the Wolves at Bay*

# MEDIA TRAINING



 Jonathan Bernstein  
BERNSTEIN CRISIS MANAGEMENT, INC.





# Keeping the Wolves at Bay

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*Look what they're saying about...*

## Keeping the Wolves at Bay Media Training!

*Jonathan Bernstein writes with clarity and humor. His easy-going style makes it easy to learn what you need to know to give great media interviews that will showcase you and your company in the best possible way. I wish everyone I ever have or will interview would read Keeping the Wolves at Bay—it would make my job so much easier.*

Jacquelyn Lynn, business writer and author of  
*The Entrepreneur's Almanac* [www.jacquelynlynn.com](http://www.jacquelynlynn.com)

*My personal and corporate experience with Jonathan Bernstein was invaluable. I know without his training, professional insight, and vast knowledge of crisis management, many leaders would have had a much more difficult experience managing crises, present company included.*

*Keeping The Wolves At Bay is an outstanding foundation for preparing individuals and organizations for effective crisis management. The comprehensive and relevant media training you receive from Jonathan will prepare you. I promise you it may not always be the most comfortable feeling going through the training, but if you ever have to engage with media during a crisis you will be very thankful you experienced the mastery of Keeping The Wolves At Bay. The first resource I turn to for any media related activity is Keeping The Wolves At Bay.*

*I have and will continue to rely on Jonathan's training, expertise and professionalism. I offer the highest of recommendations to any organization that you engage with Bernstein Crisis Management as you hope for the best, but plan for the worst.*

Mark Duffy President,  
STR Quality Assurance  
Specialized Technology Resources, Inc.

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*Jonathan Bernstein's Keeping the Wolves at Bay is an eminently practical guidance for anyone — business leader, celebrity, politician — who must willingly or unwillingly face the glare of media attention. It appears at a moment in time when the social media and other digital communications have upped the ante exponentially. Bernstein's practicum on media relations takes on renewed urgency as news, gossip, and opinion now drive public perception virally and at the speed of light.*

*Happily, Keeping the Wolves at Bay is also rich in anecdote and fun to read. Give it close attention. Those wolves are hungrier than ever."*

Richard Levick, Esq.  
President & CEO  
Levick Strategic Communications, LLC

*In deciding whether to revise "Wolves 3.0," this book's predecessor, it might have been tempting for Jonathan to adopt the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" philosophy. But he kept the good stuff, added some gems, and has thrown out darn little - a testament to how good it was to begin with. The social media additions, in particular, are essential reading for those trying to sort through the opportunities and threats of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, etc.*

Rick Kelly  
Director of Crisis Communications  
Triad Strategies

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# Keeping the Wolves at Bay

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# MEDIA TRAINING



*Ono the Ostrich is the official mascot of  
Bernstein Crisis Management, Inc.*

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# WELCOME TO KEEPING THE WOLVES AT BAY MEDIA TRAINING

**J**UST ABOUT EVERY SECTION OF THIS manual has been significantly edited since the previous edition, and considerable content has been added. The previous edition remains quite valuable, but, (a)the world of media relations has evolved dramatically and (b)your author, hopefully, is always learning.

There is also, as readers of previous editions will note, a *dramatic* change in the look of this publication. That is





thanks to the design and editorial talents of Celeste Mendelsohn – my creative director, wife and best friend – to whom these few words can only begin to express my appreciation and love. Her creativity is why the cover now identifies this book as part of a series we will be publishing under the banner “*Keeping the Wolves at Bay*.”

As in the past, however, I must also express gratitude to the thousands of people whose publicly aired media faux pas provide me and my peers with a perpetual supply of ‘wrong way’ case studies.

I would like to thank all of my clients, particularly those who came to training sessions kicking and screaming, “*My PR person is making me do this!*” and left thanking me – and their PR person.

And, as always, I want to thank Bill Gates for making it cool to be a geek.

Jonathan Bernstein  
Sierra Madre, CA  
January 2010

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



**“When your client has a crisis that could put it out of business, call the crisis manager first, think about the legal issues later. If you do it the other way around, the client might not survive to utilize your keen legal analysis.”**

***Adam K. Treiger, Partner, Stowell, Zeilenga & Ruth LLP***





## PREFACE

# A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT MEDIA RELATIONS

**W**ELCOME TO A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT MEDIA RELATIONS. EVEN IF YOU HAVE GIVEN many ‘good news’ interviews in the past, you’re almost certain to say or do things you’ll regret if you have not been media trained when in a ‘high pressure’ media interview situation. Heck, you may say or do things you’ll regret even if you are media trained – but it’s less likely!

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.
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- ❖ 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. See Section 4: Media Logistics. And who, perhaps, should *not* be a spokesperson at all.

In the six 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, 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, which is why this manual now includes, for the first time, a special section about how to practice media interview skills effectively without a trainer present.

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 the principals don't always apply them.**



## SECTION 1:

# UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA

**H**ERE'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 interview subject. 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

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The beauty and occasional curse of the Internet is  
that everything is available to everybody.

athlete who has either a general or specific outcome in mind when he or she comes 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?’

Media relations, for crisis communications or traditional purposes, used to be so simple. There were three basic types of media – print, radio and TV. Each had reporters, usually people with journalism training. Deadlines were typically within what most would consider ‘normal waking hours.’

{nostalgic sigh}

Now ‘media’ doesn’t just mean traditional media, as above, but also “social media” that takes many different forms, including blogs, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and FriendFeed. All of them featuring information – sometimes about you and/or your organization – on a 24/7 news cycle.

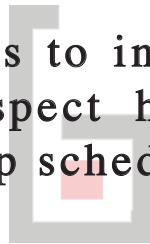
Additionally, the lines between print and broadcast media have completely blurred. First, all of them have websites, but on the *LA Times* website, for example, you’ll find video. On *Fox News*’ website, you’ll find

print. All media sites archive their stories, sometimes for many years, so a single piece of bad news can haunt you for a long, long time. The ‘blogosphere’ can act as a repeater, and distorter, of traditional media coverage, and there’s been more than one traditional media outlet that used a blog as a source.

The demand for news is so high, and traditional media’s budget so low, that fact-checking has become a much lower priority than simply cranking out headlines. On social media, fact-checking is virtually non-existent. And yet clever social media writers and broadcasters can attract a larger following than traditional media. One relatively recent example is the hilarious and instructive ‘United Breaks Guitars’ YouTube video, which you can read about and see at: <http://bernsteincrisismanagement.blogspot.com/2009/07/united-breaks-guitars-wrong-way-crisis.html>.

To the chagrin of many naïve organizational leaders, ‘reporters’ also exists amongst their staff and visitors. In fact, YOU are a reporter. I am a reporter. Almost all of us

**Crisis preparation has to incorporate the concept that crises don’t respect holidays, vacations or sleep schedules.**



routinely carry small devices that used to be seen only in James Bond movies, capable of recording sound, photos and video. Mine is called a Blackberry. Such devices have been used by millions of people to record news “as it happens” and transmit it immediately to favored traditional media outlets, to blogs and/or to YouTube. But also, they may well record embarrassing moments and, ‘things you wish you’d never said.’ They can also take photos of confidential material for corporate espionage or disgruntled employee revenge. The negative uses are as varied as the creativity of angry people, none of whom need much technical expertise to do you a lot of harm.

This manual focuses primarily on how to handle traditional media interviews. It will also help you learn to respond more effectively to social media negativity – and how to use social media to your advantage for crisis prevention and crisis response, which is critical to crisis management in the 21st Century, as is total awareness of ‘new media’ in all its forms.

For some related information, look at two articles you’ll find at: [www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com/articles.html](http://www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com/articles.html), – the *I-Reporter, Born of the Web* and *The Role of Search Engine Optimization in Crisis Management*.

## 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 his/her editor and audience. There is a journalistic code of ethics at [www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp), but it allows for behaviors you may or may not deem acceptable while in pursuit of a story. In all probability, journalists don’t review that code very often.

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 that he/she thinks

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the audience will want answered. That means you must speak through him/her 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 come out if you had written it.’ 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 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, the traditional media can be a particularly important method 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?

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

***President George W. Bush***



## SECTION 2:

# GETTING READY TO BE INTERVIEWED

**A**TTITUDE 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 to them.
2. A reporter can put words in a naive source's mouth via leading questions (*"Would you say that...?"*, *"Do you agree that...?"*, *"Do you feel that...?"*) and then swear by the authenticity of those quotes.
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 makes a civil complaint 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 and characterize responses, and via the public perception that, "If I saw it in/on the news, it must be true."
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."*

**Saying 'no comment,' is not the same thing as making no comment – but both communicate a message.**

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## 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 back up *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* Jim Avila or *60 Minutes'* Leslie Stahl.

**"The readiness is all."**

***William Shakespeare***



## The Three C's of Crisis Communication: Compassion Competence Confidence

### ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

Different types of crises dictate different attitudes on the part of spokespersons.

During a crisis, effective spokespersons must, primarily through their non-verbal cues, leave stakeholders with the impression that they are:

Compassionate... Competent... and Confident.

Think Rudy Giuliani on and after 9-11. It was his attitude, his non-verbal cues, which gave his audience comfort. If he had delivered the same message in a stereotypical governmental manner, the amount of fear and anxiety felt by listeners would have been dramatically higher. Instead, what they clearly felt, for the most part, was "*However horrible this situation is, Mayor Giuliani is going to get us through it. He's doing the right thing, in the right way.*" He

actually delivered little substance, initially, because so little was known. But he won over his audience (not to mention laying the groundwork for his future ventures).

More recently, compare the communication styles of President Obama and former president George W. Bush. President Obama is proving to be one of the most adept communicators in the public eye today, readily moving from casual/friendly to serious/introspective to stern/reproaching.

In contrast, President Bush's apparently perpetual smirk and combativeness were poorly received not only overseas, but by a majority of people in this country, including many staunch Republicans.

The attitude you bring to an interview should be a matter of conscious choice and should be both related to the crisis at hand and also to your understanding of the stakeholders who will read or view

the resulting story. Subtleties come into play when considering attitude. There could be, for example, intra-organizational joy about a certain outcome, joy that could be perceived as gloating by the general public. Your gut-level attitude may or may not be appropriate to share with all stakeholders.

Manipulation? In a sense, perhaps. But post-disaster, a spokesperson's gut reaction may be to, *"Ignore the damn media and just take care of business,"* or to get very angry at anyone outside his organization whom he perceives to be in the way. Sometimes, channeled anger can be useful, but only when it's a consciously chosen attitude to display.

One of the best trainees I've ever had was a 28-year-old woman responsible for a corporation's college recruiting program.

The company had been the focus of some criticism by college papers and bloggers.

In media training, my interviewing tactics start off soft and warm up to hostile, with intensity varying depending on my assessment of the trainee's ability to 'take it'— i.e., their proven skill. Trainees have been known to swear at me, and at themselves, while in front of the camera. But this young woman's attitude was so good that nothing I threw at her fazed her in the least. She had an almost Ronald Reagan-like smile and shrug with which she acknowledged tough questions or comments without taking offense. She also had the chutzpah to come back with her best message points delivered convincingly. Even when she muffed some message points, her attitude projected competence and confidence. It didn't surprise me, though, that she actually volunteered for more training a year later. That's part of her attitude too – a desire to improve.

**"Stay positive and assertive no matter what. Remember, the media interview belongs to you and represents a marketing opportunity – even in a crisis."**

***From "The Simple Truth"  
by Bob Aronson***

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## SECTION 3:

# MEDIA TACTICS - DANCING THE DANCE

**I**MAGINE YOU'RE GOING TO A DANCE WITH A BLIND DATE WHO YOU THINK MIGHT BE interesting. And he/she thinks you might be interesting. Though not necessarily for the same reasons. But your date, unless you demonstrate otherwise, believes that he/she is going to lead every dance.

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.

**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 non-verbal 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**

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## 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 them, test them and practice them.

Yes, practice, just like those professional athletes 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), after which the trainer's knowledge doesn't just automatically transfer to you.

Here are some rules for successful message development and delivery:

- ❖ 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.
  - ❖ 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.
  - ❖ 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.
  - ❖ State your most important messages up front and find ways to repeat them, verbatim or re-stated, throughout an interview.
  - ❖ 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.
  - ❖ 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.

- ❖ If a reporter asks to audio record an interview, ask if you can do the same thing. This greatly increases the likelihood that the reporter will listen to 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.
- ❖ If there is a camera rolling – just one – asking to video record yourself would be considered paranoid by a reporter. However, in a multiple-camera (e.g., press conference) environment, setting up your own camera to record the event is considered perfectly normal.
- ❖ This is a hot one. *After* you've done the interview, email or fax 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 Bestpractices 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.

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

- ❖ What happened that could have resulted in E. coli contamination?
- ❖ What are the food safety practices at the manufacturing facility?
- ❖ What is the plant/company health and safety history?
- ❖ What is the company going to do now?
- ❖ 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:

- ❖ Our hearts and prayers are with the victims and their loved ones.

❖ We are cooperating fully with the CDC's investigation and defer to them for any update on the situation.

❖ 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.

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

Let's look at some sample questions, how you would put them into categories, and then how you would respond:

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

***Bob Aronson***

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**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.

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**Q:** Do you know what happened?

**Category:** What happened.

**Your reply:** Use messages 1, 2 & 3. Our hearts and prayers are with the victims and their loved ones. We are cooperating fully with the CDC's investigation and defer to them for any update on the situation. 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.

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 he *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 he/she wants to cover. Set a time limit. Do not leave the interview open-ended so that the reporter can continue to grill away until you say something you regret.
  3. Use the techniques in this manual to get yourself into a calm, purposeful state before an interview.
-

- a. You're the expert unless proven otherwise – know your subject.
    - b. The reporter will come with his/her agenda. You need to have yours, which is to communicate your most important messages no matter what is asked.
  4. Be honest. If you aren't, you're likely to (a) get caught, sooner or later, and (b) suffer *far* more damage than you would have otherwise. More on this later.
  5. 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.
  6. Don't guess. *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.
  7. 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.
  8. 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 it was clear that the problem was contained and in the past. When he spoke, one of his strong message points was "*We're not just company spokespersons, we're also 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.
  9. Don't use jargon. Jargon and arcane acronyms confuse your stakeholders – a surefire way to make a crises worse. Let's check out a few taken-from-real-life gems:
    - a. The rate went up 10 basis points.
    - b. We're 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 0.65 ppm 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 reaction to such statements is, “*Huh?*”

10. While reporters instinctively distrust ‘no comment,’ a poll indicated that 93% of journalists

feel ‘legal considerations’ are justifiable reasons for withholding information. ‘Competitive’ and ‘ethical’ considerations also score high, as do personal rights to privacy. 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 expanded text box below.

### Target Corporation Misses the Bullseye

*By Jonathan Bernstein*

On May 23, 2003, 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.”*





11. 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.*

12. 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 (<http://www.spaethcom.com/bimbo.php>) given by crisis management consultant Merrie Spaeth:

Peter Cook, model Christie Brinkley’s ex-husband, who sought an interview with Barbara Walters so he could tell people, “I’m not the scumbag pervert I’ve been painted to be.”

From then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzales about his role in firing eight U.S. Attorneys: “I have nothing to hide,” “It certainly was not in any way an attempt to mislead the American

people,” “Nothing improper occurred,” and “I never sought to mislead or deceive the Congress or the American people about my role in this matter.”

13. Take your time before answering questions. Pauses are effective. Even on TV, unless it’s live, all the pauses will be edited out and only your answers used.

14. When awaiting questions, maintain a neutral or, if appropriate, pleasant expression. Do not look guarded or defensive. A good reporter, or cameraman, watches your face all the time.

15. 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 plaintiff's attorney who attacks from in front of media microphones.**

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## THE PRICE OF DISHONESTY

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

1. Act of commission – e.g., black is white.
2. Act of omission – leaving important information out of your communication.

3. Exaggeration – for the purpose of obfuscating the truth.

4. Understatement – for the purpose of obfuscating 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

*By Jonathan Bernstein*

Talk about 'creative' writing! Writers Guild President, Charles D. Holland, has been attempting to explain why there doesn't appear to be proof that he served in an elite Special Forces unit or that he attended college on a football scholarship, both claims he made while being interviewed for a profile in the WGA's in-house magazine entitled, *Soldier of Fortune*.

It's bad enough that Mr. Holland does not appear to have learned from the spate of similar cases reported in recent years, but his explanations have been classic examples of how impossible it is to lie in an age where background investigation of *anyone* is so easy to do. For example:

He claimed to have served with the 7th Special Forces Group at Ft. Bragg, NC. A military records check by the *L.A. Times* showed he was in the National Guard in Illinois and Massachusetts during a three-year period when he was earning a master's degree and a law degree. Not much time in there to sneak away to Ft. Bragg and participate in special ops. His Guard duties were listed as military policeman and assistant postal officer. Records also

Continued...

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showed subsequent Guard and Army Reserve duty in Massachusetts and San Francisco.

In an interview with *the 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 readily available because they didn’t exist?

Ben Abel, spokesperson for the Army Special Operations Command at Ft. Bragg, told the *L.A. 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 to that unit.”*

Let me add some personal experience here. I did serve in U.S. Army Military Intelligence (ok, ask yourself, *“Isn’t that an oxymoron?”* – then get over it) working as what was called an ‘Area Intelligence Specialist.’ A position having had a Top Secret clearance with all kinds of fancy access info added to it, (a) I could show you paperwork today which proved that I had this experience, without in ANY way compromising security of operations in which I participated and (b) a military records check would disclose the same information.

But wait, Holland wasn’t through attempting to draw others into his fantasy. He also claimed to have been on a football scholarship at the University of Illinois – which had no record of him playing. His explanation?

*“I played wide receiver under a different name.”*

OK. Maybe. So he gives the name to the *Times*, which tracks down the man who has that name, who played wide receiver at Illinois at that time – and who is now an account executive for an Arizona pharmaceutical company. And he doesn’t know Holland.

Continued...

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Now here's the pièce de résistance: A couple of weeks after the *L.A. Times* broke this story, the WGA Board of Directors met to decide what should be done about it and to hear Holland's in-person 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."*

**You can pick yourself up off the floor now.**



## POSITIONING

There's always a way to position messages in a manner optimal to your interests. There are some tricks to positioning in order to avoid the label 'spin doctoring.'

Consider this case history – an amalgam of actual situations with which your author has had experience. The object is to demonstrate the wrong way and the

right way to manage media relations and citizen concerns about a corporate mistake.

Situations are not always this black and white, of course. But you will always profit from 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.**

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## THE SITUATION

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 set for months later

### 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 were 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


Continued...



their comments and questions was to provide strictly factual answers, as if the situation was a criminal trial.

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

### 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.
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2. 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 'take a hit.' 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. I've done this with clients many times for just this purpose, and it works. As my client base gets more tech-savvy, we've been able to do this kind of 'pre-game warmup' via webcam as well.

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 the 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'

**Towhey's Law of Perception: The good news is that perception is not reality. The bad news is that reality is irrelevant.**

*G. Mark Towhey,  
Towhey Consulting*

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common interest, Widget was able to refocus 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: *"I'm sorry; I really do not understand what you are getting at. Would you repeat that?"*
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. Try to keep your answers short.
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.
15. 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 the sniff your hand and never turn your back."**

***Anonymous***

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## 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. A trade union leader actually shouted 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 of 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.”*

4. 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.
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**"You can't solve a problem  
with the same mind that created it."**

***Albert Einstein***

## 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.

Remember – whoever frames the context first has an advantage. However, even if someone else framed it first, you can always reframe it – better! 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.

REMEMBER: THEY  
AREN'T LEMONS, THEY'RE  
ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS  
OF LEMONADE

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# THE ONO AWARDS

*The readers of the Crisis Manager Newsletter may remember the Ono Awards from early issues. We've decided to bring them back here because these quotes so admirably illustrate what NOT to say to the media.*

*"He was trespassing." The only comment made by Norfolk-Southern Railroad spokesperson, Rudy Husband, after a man was killed by one of their trains.*

*"I won't be backed into an apology." Donna Tocci, PR Manager for Kryptonite Locks, speaking to a reporter for Business 2.0's "Marketing Focus" ezine, following wide-spread reports that the ubiquitous bicycle locks made by the company can easily be picked with a Bic pen.*

*"It's not supposed to happen like this." Mayor John Smith from Meridian, MS, following the July 8, 2003 shooting at a Lockheed Martin plant.*

*"We don't need to do crisis planning, we just need to learn how to think better during a crisis." Unidentified pharmaceutical CEO in response to suggestion that lack of a crisis plan and training wasn't prudent.*







## SECTION 4:

# MEDIA LOGISTICS

**Journalists aren't supposed to praise things. It's a violation of work rules almost as serious as buying drinks with our own money or absolving the CIA of something.**

*P.J. O'Rourke*

**J**UST WHEN YOU THOUGHT ALL YOU HAD TO CONSIDER WAS WHAT TO SAY, HERE'S A SECTION on all the little considerations inherent in all interviews and in specific types of interviews.



## ALL INTERVIEWS

- ❖ Remember that a reporter's assignment is to find a story, an angle, a hook – something to entice his audience and further his/her 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.
- ❖ 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.

❖ It's OK to ask a journalist for the focus and direction of his/her story ahead of time. You may even hear some of the questions you'll be addressing in the actual interview. **Caution!** Even many allegedly prestigious 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.

❖ 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 some stunts such as leaving an audio recorder on while they left the room, ostensibly on some sort of break, but actually hoping to catch someone saying something they didn't know that he or she would hear. 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?"

"If it's natural to you to gesture as part of your communication, by all means do but don't force them - you'll

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**One definition of ‘humility’ is ‘becoming teachable.’**

*Anonymous*

come across, particularly on TV, as stilted and uncomfortable. We’ve 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.’

- ❖ Space-filling and distracting noises or phrases – e.g., “uh,” “um,” “you know” – should be avoided. You may be unconscious of such speech mannerisms and/or 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.
- ❖ 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.**



## PRINT INTERVIEWS

❖ 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.

❖ Print reporters tend to be the best-prepared, with the level of preparation and research being directly related to how much time they have before a story filing deadline. So ask what their deadline is and, if it's near, pull out all stops to make it easy for them 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.

❖ 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, etc.

*"Smith started sweating and shifting in his seat when asked about his company's recent mistakes."*

There are very few print outlets that support true investigative journalism anymore, but you should be aware of those that do. One such organization is *ProPublica* ([www.propublica.org](http://www.propublica.org)), which is Web-based and encourages other media to, "steal our stories." Major publications do so with regularity. Additionally, some weekly papers, although often biased to the left- or right-wing, have very enthusiastic and often skilled investigative reporters not hampered by the deadlines of the daily (or hourly) press. Since they also have an Internet presence, the stories of such weeklies' can have quite an impact. For example, I have had clients fall both afoul of and benefit from investigative coverage by *The Phoenix New Times*.

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

***Jean-Paul Sartre***

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## TV INTERVIEWS

### *Types of TV Interviews*

There are three basic types of TV interviews, with facts you should remember for all of them, and some special considerations for individual types of interviews.

1. *In-Studio.* You and the interviewer are both in chairs on a set.
2. *Remote.* The interviewer and you are not in the same location. You might be in the local studio of that broadcast outlet while the interviewer is across the country in another studio. Or the news director might send a cameraman to you at your location, but the interviewer remains remote. Whatever the setup, you are going to be hearing the interviewer through an earpiece and speaking to him/her via a lapel microphone. You might have TV monitors available in which you can view the interviewer and/or yourself.
3. *Ambush.* You are coming in to or out of your office, leaving a courthouse or government building, or even arriving at home, when suddenly you are approached by a reporter with a microphone and/or a cameraman.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ALL TV INTERVIEWS

There are some considerations common to all types of TV interviews – in-studio, remote and ‘ambush.’ I’ll outline the common considerations first, then we’ll move on to discuss different types of TV interviews and their associated special needs. For all types of interviews, remember:

- ✿ Television is a visual medium. Every aspect of communication, verbal and non-verbal, will be detectable by the audience.
  - ✿ The TV 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.
  - ✿ Ignore the camera in favor of maintaining eye contact with the interviewer unless you are giving a remote interview (more on that soon).
  - ✿ 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 his/her editor which ‘take’ to use.

❖ 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, *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.

❖ In a seated interview, sitting erect and occasionally leaning in connotes enthusiasm. Slumping or slouching communicates boredom or lack of self-confidence. 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.

❖ Some of us have ‘facial habits,’ movements that can lead a TV viewer 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, could mean, “*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 – on TV, that can come across as evasive. Learn, from practice on-camera, about your own facial habits and whether they can be misinterpreted.

❖ 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

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**“The First Law of Holes:  
If you get in one, stop digging.”**

***Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Secretary of Defense***

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.

***Considerations for In-Studio Interviews***

- ❖ Monitors that allow you to see yourself are distracting. If they can’t be turned off, ignore them in favor of maintaining eye contact with the interviewer.

***Considerations for Remote Interviews***

- ❖ There will be a sound check before the interview to ensure that you can both 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.
- ❖ Most remote interviews involve having a live human cameraman present,

but not all. Sometimes, you have a remotely operated camera, essentially a ‘robo-camera,’ operated by controls from another location. Speaking from personal experience, it’s somewhat eerie the first time you do it.

- ❖ Look at the camera while imagining that you’re looking someone right in the eyes. Definitely not easy to do without practice.

***Considerations for Ambush Interviews***

- ❖ A TV 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 judgment 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 positioning work.
-

## RADIO INTERVIEWS

These days, radio interviews are most often done by phone versus in-studio. So let's look at some logistics that apply to both situations, and then at some specific considerations for each.

### *Logistics For 'Phoner' Or In-Studio Interviews:*

- ❖ Be prepared to allow the engineer to do a 'sound check' before the program. Talk at your normal volume because they are using that to set the volume controls.
- ❖ It is more important than ever to have appropriate verbal illustrations and anecdotes. Remember, the radio listener has to paint his own mental pictures from your words.
- ❖ Speak clearly and distinctly. That is all the listener has to go on. You may think you speak clearly and distinctly,

but you could be unpleasantly surprised at how slurred words can sound on the radio unless you've tried some simulated interviews first.

### *Logistics for 'Phoner' Interviews Only*

- ❖ You can have visual reminders – cheat sheets – available to you, but do not read from them without practice, because it will sound like reading.
- ❖ Your attire is immaterial, dress in whatever manner makes you feel most comfortable and confident.

### *Logistics for In-Studio Interviews Only*

- ❖ 'Business casual' dress is advised, even if the interviewer is extremely casual. Clothes do make an impression.
- ❖ In a studio, it is prudent to practice good posture. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer if possible and be mentally "present" during the interview.

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

***Jerry Brown, in "Monday Morning Media Minute"***

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**"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***

## 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 become our own reporters, directly delivering the news to the same stakeholders reached by traditional media.

After popular airline JetBlue stranded travelers in planes and in airports for many hours during an ice storm in February 2007, company founder and CEO David Neeleman did a brilliant job of humbly apologizing, making amends to affected passengers, and initiating operational reforms to ensure that this situation wouldn't be repeated. Besides speaking to traditional media, Neeleman, de facto, interviewed himself – became both reporter and interview subject – by broadcasting a statement on *YouTube* that was widely picked up by blogs. The

same video was on JetBlue's website, as were print stories readily available for use by traditional media or others.

A steadily increasing number of organizations have launched their own blogs and ezines – email newsletters – as a way of letting people know who they are and what they're doing on an ongoing and evolving manner, versus the traditional website that was little more than a slick virtual brochure. I've distributed an ezine twice monthly since February 2000, resulting in a number of readers-turned-clients telling me, "*We felt we knew you even before we met you.*"

Other means of delivering the news yourself are constantly being introduced, and a wise organizational leader would do well to ensure that someone in his/her employ is tasked with staying current on this subject and advising the management team on how to best use such tools to the organization's advantage.

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## SECTION 5:

# 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 days of media training, alone, will not leave you with lasting skills in this area unless you practice them on your own.*

**“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*

**"If you...are spending most of your time on news releases and very little time preparing for interviews, you may want to re-examine your priorities. Interviews are where the news is. And, when a story goes bad, the interview is more likely to be the cause than the news release."**

***Jerry Brown in 'Monday Morning Media Minute'***

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 a police officer who may never have to shoot a suspect for years after going through the police academy, they still have to maintain their skills so that when they're needed, they are intuitively available.





## METHODS OF PRACTICE

*All methods of practice should:*

- ❖ Simulate a situation/scenario that, realistically, could occur to you/your organization.
- ❖ Simulate one or more of the types of interviews described earlier in the Media Logistics section of this manual.
- ❖ 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 (e.g., tripod-mounted video camera of at least moderately high quality, someone to operate the camera, someone to play interviewer).
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 have to have a media trainer return for a full training session to just get some 'brush up' practice periodically. Instead, hook up with him/her 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.

**"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen."**

***Winston Churchill***

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## SECTION 6:

# SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

**T**HERE ARE SOME ASPECTS OF MEDIA TRAINING REQUIRING HIGHER LEVELS OF AWARENESS AND more sophisticated tactics than have been discussed to date. So to conclude the process of awakening you to the realities of media communications, let's talk about three such circumstances:

- ❁ Crisis Management Media Relations
- ❁ Media Training the Untrainable
- ❁ What To Do When the Media Goes Too Far



## 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 he or she is supposed to prevent?

*There are a few variations to this problem:*

- 🐾 The primary spokesperson isn't taking well to training, but there are other potential spokespersons.
- 🐾 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's truly only one person who should speak about the crisis, but he/she insists that he/she can ‘handle it.’

### *Multiple Spokespersons Available*

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 he/she is 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.

### *Only One Spokesperson, Untrainable, Play to the 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

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give interviews, or they can play to their weakness.

Imagine your reaction 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 he or she is less likely to misinterpret your discomfort as coming from guilt or some other motive contrary to your position.

*Only One Spokesperson, Untrainable, Says "I Can Handle It"*

Pray. And hope that 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'll regret.**

## **WHEN REPORTERS GET OFFENSIVE**

In an actual situation that occurred to one of my clients, a reporter for an Arizona newspaper, 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 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. One is considering use of advertorials, perhaps even in a competing outlet (if there is one). That is the process of buying advertising space — print or air time — and putting your own message in there, formatted to look or sound just like

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news coverage. Sure, it will have to have the words ‘advertising’ somewhere in the piece, but studies have shown that carefully crafted advertorials are almost as well received by media stakeholders as regular news coverage, and you control the message.

The Internet, as discussed earlier in this manual, provides us with a plethora of opportunities to be your own media outlet, generating print, audio and/or video materials in which you completely control the message. You then let your stakeholders know where to find that information by contacting them through direct email or other methods you routinely use for internal and external communication.

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](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp).

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

***Source Unknown***

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## WHEN THE 'MEDIA' IS A BLOG

Some prominent bloggers have developed a following comparable to any major metropolitan newspaper (where those still

exist) and some media outlets are strictly online, such as *The Huffington Post*. When this is the case, deal with them just as you would any other media – to include using your own, 100%-controlled online assets to help ensure balanced coverage regardless of what the blog reports.



**The trouble with learning from experience is that the test comes first and the lesson afterwards.**

*Anonymous*



## SECTION 7:

# BONUS MATERIAL

**H**ERE'S WHERE WE GIVE YOU SOME 'EXTRA STUFF' REFERRED TO EARLIER IN THIS MANUAL:

- ✿ Criteria for Effective Spokespersons
- ✿ Crisis Interview Wallet Card
- ✿ The Biggest Mistakes in Crisis Communications
- ✿ The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications

If you'd like to receive an ongoing education in crisis management-related topics, just subscribe to my free email newsletter, *Crisis Manager*. Go to [www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com](http://www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com).



## CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE SPOKESPERSONS

*By Bob Aronson, The Aronson Partnership,  
[www.aronsonpartnership.com](http://www.aronsonpartnership.com)*

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An effective spokesperson:

1. Doesn't speak without being thoroughly prepared.
2. Is highly focused on what must be communicated.
3. Has a positive attitude even when under attack.
4. Is loyal. Internal disagreements are never voiced publicly.
5. Commits to preparedness and on-going coaching. There is too much at stake for anyone to wing it.
6. Will sit on his/her ego for the greater good. Every time you speak you represent the organization. Whatever the spokesperson says becomes the organization's position.
7. Understands that on occasion he/she may not be the 'appropriate' spokesperson and should pass the baton to someone else.
8. Is never afraid to say, *"I don't know, I'll find out and get back to you."*
9. Is opportunistic but never defensive. Views every situation as an opportunity to proudly tell the organization's story.
10. Understands that anger begets anger.
11. Is available. The job may be 24-7 especially with the news media. Delay usually indicates indecision and sometimes guilt.
12. Must respect, not fear, the news media or any other stakeholder group.





## CRISIS INTERVIEW WALLET CARD

Here's another one of those gems I've been privileged to collect as a result of having newsletter readers who like to contribute to editorial contact. This is a very handy

little card sent to me by Salvation Army PR wiz, Kathy Lovin. Kathy says it's a compilation of similar items she's seen from various agencies, plus her own thoughts on the subject. I say it's a good thing for all spokespersons to laminate and carry in their wallets! Shown here in larger font for ease of reading, you may want to make it smaller.

<b>"Interview Do's"</b>	<b>Classic Interview Pitfalls</b>
Tell only the truth and as much as you can	Problem / Solution
Remember who your audience is	Interviewer quote / Don't let them put words in your mouth
Respect media deadlines	The set up / Listen, don't nod, politely challenge
Be concise, use quotable language	Either, or / "Neither, the issue is..."
Be the source	What if? / Don't speculate
Stick to your message	Silent mike / Deliver a key message, or smile and wait
Emphasize the organization's good track record	Irrelevance / Dignify question, and then bridge
<b>"Interview Don'ts"</b>	<b>Interview Techniques</b>
Say "No comment"	BRIDGING
Speculate	"I can't give you further details, but I can tell you that..."
Speak "Off the record"	"You make a valid point, but the way we see it is..."
Repeat a reporter's negative language	"First let me give you some background information..."
Ask to preview the story	FLAGGING
Reveal proprietary information	"The most important thing I want you to know is..."
Let a factual error go uncorrected	"Let's not lose sight of the fact that..."

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## THE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

*By Jonathan Bernstein*

All businesses are vulnerable to crises. You can't serve any population without being subjected to situations involving lawsuits, accusations of impropriety, sudden changes in company ownership or management, and other volatile situations on which your stakeholders — and the media that serves them — often focus.

The cheapest way to turn experience into future profits is to learn from others' mistakes. With that in mind, I hope that the following examples of inappropriate crisis communications policies, culled from real-life situations, will provide a tongue-in-cheek guide about what *not* to do when your organization is faced with a crisis.

*To ensure that your crisis will flourish and grow, you should:*

### 1. *Play Ostrich.*

Hope that no one learns about it. Cater to whoever is advising you to say nothing, do nothing. Assume

you'll have time to react when and if necessary, with little or no preparation time. And while you're playing ostrich, with your head buried firmly in the sand, don't think about the part that's still hanging out.

### 2. *Only Start Work on a Potential Crisis Situation after It's Public.*

This is closely related to item 1, of course. Even if you have decided you won't play ostrich, you can still foster your developing crisis by deciding not to do any advance preparation. Before the situation becomes public, you still have some proactive options available. You could, for example, thrash out and even test some planned key messages, but that would probably mean that you will communicate promptly and credibly when the crisis breaks publicly, and you don't want to do that, do you? So, in order to allow your crisis to gain a strong foothold in the public's mind, make sure you address all issues from a defensive posture — something much easier to do when you don't plan ahead. Shoot from the hip, and give off-the-cuff, unrehearsed remarks.

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### 3. *Let Your Reputation Speak for You.*

"Doesn't anybody know how important we think we are?" you complain. You: big business Goliath. Me: member of public who doesn't trust big business. You lose.

### 4. *Treat the Media Like the Enemy.*

By all means, tell a reporter that you think he/she has done such a bad job of reporting on you that you'll never talk to him/her again. Or badmouth him/her in a public forum. Send nasty faxes or emails. Then sit back and have a good time while:

- a. The reporter gets angry and directs that energy into *really* going after your organization.
- b. The reporter laughs at what he/she sees as validation that you're really up to no good in some way.

### 5. *Get Stuck in Reaction Mode Versus Getting Proactive.*

A negative story suddenly breaks about your organization, quoting various sources. You respond with a statement. There's a follow-up story. You make another statement. Suddenly you have a public debate, a

lose/lose situation. Good work! Instead of looking at methods which could turn the situation into one where you initiate activity that precipitates news coverage, putting you in the driver's seat and letting others react to what you say, you continue to look as if you're the guilty party defending yourself.

### 6. *Use Language Your Audience Doesn't Understand.*

Jargon and arcane acronyms are but two of the ways you can be sure to confuse your stakeholders, a surefire way to make most crises worse. Let's check out a few of these taken-from-real-life gems:

- a. The rate went up 10 basis points.
- b. We're 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 0.65 ppm 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 reaction to such statements is "Huh?"

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7. *Don't Listen to Your Stakeholders.*

Make sure that all your decisions are based on your best thinking alone. After all, how would your clients/customers, employees, referral sources, investors, industry leaders or other stakeholders' feedback be at all useful in determining how to communicate with them?

8. *Assume That Truth Will Triumph Over All.*

You have the facts on your side, by golly, and you know the public will eventually come around and realize that. Disregard the proven concept that perception is as damaging as reality – sometimes more so.

9. *Address Only Issues and Ignore Feelings.*

- a. The green goo that spilled on our property is absolutely harmless to humans.
- b. Our development plans are all in accordance with appropriate regulations.
- c. The lawsuit is totally without merit.

So what if people are scared?  
Angry? You're a businessman,  
not a psychologist...right?

10. *Make Only Written Statements.*

Face it, it's a lot easier to communicate via written statements only. No fear of looking or sounding foolish. Less chance of being misquoted. Sure, it's impersonal and some people think it means you're hiding and afraid, but you know they're wrong and that's what's important.

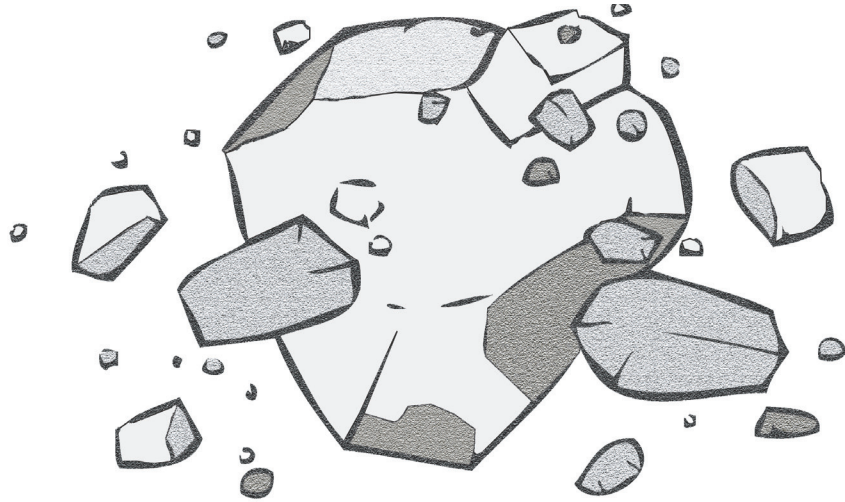
11. *Use 'Best Guess' Methods of Assessing Damage.*

"Oh my God, we're the front page (negative) story, we're ruined!"  
Congratulations – you may have just made a mountain out of a molehill....OK, maybe you only made a small building out of a molehill. See item 7, above, for the best source of information on the real impact of a crisis.

12. *Do the Same Thing Over and Over Again Expecting Different Results.*

The last time you had negative news coverage you just ignored media calls, perhaps at the advice of legal counsel or simply because you felt that no matter what you said, the

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media would get it wrong. The result was a lot of concern amongst all of your stakeholders, internal and external, and the aftermath took quite a while to fade away.

So, the next time you have a crisis, you're going to do the same thing, right? Because 'stuff happens' and you can't improve the situation by attempting to improve communications... can you?





## THE 10 STEPS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

*By Jonathan Bernstein*

*Crisis: Any situation that is threatening or could threaten to harm people or property, seriously interrupt business, damage reputation or negatively impact share value.*

Every organization is vulnerable to crises. The days of playing ostrich are gone. You can play, but your stakeholders will not be understanding or forgiving because they've watched what happened with Bridgestone-Firestone, Bill Clinton, Arthur Andersen, Enron, Worldcom, 9-11, The Asian Tsunami Disaster, Hurricane Katrina and Virginia Tech.

If you don't prepare, you WILL take more damage. And when I look at existing crisis management plans while conducting a crisis document audit, what I often find is a failure to address the many communications issues related to crisis/disaster response. Organizations do not understand that, without adequate communications:

- ❖ Operational response will break down.
- ❖ Stakeholders (internal and external) will not know what is happening and will quickly be confused, angry, and negatively reactive.
- ❖ The organization will be perceived as inept, at best, and criminally negligent, at worst.

The basic steps of effective crisis communications are not difficult, but they require advance work in order to minimize damage. The slower the response, the more damage is incurred. So if you're serious about crisis preparedness and response, read and implement these 10 steps of crisis communications, the first eight of which can and should be undertaken before any crisis occurs.

### *The 10 Steps of Crisis Communications*

#### *1. Identify Your Crisis Communications Team*

A small team of senior executives should be identified to serve as your organization's Crisis Communications Team. Ideally, the team will be led by the organization's CEO, with the firm's top public relations executive and legal counsel

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as his or her chief advisers. If your in-house PR executive does not have sufficient crisis communications expertise, he or she may choose to retain an agency or independent consultant with that specialty. Other team members should be the heads of major organization divisions, to include finance, personnel and operations.

Let me say a word about legal counsel. Sometimes, during a crisis, a natural conflict arises between the recommendations of the organization's legal counsel on the one hand, and those of the public relations counsel on the other. While it may be legally prudent not to say anything, this kind of reaction can land the organization in public relations hot water that is potentially as damaging, or even more damaging, than any financial or legal ramifications. Fortunately, more and more legal advisors are becoming aware of this fact and are working in close cooperation with public relations counsel. The importance of this understanding cannot be underestimated. Arthur Anderson lost its case and went out of business due to the judgment rendered by the court of public

opinion, not the judgment of a court of law.

## 2. *Identify Spokespersons*

Within each team, there should be individuals who are the only ones authorized to speak for the organization in times of crisis. The CEO should be one of those spokespersons, but not necessarily the primary spokesperson. The fact is that some chief executives are brilliant business people but not very effective in-person communicators. The decision about who should speak is made after a crisis breaks - but the pool of potential spokespersons should be identified and trained in advance.

Not only are spokespersons needed for media communications, but for all types and forms of communications, internal and external, including on-camera, at a public meeting, at employee meetings, etc. You really don't want to be making decisions about so many different types of spokespersons while 'under fire.'

## 3. *Spokesperson Training*

Two typical quotes from well-intentioned organization executives summarize the reason why your

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spokespersons should receive professional training in how to speak to the media:

*"I talked to that nice reporter for over an hour and he didn't use the most important news about my organization."*

*"I've done a lot of public speaking. I won't have any trouble at that public hearing."*

Regarding the first example, there are a good number of people interviewed by CBS' **"60 Minutes"** or ABC's **"20/20"** who thought they knew how to talk to the press. In the second case, most executives who have attended a hostile public hearing have gone home wishing they had been wearing a pair of Depends.

All stakeholders-internal and external – are just as capable of misunderstanding or misinterpreting information about your organization as the media, and it's your responsibility to minimize the chance of that happening.

Spokesperson training teaches you to be prepared, to be ready to respond

in a way that optimizes the response of all stakeholders.

#### 4. *Establish Notification Systems*

Remember when the only way to reach someone quickly was by a single phone or fax number, assuming they were there to receive either?

Today, we have to have – immediately at hand – the means to reach our internal and external stakeholders using multiple modalities. Many of us have several phone numbers, more than one email address, and can receive SMS (text) messages or faxes. Instant Messenger programs, either public or proprietary, are also very popular for business and personal use. We can even send audio and video messages via email. Depending on how 'techie' we choose to be, all of these types of communication – and more – may be received on or sent by a single device!

It is absolutely essential, pre-crisis, to establish notification systems that will allow you to rapidly reach your stakeholders using multiple modalities. The Virginia Tech catastrophe, where email was the sole means of alerting students initially,

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proves that using any single modality can make a crisis worse. Some of us may be on email constantly, others not so. Some of us receive our cellphone calls or messages quickly, some not. If you use more than one modality to reach your stakeholders, the chances are much greater that the message will go through.

For a long time, those of us in crisis management relied on the old-fashioned 'phone tree' and teams of callers to track people down. But today there is technology – offered by multiple vendors and also available for purchase – that can be set up to automatically start contacting all stakeholders in your pre-established database and keep trying to reach them until they confirm (e.g., by pressing a certain number on a phone keypad) that the message has been received. Technology that you can trigger with a single call or email.

### 5. *Identify and Know Your Stakeholders*

Who are the internal and external stakeholders that matter to your organization? I consider employees to be your most important stakeholder group, because every employee is a PR representative and crisis manager for your organization

whether you want them to be or not! But, ultimately, all stakeholders will be talking about you to others not on your contact list, so it's up to you to ensure that they receive the messages you would like them to repeat elsewhere.

### 6. *Anticipate Crises*

If you're being proactive and preparing for crises, gather your Crisis Communications Team for extensive brainstorming sessions on all the potential crises which can occur at your organization.

There are at least two immediate benefits to this exercise:

- a. You may realize that some of the situations are preventable by simply modifying existing methods of operation.
- b. You can begin to think about possible responses, about best case/worst case scenarios, etc. Better now than when under the pressure of an actual crisis.

In some cases, of course, you know that a crisis will occur because you're planning to create it – e.g., to lay off employees, or to make a major acquisition. Then, you can

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proceed with steps 8-10 below, even before the crisis occurs.

There is a more formal method of gathering this information that I call a 'vulnerability audit,' about which information is available at my website, [www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com](http://www.bernsteincrisismanagement.com).

### 7. Develop Holding Statements

While full message development must await the outbreak of an actual crisis, 'holding statements' – messages designed for use immediately after a crisis breaks – can be developed in advance to be used for a wide variety of scenarios to which the organization is perceived to be vulnerable, based on the assessment you conducted in Step 6 of this process. An example of holding statements by a hotel chain with properties hit by a natural disaster – before the organization headquarters has any hard factual information – might be:

*"We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of our guests and staff."*

*"Our hearts and minds are with those who are in harm's way, and we hope that they are well."*

*"We will be supplying additional information when it is available and posting it on our website."*

The organization's Crisis Communications Team should regularly review holding statements to determine if they require revision and/or whether statements for other scenarios should be developed.

### 8. Assess the Crisis Situation

Reacting without adequate information is a classic 'shoot first and ask questions later' situation in which you could be the primary victim. But if you've done all of the above first, it's just a 'simple' matter of having the Crisis Communications Team on the receiving end of information coming in from your communications 'tree,' ensuring that the right type of information is being provided so that you can proceed with determining the appropriate response.

Assessing the crisis situation is, therefore, the first crisis

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Continued...

**If you want to change who you are, change what you do.**

***Meiji Stewart***

communications step you can't take in advance. But if you haven't prepared in advance, your reaction will be delayed by the time it takes your in-house staff or quickly-hired consultants to run through steps 1 to 7. Furthermore, a hastily created crisis communications strategy and team are never as efficient as those planned and rehearsed in advance.

### **9. *Identify Key Messages***

With holding statements available as a starting point, the Crisis Communications Team must continue developing the crisis-specific messages required for any given situation. The team already knows, categorically, what type of information its stakeholders are looking for. What should those stakeholders know about this crisis? Keep it simple — have no more than three main messages for all stakeholders and, as necessary, some audience-specific messages for individual groups of stakeholders.

### **10. *Riding Out the Storm***

No matter what the nature of a crisis... no matter whether it's good news or bad...no matter how carefully you've prepared and responded...some of your stakeholders are not going to react the way you want them to. This can be immensely frustrating. What do you do?

- a. Take a deep breath.
- b. Take an objective look at the reaction(s) in question. Is it your fault, or their unique interpretation?
- c. Decide if another communication to those stakeholders is likely to change their impression for the better.
- d. Decide if another communication to those stakeholders could make the situation worse.
- e. If, after considering these factors, you think it's still worth more communication, then take your best shot!







**The difference between a crisis and a disaster might be you.**

## **'IT CAN'T HAPPEN TO ME'**

When a healthy organization's CEO or CFO looks at the cost of preparing a crisis communications plan, either a heavy investment of in-house time or retention of an outside professional for a substantial fee, it is tempting for them to fantasize, "*It can't happen to me,*" or, "*If it happens to me, we can handle it relatively easily.*"

Hopefully, that type of ostrich-playing is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Yet I know that thousands of organizations hit by Hurricane Katrina will have, when all is said and done, suffered far more damage than would have occurred with a fully developed crisis communications plan in place. This has also been painfully true for scores of clients I have served over the past 25 years. Even the best crisis management professional is playing catch up - with more damage occurring all the time - when the organization has no crisis communications infrastructure already in place.

## **THE LAST WORD - FOR NOW**

I would like to believe that organizations worldwide are finally 'getting it' about crisis preparedness, whether we're talking about crisis communications, disaster response or business continuity. Certainly client demand for advance preparation has increased dramatically in the past half-decade, at least for my consultancy. But I fear that there is, in fact, little change in what I have said in the past, that 95 percent of American organizations remain either completely unprepared or significantly under-prepared for crises. And my colleagues overseas report little better, and sometimes worse statistics.

Choose to be part of the prepared minority. Your stakeholders will appreciate it!





**If you don't want to burden yourself with a lot of unwanted scrutiny, try being transparent.**





## SECTION 8:

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**J**ONATHAN BERNSTEIN IS A HUSBAND, FATHER, INTERNET NERD, FOLK SINGER, ARCHER, FORMER investigative reporter, former military intelligence NCO, and one of the United States' most experienced crisis management professionals. For more than 25 years, as president of Bernstein Crisis Management, he has been meeting clients' needs in all aspects of crisis management – crisis response, vulnerability assessment, planning, training and simulations. In a *PR Week* article called “The Crunch-Time Counselors,” he was one of 22 individuals nationwide identified as “people who should be on the speed dial in a crisis.”

Jonathan is widely quoted by national and international media about breaking crises du jour, and publishes his own newsletter, *Crisis Manager*, written for “those who are crisis managers whether they want to be or not.”

Drop in on his website or blog for an ongoing education about all things crisis management:

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