DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS

How EDITORS CHOOSE *the* NEWS

IS IT NEW?

News, as the word implies, must be new and this is the most important criterion. News is about change, trends, and new developments, events that are different from the norm, information that people previously didn't know.

Ask yourself:

- What has changed in recent days/weeks/months related to the issues on which my agency works?
- What have I heard about changes are coming in the future?
- What trends are affecting the people/issues we work with?
- What have I heard from my staff that made me say, "That's interesting, I didn't know that."?
- What's going on in the community?
- What is my agency doing now that's a shift from the past?
- What research have we conducted recently? (Any research can be turned into news: if the topic was compelling enough for you to study it, the public would be interested in it to, and by definition you should have found out something new in your research.)

News stories don't have to be one-off events. In the minds of editors, different stories deserve different amounts of coverage, both in terms of the space/time allotted to them in an edition/program, and in terms of the frequency that the story will be covered. An ongoing issue can have "legs"—in other words, it is sufficiently interesting and complicated that it will be covered several times a month while it continues to develop or until there is a "resolution". Some stories are so hot that they are deemed to deserve daily coverage. Ask editors how much coverage your issue merits and try to make your releases and phone calls fit this time frame.

Don't issue a news release with every twist and turn of a story: editors get antagonistic towards people who try to get far more coverage of an issue than (they think) it deserves.

Some ways to give a story legs:

- **Offer fresh angles.** For instance, if it's an environmental campaign, suggest stories that look beyond strict environmental issues: how are First Nations affected? What about tourism? Educational opportunities?
- **Offer little "nuggets" of news** that can generate a little coverage. Did you find an interesting document in a freedom of information request? Has a politician shifted ground slightly on your issue? Try issuing a news release on Sunday, always a slower news day.

- **Suggest different approaches to the story**: Make a campaign leader available for a profile story. Publicize the results of a poll you conducted. Get a high-profile person to visit. Organize a public debate, and invite the media. Offer an exclusive in-depth interview with a researcher. Think laterally.

IS IT RELEVANT TO OUR AUDIENCE?

Issues and events that are relevant to people's lives qualify as news.

Ask yourself:

- How does your agency's work affect people's lives?
- How will people in your community be affected by the event?
- What tangible impact does this issue have on people?

Editors are always demanding that reporters do stories about events/issues that have an impact the lives of ordinary people. They want real people as "characters" in stories, not just officials and spokespersons. Find people from among your clients or your supporters who are willing to tell their story to the media.

Much of this is about how you portray your work or issue, what the media call *framing*. Think about framing your agency's work in terms of the benefit it has on the community. Frame your issue in a way that shows how and why it matters.

Proximity is one of the elements of relevance: editors search for news that is close to home. If you are a local agency, this will be to your advantage with the local media.

IS IT INTERESTING?

The above criteria are the most important, but they don't explain the preponderance of stories in our media about the Royal Family, American multiple murders and animals who perform bizarre stunts. Yet people read, watch and listen to them. Rather than despairing at this, think of how you can use this tendency to your advantage.

Ask yourself:

- Is there a personality who can help us attract media attention?
- Is there a way to humanize our story?

Don't bang your head against a wall with this: if your issue meets the first two criteria, it ought to be covered.

PREPARING *a* SPOKESPERSON

The Communicator's Commandment:
Identify your message. Know your message. Believe your message. Present your message directly. Summarize your message clearly

1. Be Available!
   - ALWAYS make sure your key spokesperson is available to comment whenever you send out a communication to the press.
2. Be Prepared!
   - ALWAYS be fully prepared to comment when you send out a communication to the press.
3. Know, and fully understand, why you want to talk to a reporter
   - Is it to inform, motivate, persuade, and entertain?
4. Know, and fully understand, why the reporter wants to talk to you
   - Preview the show or read the reporter's writing before you talk to her. If the interview is for media outside of your market, call an ally to get this information.
   - Do some background research on the interviewer. To the best of your ability, try to determine whether s/he has an 'agenda'.
5. Know what you want to say in one minute or less
   - If you can't summarize your news in one minute, it's too complicated or it lacks focus.
6. Be truly interested in your subject
   - If the subject does not intrigue you, you won't get the reporter interested either.
7. Believe in what you are addressing
   - If you are not entirely convinced about the statements you are communicating, you will not persuade the reporter, or readers, to support your position.
8. Know your subject intimately—forwards, backwards, upside down
   - Gather timely and extensive data related to your issue.
   - Cite evidence during the interview to back up your key points—sometimes data/research/statistics, sometimes anecdotal evidence, but always something tangible.
   - Offer to fax a background release or fact sheet containing this information, it makes it more likely the reporter will cite your data (and cite it accurately!)
   - Know what those who will argue your position will say, and address their points—be proactive, not reactive.
9. If you don't know an answer, never lie or make it up
   - Tell the reporter you'll get right back to them with the information they want, and do!
   - Or, give the reporter a contact who does know the answer. S/he will remember you as a cooperative and reliable source.

10. Prepare to answer two or three really tough questions
    - Think of questions you hope you won't be asked and prepare answers for them.

11. Know your top 1-3 clear, concise messages
    - Make positive statements.
    - Avoid defensive comments.
    - Talk in soundbites, keep answers short, do not over-answer.
    - Avoid acronyms, jargon and technical terms—remember who your audience is.
    - Use your organization's name, never "we" or "I".

12. Rehearse your delivery
    - Words written on paper often do not translate well when spoken—deliver your interview out loud to the mirror, to colleagues or people in the grocery store.
    - Practice 'bridging': answering a question about the past with an answer about the present, a question which would require you to make assumptions with an answer that addresses the facts, a question which is irrelevant with a message that addresses the reason you want media coverage.
    - For broadcast interviews, practice keeping your answers to about 20 seconds. Time yourself with a stopwatch, but don't look at it while you speak. You'll be surprised how quickly 20 seconds goes by, yet it's a long time on television.

13. In broadcast interviews:
    - Smile, sit erect and maintain open body language;
    - Use simple hand gestures;
    - Project energy;
    - Maintain eye contact — not 'camera contact';
    - Use the interviewer's name once near the beginning of the interview;
    - Keep your answers shorter than you think they should be. Sound bites rarely run beyond 20 seconds, 15 is average;
    - For television, dress conservatively. Don't wear stripes or small patterns, they go fuzzy on screen. Subdued "cool" colours lend a sense of authority; bright colours can make you seem less serious. Don't distract the viewer from your message by outlandish dress, unless of course that's part of your message;
    - If it's a studio interview, arrive early so you can get make-up;
    - If it's a field interview, ask the cameraperson if you can conduct it somewhere that fits with your message: with children playing behind you if it's about daycare cuts, under a tree if it's about logging, on the street if it's about the homeless. Try to avoid "behind-the-desk" interviews unless you want to look lie a bureaucrat;

14. In print interviews:
    - Pay attention to how the interviewer paraphrases you. Correct her if necessary.
    - Take time to clarify or elaborate.
    - Offer to follow-up with additional information.
    - Supply photos if possible.

INTERVIEW CHECKLISTS

PRE-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Before sitting down to do an interview, try to answer all of the following questions:

1. Who am I speaking to?
    - What is her name?
    - What is his bias?
2. What is his area of interest?
3. What has she written/produced on this or similar topics before?
4. What is the reporter's objective?
    - Is there a particular issue she'd like to cover?
    - Is he looking for 'dirt'?
    - Is this piece part of a larger series? What is the series about?
    - Who else is she interviewing for the piece?
5. Who is the Audience?
    - Local?
    - National?
    - Industry?
6. How much time/space will I have to get my point across?
    - One quote?
    - seconds?
    - minutes?
7. What are my 2 or 3 key messages?
8. What are the 3 worst questions I may be asked?
    - How can I best respond to these questions?

POST-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Following your interview, take a couple of minutes to evaluate your message delivery. Ask yourself, and ask others who were present, if your were able to:

1. Communicate your key messages
2. Avoid responding emotionally
3. Maintain control of the interview
4. Avoid repeating negative language, by turning answers to positives
5. Speak concisely and avoid using jargon
6. Use anecdotes
7. Avoid giving personal opinion
8. Use the interviewer's first name
9. Maintain eye contact and smile appropriately
10. Demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to your issue
11. Use effective, natural and appropriate body language

WHAT *to do* WHEN *a* REPORTER CALLS *and* CATCHES YOU UNPREPARED

A WORD OF CAUTION

If an agency has only one person who is "authorized" to talk to the media, and that person is away when a reporter calls, it gives a bad impression. Agencies should try to encourage any staff who are comfortable and familiar with the issues to talk to the media. This will require good planning and preparation of spokespeople. Any and all people speaking on behalf of your organization must be totally informed and practiced in the key messages you are trying to communicate.

Failing that ability, agencies should always designate an alternate spokesperson. Designated spokespersons should consider giving out their home or mobile phone numbers: you never know when a reporter might have a question that gives you an opportunity for free publicity, and the more accessible you are, the more likely a reporter is to call you. A pager is a good option – it is cheap and gives a bit of extra privacy.

IN ALL CASES

1. Find out what the story is about.
- Is it a general issue the reporter feels you are competent to comment on? (If you are—it's free advertising. If you're not, politely turn them down and use the opportunity to educate them about what your organization does.)
- Is it a story that is directly related to your organization? (Is there a potential for this story to damage you? Will it raise your profile? Consider before talking. If the reporter won't tell you, you don't have to deal with him.)

2. Ask for time.
- Don't be hesitant to say you'll need time to get a handle on the issue, consult with others in your organization, your board, experts, and so on.
- Determine the reporter's deadline and get back to them by that time. Even if you decide not to do an interview, it is critical that you let the reporter know so that he can find an alternative interviewee.

3. Prepare your answer.
- Consider what you want to get out of the coverage.
- Strengthen your story elements to make sure you achieve the profile you want from this free advertising

4. Call the reporter back.
- Be aware that he probably already has a story focus and your involvement may be heavily edited and / or peripheral. Regardless, if you said you'd call back, do. It cannot be emphasized enough that you are building relationships and every call, or broken promise, will impact on your future credibility and reputation with the media.

5. Be appreciative and helpful when reporters call.

- Again, you're developing relationships. Can you refer to them to somewhere else for a quote? Comment on just one portion of the story?

If you're misrepresented

- Consider how serious it is. If it's really bad, ask for a correction. If it's not, use it as an opportunity to educate and build relationships. Can you get a story out of this?
- Call and discuss at a time of day when reporters are less likely to be busy.
- If it's serious, ask for the editor or producer
- Call right away if it's radio; the story will likely run more than once and you want to stop it.

If reporters are calling to cover bad news about your organization

Defuse the situation by:

- Deciding what you can and can't discuss (there must be ***something*** you can discuss—and being available to provide some details will go a long way to reducing the appearance of being under siege).
- Making the parts you ***can*** discuss available as soon as possible.
- Having a rationale for the parts you ***can't*** discuss (it's under investigation; I don't have the facts right now, etc.).
- Calmly reiterating this rationale if you are pressed.
- Avoiding engaging in speculation.
- Keeping your cool.
- Looking for ways to turn bad news into good coverage. Is there something you wanted to publicize anyway? Can you develop relationships with reporters?

If there's bad news about your organization and reporters are NOT calling

- Decide if you want to try to alter the perception that has been created.
- If so, act quickly. Get a media release or some sort of response out ASAP—the same day the story first appears.
- Make it clear that you are at the centre of the story (implying that balanced news coverage requires that you are heard).
- Answer what you can and hold off on the rest. Mitigate any damage, and open the door to further communication.
- Use this as an opportunity to educate about your organization—make sure your media material has basic background information about you.
- Call the reporters who have covered the story and ask them why they have not called you. Tell them you feel this was a misrepresentation of the story and educate them about your organization or issue. If they are unresponsive, call their editor and ask why you were not called. Stand your ground but take the line of questioning rather than criticizing ("I'd like to understand why you didn't call; I believe you should balance this story with a follow up story that includes our point of view..." rather than, "Your journalism sucks.") Again, you are building relationships.

ON-AIR INTERVIEWS

Media Outlet	**Program**	
Contact Person		
Phone	**Fax**	**Email**
Interview Location		
Address & Cross Street		
Room Number & Floor		
Procedures in Lobby		
Transportation Details		

Interview Details

Taping Date	**Arrival Time**
Taping Time	**Length**
Reporter doing Interview	
Focus of Interview	
Names & Background of other guests	
Air Date and Time	

PRINT INTERVIEWS

Media Outlet

Reporter Doing Interview

Background

Phone **Fax** **Email**

Interview Date **Time**

In Person? Location

By Phone? Who will call whom?

Subject

Has the Reporter been briefed?

By Whom?

Materials sent in Advance

Expected Publication Date

Photo to be taken? Photo required?

MEDIA CALLS

Media Outlet

Contact Person, Title

Phone **Fax** **Email**

Contact Details

Date	**Time**	**Action (called… sent release… sent media kit… etc…)**