

Negative FMCG stories highlight importance of media skills



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Recent negative supermarket stories in New Zealand and Australia have shown how vital it is that spokespeople in the FMCG industry are prepared for that unwanted story that can thrust them into the national media spotlight without warning.

Most leaders are great communicators. That's probably why they became leaders. But media interviews are like no other form of communication. Most leaders treat them as Q&As with the reporter or presenter. They simply answer the question asked of them and then wait for the next one. That may seem to be the correct approach because it's how we communicate in every other part of our life.

A media interview is different

But a media interview is a different ball game. You need your own message and the skills to get it across. Otherwise the reporter has all the power, and you have no way of influencing what is covered or what parts of the interview are used in the news stories that follow.

It also makes you more likely to get misquoted or quoted out of context. With print media interviews and all broadcast interviews that aren't live, only snippets will make it into the subsequent story. That's why you need the skills to continually refer back to your own message to make sure it's the focus of these snippets.

Recent media interviews with FMCG spokespeople on both sides of the Tasman



show that this isn't universally understood by the industry, or that the spokespeople haven't been trained and put through their paces well before an issue erupts.

In a nutshell, you need to create your own message that you want the reporter to use. This must still be of interest to the media audience, be clear and brief. You then dress it up by using interesting language like analogies and examples. This then becomes attractive to the reporter because it will interest readers, viewers or listeners.

There is more to this than can be explained in a few sentences, but the key is to have a message that satisfies yourself and the person asking the questions. You then keep referring back to it as mentioned above. That's your plan.

The ability for spokespeople to do this is vital, particularly when the stakes are high. It takes practice, but once mastered is valuable to any media spokesperson and their business. There are also techniques to deal with difficult questions and avoid traps that often aren't even known until the subsequent story comes out.

The problem with untrained spokespeople

There are two big problems with FMCG businesses not having skilled spokespeople. These have all become evident through examples this year.

The obvious one is that they have no message and therefore no control in the interview. This often leads to them being quoted out of context because the interviewer will only quote one or two sentences of what could be a 15-minute chat. This doesn't happen if they focus on a specific message and communicate that in different ways throughout.

The other big problem is common. If no-one has the expertise to front for TV news, all possible spokespeople run for the hills. This is hugely serious, particularly if it's a sensitive issue, because showing empathy through a brief statement doesn't work on TV. It appears as if no-one cares, and this does massive reputational damage.

Final word

The key is to have trained spokespeople who are competent, confident and ready to go at short notice. It's the only way to secure that all important reputation.

As Warren Buffett famously said: "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it." **FMCG**