

NEWS MEDIA SKILLS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Many aged care industry leaders have been the subject of unfavourable news coverage over recent years, largely because they have been unaware of the changing needs of the news media in the digital age.



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Most leaders in the industry steer clear of the media like the plague for fear of being misquoted, quoted out of context, or humiliated at the hands of an aggressive interviewer. This fear is nothing new, but many are unaware of the changes they have needed to make when dealing with reporters since the advent of social media and the growth of other technology.

Speed of response

An important change is the speed with which you must respond to media requests, particularly when it's an issue that could damage your reputation or that of your business. This could be an allegation about staff that are likely to be false, or something more serious like a minivan crash causing death or serious injury to residents.

I often hear clients say the media is not a priority and journalists can wait. I agree that in an emergency or crisis, other stakeholders are the priority. However, the media must be a close second for good reason. Firstly, the media will produce stories about your issue whether you are in them or not. If you are not available, the story will probably be one-sided against you and be full of misinformation or speculation. Your contribution is likely to read something like, "The CEO refused to comment." You'll agree that is not a great look, even if you are busy doing more important things. The story will then spread through social media like wildfire where you will be accused of either not knowing what is happening, or not caring. This will damage your reputation and bottom line.

Before the advent of social media and online news, you only had to worry about tonight's television news bulletin or tomorrow's daily newspaper. Today a story will be up on news websites within minutes and scattered through social media channels. You need to be in it, even if it's just showing empathy for a victim or explaining how you are resolving the situation. It's a different ballgame. Many aged care businesses have been burnt by this speed of news distribution.

The answer is to know how to prepare a message quickly and have messages ready go at a moment's notice on issues that could blow up.

Short messages

All aged care owners and managers should have received formal media interview training. There will be times when you need to front up to media interviews – you can't always hide



Do you or your staff care for people who are at end-of-life?

"I have become a lot more confident, my communication skills are better when talking about death and dying. I learned a lot about symptom management."
– Nurse

"I feel more comfortable talking and working with patients that are terminal" – AIN

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behind prepared statements. Those who have been trained understand how to prepare for a media interview and how to get their points through media gatekeepers and into stories. The best spokespeople usually do annual refresher courses.

However, people who have completed a media training workshop did so some years ago before these rules changed. If this is you, the trainer may have told you to come up with a few messages you want to get across in the interview. This is good advice, but over recent years the length of those messages have needed to drop dramatically. Some media trainers told clients to come up with three key messages that lasted no longer than 60 seconds between them.

If your messages are that long these days, you could get into trouble. The average sound bite on television and radio news is now around seven or eight seconds. That means your three messages should each be about this length. You need to break them down to their absolute core.

If you can't do this, often the reporter or editor will do it for you. They may only use half of your point. That could change the context or make you look incompetent. The other possibility is that the reporter tries to paraphrase what you said. This is usually when spokespeople get misquoted. The answer is to be as brief as possible. Then there is less for the reporter to choose from.

Your message must still be of interest to the reporter and you must still answer their questions. However, it's important to have your own messages and know how to get them across in a way that satisfies the reporter.

Media skills for day-to-day business

Media relations is not the only area where messages are more difficult to get across in the digital age. We are now bombarded with thousands of messages a day. The question is, which ones will be retained by our stakeholders? This is relevant for board meetings, presentations and the growing popularity of video as a business communication tool.

Media skills are the best way to win this battle in all business environments. The key is to break a message down to its core and communicate it in an attractive way. This can be done in the form of analogies, stories, the use of emotion and other ways. This is something that great communicators do, but it's rare. Think of the last presentation you sat through at a conference. What can you remember about it? I bet it's very little.

In a nutshell, aged care leaders need to know the new rules of media relations in the digital age as an insurance policy against reputation damage, while these same skills can help them communicate better with other stakeholders. ■

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