FRANCHISE UNDER FIRE
how to handle the media

Media trainer Pete Burdon offers some tips for franchisors and franchisees who might find themselves in the spotlight when something goes wrong or right

As franchises grow, they are increasingly likely to find themselves making the headlines. Sometimes that's for all the right reasons, as with Hell's award for providing training for intellectually-disabled youngsters (see page 16), or for the wrong reasons, as when a KiwiYo employee was asked not to greet customers with 'Kia ora'.

Earlier this year, Franchise New Zealand *presented a session for Franchise Association members which took a look at some local examples. At the recent Franchise Conference, Columbus Coffee also shared their own experience of inaccurate social media claims being picked up by local papers. If such situations aren't properly handled, the potential for damage to a franchise brand and franchisees' businesses is enormous.*

Pete Burdon's new book contains invaluable advice for anyone wanting to generate positive publicity or manage negative reports. In this extract, he focuses on one of the situations that many people find difficult to handle – what to do when a reporter thrusts a microphone in your face.

interview landmines to avoid

In negative situations, you may be asked by a reporter to give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. In some situations, there's no problem with this but in others, you can get yourself into trouble by giving such a black or white answer.

For example, if a worker had been killed in a factory accident, you could be asked, 'Could another worker suffer a similar fate, yes or no?' You can't say 'no' because it's always a possibility, regardless of how unlikely, but if you say 'yes', you could be in even more trouble.

This is where a media interview is different from any other conversation. You may believe the best answer is, 'Yes, it's possible we will have another similar accident but our safety precautions are among the best in the world and the chances of a repeat are almost impossible.'

In any other context, that would be a perfectly reasonable answer. The problem is that you have no idea what part of that answer will make it into an edited story. It's possible that the headline could read something like, 'Factory boss admits another fatality could be just around the corner' with the second part of your answer being totally ignored.

What about the alternative? If you said 'no', your answer would lack credibility. Your audience would know that's untrue and you could also be accused of failing to take the issue seriously.

The best way to deal with these situations is to create your own answer and say something like, 'Safety is our top priority and the precautions we take are among the best in the world.' If that doesn't satisfy the reporter and he asks you again, you just have to repeat the answer. If you're asked a third time, you need to say something like, 'I believe I've answered your question.'

Another common question is to be asked for a guarantee. In this same example, the reporter may ask you, 'Can you guarantee this won't happen again?' You clearly can't guarantee that but in this situation, you can use the word 'guarantee' in your answer. You could say, 'What I can guarantee is that safety is our top priority and our precautions are among the best in the world.'

Bear in mind that most reporters won't go for this sensationalism, but some will and there are lots of cases where this has happened. You'll see an example in the chapter on crisis communication.

Charity box stolen from...
Teen sacked for sharing lunch
Slug found in burger – again
Third franchisee fails
Worker injuries 'not our problem' says franchisor
Te Reo banned in fast food outlet

Always remember to bridge back to your key points after tough questions like this. It's easy to forget about them when you're under the pump but they are the points you want to get across in your interview. It's also the best tactic to get the interviewer away from a dangerous area and back to safer ground.

never use negative language

Many spokespeople, whether in high profile positions or novices, fall into the trap of using negative language. I mentioned earlier how journalists producing news stories need you to answer in complete sentences. There's one exception to this and it's an important one.

Never repeat negative language – always choose a positive alternative. For example, let's say you're the CEO of a company in the middle of a major strike by your workers. A reporter could say to you, 'You have terrible workplace relations policies, don't you?'

Your natural reaction would be to start your response with, 'We don't have terrible workplace relations policies.' The problem with that is you've just given the reporter an exciting negative quote to base his entire story on. That statement could be used as the headline of the story or as the story's major quote or sound bite.

It'll then be negative towards you and based on your denial. If you used a positive statement in response, the story could become positive. You could have responded with, 'The benefits we give our staff are well above industry standards and we're proud of how we deal with staff.' You can see how much more positive that sounds, while also answering the question. Instead of a negative denial, you're saying something positive about your business.

There are famous examples from history where experienced leaders used negative language that's worked against them. Richard Nixon's 'I'm not a crook,' is the best example, closely followed by Bill Clinton's, 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.' Don't fall into the same trap.

don't speculate

Reporters will always ask spokespeople to speculate. They're just doing their job and there will be times when speculation is quite appropriate. For example, the local reporter might ask you what you think the score will be in the World Cup Final. Giving your view is unlikely to harm anyone, unless such an answer could create political implications.

However, in more serious circumstances, it's best not to get drawn into the speculation game. This is particularly so when it's a negative issue. For example, let's say you're a big employer in a small town during an economic recession and you've already said redundancies are possible. A reporter asks you, 'If redundancies do come, who'll be the first workers to go?' Until you know exactly what will happen and exactly who'll lose their jobs, you'd be asking for trouble by answering that question. Imagine the headlines in the following day's newspaper. Your answer would be sensationalised. You'd also see reporters visit those workers who you'd mentioned. Your best way to deal with this is to bridge away and go back to a key point. For example, you could say something like, 'That'd be mere speculation. Our focus is on surviving the economic downturn so we can keep everyone employed.'

Once you've decided who'll be made redundant and you've broken the news to those workers, you're best to inform the media quickly.

face up to loaded questions

Loaded questions include an assumption. For example, a reporter may ask, 'Since your business has an issue with employing women, don't you think you should change your policy towards gender equality?' Clearly, the reporter has asked that question on the assumption that it's common knowledge that your business doesn't like employing women.

If you fail to dispute the first part of that question and only respond to the second, you've just agreed with the assumption. Whatever the type of interview, you must challenge incorrect assumptions. You could say, 'I dispute the premise of the question. We welcome female employees into our business' and remember not to use negative language. The most obvious answer would be, 'We don't have an issue with employing women' which would be fine in any other context but not a media interview.

if the interviewer goes off topic

You've prepared your media message, accompanying sound bites and the interview's going well when suddenly the reporter asks you a question totally unrelated to the topic you agreed to talk about. What do you do? The answer to this depends on whether it's something that's just happened and you couldn't be expected to know more, in which case it's quite acceptable to say you'll need to see the details before you can comment. Say that you are happy to get back to the reporter and make sure you do.

If the new question is about something commonly known, you should offer a brief comment followed by a bridge back to one of your key points. For example, let's say you're the leader of a political party and your interview is about your party's push for a higher minimum wage. Then the reporter asks you about recent criticism of your party's support of same sex marriage. For example, 'Why does your party support same sex marriage?' You could answer, 'We believe everyone should be equal before the law but what I'm here to talk to you about is the need for us to support those workers who are still living in poverty.'

what's your personal opinion?

Reporters in today's world love using emotion in their stories. You often see presenters ask reporters at the scene of a disaster how the event has affected them personally. They'll first ask about the latest information on the disaster, then they often ask about the emotional impact it had on the reporter.

This is a major change in journalism. Reporters have traditionally been strictly suppliers of fact and other people's opinions. Their personal feelings have been irrelevant.

This concept of personal opinions and feeling has now shifted to official spokespeople. If you speak for a specific organisation, you're used to answering media questions based on your professional position but now some reporters have begun a trend in asking about your personal opinion. For example, let's say you're a spokesperson for the tobacco industry. A reporter challenges you about your industry's failure to recognise the safety risk of smoking. As spokesperson, you may reply that the industry has recognised the safety risks and has a number of programmes in place to address these. You may then mention a few examples.

But then the reporter may ask if you personally think the industry is doing enough to stop young people taking up the habit. If you don't, you may be tempted to say that you think more needs to be done. You then say that it's your personal opinion and doesn't represent the views of the industry.

As I'm sure you're aware, that won't work. You'll have just given the reporter a fantastic story angle. The headline would read something like, 'Tobacco industry spokesperson at odds with policy.'

You can't distinguish between your opinion and that of your employer. So how should you respond? You simply say you're speaking on behalf of your industry and bridge to another key point. If pushed, repeat your answer.

If you feel uncomfortable doing this because you have a differing opinion, you need to decide whether the job is suitable for you.

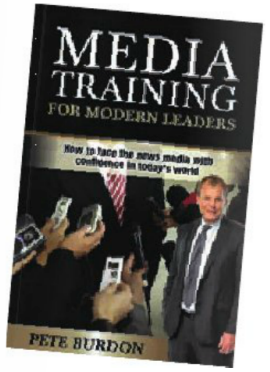
what's changed in the digital age?

The risk of falling into these traps has grown in the digital age because organisations and individuals have so many communication platforms. While you should avoid using negative language in media interviews, it's also sensible to avoid it when posting to social media or on your website. The media have access to all of this information and they are quite entitled to quote you from these sources.

The same goes for your personal opinion. Keep any disagreement you have with your employer to yourself or at least off social media otherwise you may find it on the front page of your local newspaper.

This final point in this chapter applies even more within the franchisor-franchisee relationship, where not just the brand image but also legal outcomes may be affected by hasty, intemperate or ill-considered postings. While franchise agreements may have clauses requiring franchisees not to speak to the media, it can be difficult for them to avoid it – and even more difficult to manage postings by individuals – not just franchisees but their staff, too, on social media.

GET THE BOOK



Pete Burdon's book *Media Training for Modern Leaders* is essential reading for franchisors looking to manage and improve their media profile, be prepared for tricky situations which arise (whether caused by the franchise itself, by a franchisee or a supplier), and improve the presentation of their brand.

Its 14 chapters cover topics from *How to handle approaches from the media* and *Making your message more media-friendly*, to *Answering questions*, *When crisis strikes* and *What if you're misquoted?* Specific sections within chapters on *What's changed in the digital age* cover websites and social media, too.

Media Training for Modern Leaders is available from Amazon or via www.PeteBurdon.com for $29.95. In Australia, it's also available at Dymocks and Angus and Robertson.

about the author

Pete Burdon is an experienced journalist, a highly sought-after media trainer and presenter and an accomplished author. He has trained countless corporate executives and entrepreneurs as well as leaders in local and national government, and is an active member of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand.