

News media skills for the digital age

Every CEO and senior leader needs to know the new rules of media relations in the age of social media and online technologies. By Pete Burdon.

Many business leaders have been the subject of unfavourable news coverage over recent years purely because they have been unaware of the changing needs of the news media in the digital age.

Most leaders 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 leaders are unaware of the changes they have needed to make when dealing with reporters in the age of social media and other online 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.

I often hear clients say the news media is not a priority and they 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 could 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.

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 have been burnt by this speed of news distribution.

The answer is to know how to prepare messages quickly and have them ready to go at a moment's notice on issues that could blow up. For example, any large business that holds confidential client information should have messages and a media statement ready to send out

in the event of a data breach. Or a corporate that has workers in dangerous roles at the coalface should be ready to communicate a death or serious injury in a matter of minutes. What should you be ready for?

Shortness of message

All leaders should have been through a media training workshop and many have. That's because there will be times when you need to front up to media interviews.

You can't always hide behind prepared statements. Those who understand the media interview process and practice regularly know how to get their points through media gatekeepers and into stories.

However, many leaders 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 around 60 seconds.

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.

Keep in mind with this that 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.

Skype interviews

Skype is becoming more popular with the news media as an interview device. Most of the principles you would be shown in any media

training session are relevant to Skype. However, there are some important differences.

Firstly, when a television crew comes to your office for an interview or you go to a studio, they are responsible for sound, lighting and background. However, with Skype you are on your own.

If you want to look credible, you'll need to give this some thought or get professional advice. How many times have you seen a Skype interview on television where the light is too bright in the background or the webcam from the spokesperson's computer is clearly at the wrong level?

A big difference between television and Skype is body movement. I always encourage my media training clients to gesture with their hands. It improves the tone of their voice and makes them come across as more credible.

However, you need to be cautious when moving your body during a Skype interview. Depending on your bandwidth, your movements can look staggered and in separate frames, rather than in real time like television. The best idea is to test this with a colleague before your interview. Then you will know how much body movement to use.

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 only 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 the ability 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 many other elements. 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. This reminds me of a great quote

from George Bernard Shaw. "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

In a nutshell, 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. **M**

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