

Loss of context

— why media interviews are like no other conversation

By Pete Burdon

Principals are usually great communicators and competent speakers. That's partly why they got into their leadership positions. But they can get into trouble in media interviews because they assume they are like any other conversation. The fact of the matter is, media interviews require an entirely new set of skills.

How many times have you heard someone complain of being taken out of context? Most of the time, this happens because they don't understand the important distinction between media interviews and other conversations.

Apart from live television and radio interviews, every time you speak to a journalist, you risk being taken out of context. This is just the nature of journalism.

It's because a journalist will only use snippets of the interview in their subsequent story. They don't have the space for more. You may speak for 30 minutes and only 30 seconds of your conversation may be used.

Speech lessons

This is totally different to giving a speech. Here you can build one idea on another, referencing something you said earlier to highlight a point. People in the audience get to hear the whole speech, so you can do this.

You don't have that luxury when you are talking to the media. You never know what parts of your interview will be used. That means everything you say must make sense on its own and not be reliant on things you say before or after each point you make.

For example, in a real life conversation, if someone said to you, "How does it feel to have a major bullying problem at your school?" It would be fine for you to say, "We don't have a major bullying problem. We've recently put in some

initiatives to stop bullying in its tracks and we haven't had any problems for the last 18 months".

The problem with this response in a media context is that the journalist may take the first part of that answer alone, so the story could focus entirely on, "Principal denies major bullying problem," and not use the rest of the answer. This makes for a negative denial story and implies some shadiness on your part.

Not every journalist will do this, but some will and it's best not to give them the chance.

Positive responses

Without the control of context, you would be better to answer with a positive statement only. "We're very happy with the recent initiatives we put in place to stop bullying and we haven't had any problems for the last 18 months."

With this response, the reporter doesn't have a negative option and can't take you out of context.

The most famous example of this was Richard Nixon when giving his speech during Watergate. He explained how he had never profited from the presidency and he had earned every cent. This was followed by the words, "I'm not a crook."

I don't need to tell you which part of that speech was used by the media. In a nutshell, if you don't want it used, do not say it in any context.

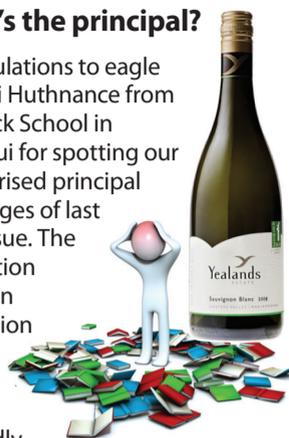
Pete Burdon is managing director of **Media Training NZ**, a company specialising in training principals and other groups how to communicate effectively with the media in a crisis and other situations. Contact him at info@mediatrainingnz.co.nz or through www.mediatraining.co.nz



And the winners are...

Where's the principal?

Congratulations to eagle eyes Judi Huthnance from Brunswick School in Wanganui for spotting our characterised principal in the pages of last term's issue. The competition was run in conjunction with Yealands Estate, who kindly provided the prize — a case (12 bottles) of wine. Your case is on the way Judi — enjoy!



Plan 2 Survive survival kit

Congratulations to laneta Falevaai who teaches at Owairaka Primary School in Mt Albert, Auckland on winning the Plan 2 Survive survival kit valued at \$850. This kit includes enough food, water, shelter and warmth for 25-30 students and comes with a portable toilet. Your survival kit is on the way.



Cleaning up your act

To go in the draw to win an environmentally friendly Healthy Home Bucket from the Ecostore, entrants had to submit a short blurb about what they've done to become more sustainable this year.

Kathryn Hooper of Highlands Intermediate School in New Plymouth took out the honours and won her school a Healthy Home Bucket. These buckets include a wide range of home cleaning and body care products.

This is what Kathryn said about her school's push to be more environmentally friendly:

"Highlands Intermediate School has been very proactive this year in becoming a sustainable school."

"We have planted over 200 native trees on the school grounds and in the gardens to both provide and enhance

an environment that encourages wildlife and bird life.

"The students have also made a large worm farm, where all the school's food scraps at the end of the day, that have been collected from 22 classrooms, are put to feed the worms and make good compost."

"In school itself we have a special 'Green Team' which is a group of around 12 students who have specific duties to maintain the sustainability around the school."

"They collect paper for recycling and empty these each day for the recycling bin and generally focus on ensuring the school is kept clean and tidy."

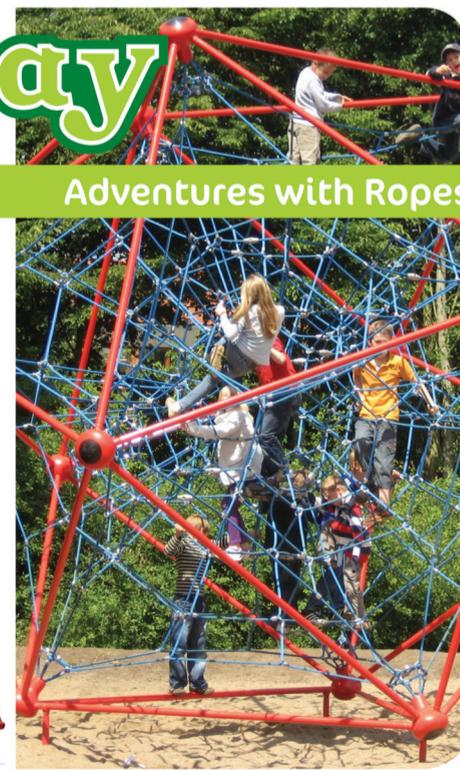
"We have made real effort to make Highlands a sustainable school."

Congratulations to Kathryn and Highlands Intermediate for taking sustainability seriously.

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