

Being a media figure

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Introduction

"We must express the view, based on our empirical observations, that a substantial number of journalists are ignorant, lazy, opinionated, and intellectually dishonest. The profession is heavily cluttered with aged hacks toiling through a miasma of mounting decrepitude and often alcoholism, and even more so with arrogant and abrasive youngsters who substitute 'commitment' for insight."

And that was said by someone *inside* the media. It was actually said by Conrad Black, the owner of, amongst others, *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*. So he should know.

Alas the views of Lord Black of Crossharbour (as he now is) are (a) not uncommon and, even more unfortunately (b) not that far from the truth. Knowing this can be of great use to you when dealing with the press.

Almost everything you have heard about journalists is true:

- Most journalists are extremely self-opinionated. But they have to be. People buy magazines and newspapers, and watch or listen to the news, to be told what is going on. They don't do it to be presented with a sweep of facts and told to pick-and-choose the ones they want. It takes a certain self-belief that your version of events is right and the Prime Minister, President or CEO is wrong.
- Most journalists are not very knowledgeable. There is a huge gulf between trade journalists and those working on popular titles. General reporters are mostly five-minute experts. They have little prior knowledge of the subject and will be desperate to find someone who can explain it to them. Trade hacks may well be extremely knowledgeable, especially if they have been around for a while. There are trade journalists who without a doubt will know vastly more about your subject than you do.
- Most journalists are lazy. No truer than the rest of the population, but if you do meet one, then use it to your advantage. A lazy journalist is going to be looking for someone to do all the work for them. If you give them everything they need they are less likely to look elsewhere for their information, and that way it is your view that they will present.
- Most journalists have a too-well read copy of *All the President's Men*. So many journalists, and it seems to be a particular fault of the technology press, see themselves as the next Woodward and Bernstein, tackling the corporate liars who are their simply to put them off the trail. The fact is that most companies tell mostly the truth most of the time. Sure there are the Enrons of this world, and even perfectly upright and decent companies who have been known to be, in that phrase of Alan Clarke, a little "economical with the *verité*"

These four facts are important, because they will give you some very strong tips on how to deal with the press.

But there are many, many pitfalls for the unwary, so a health warning. If you are talking to the press because you wish to launch a new product or announce an appointment, in other words you are going out to them, then by and large you may well not need too much training. The worst that is likely to happen is that you will get no coverage at all. It is highly unlikely that you will get trashed in the papers.

But if you are talking to the press because your company has a factory that has exploded, or your company is in an industrial tribunal, or a director has been arrested for embezzlement or some other disaster has befallen you and you have 20 journalists from every national newspaper and TV station outside your door, then get professional help urgently. One false statement and you could land yourself and your company in huge amounts of trouble. Alas, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time can happen to the best of us. For example:

- When Dr Michael Stonebraker, then chief technology officer at Informix, took to the stage at the company's 1996 user group conference, he probably didn't realise how fateful the moment would be. Taking a question from a user about the ability of Informix' new database server to run effectively at speed, Stonebraker admitted that customers could have it fast or they could have it reliable, but not both.

His faux pas was gleefully reported by the attendant press, prompting a decline in the company's share price that resulted in the resignation of the CEO and a long spell in the financial doldrums.

- Steve Ballmer, now CEO of Microsoft, observed to a journalist that most technology companies, including his own, were overvalued; and sure enough, the company's value fell by 5% overnight.
- Richard Branson, everyone's favourite millionaire, explained the renaming of Virgin Trains in the *Independent on Sunday* by asserting that his trains were 'f*****'. And what reputation does Virgin Trains have now?

And most famously, high-street jeweller Gerald Ratner in 1991. A remark about one of his products being 'crap' and having a lifespan less than that of a Marks and Spencer prawn sandwich was intended to illustrate the perfectly valid observation that there was money to be made at the low end of the market. Instead, his colourful phrasing cost him his company, and hundreds of people their jobs.

Here is one thing to remember when talking to the press. They need you as much as you need them. With pages to fill and readers to inform and entertain, all journalists are looking for people who can add something genuinely new to a debate, provide a lucid explanation of a product or service or build a convincing defence of a decision or strategy. Good spokespeople are experts, educators, opinion-formers, controversy-generators, humourists and even, occasionally, visionaries. They speak with clarity, confidence and context. In the process, they enhance their companies' and their own reputations, sell more products and even raise their share prices.

The Ten Commandments

1. **Think about who you're talking to.**

The most cursory glance of the shelves in W.H. Smith will highlight the first problem that spokespeople face — the sheer number of publications that now cover technology in one form or another. Technology is no longer the sole preserve of the computer magazines — woman's magazines, national newspapers, business titles and even the most resolutely specialist consumer magazines all now cover it in one form or another. Trying to develop a one-size-fits-all story to encompass all these is a waste of time — make sure that you spend some time preparing a story that is likely to appeal to the readers in question.

2. **Don't prejudge the journalist.**

Very few of the people currently writing about the technology world made a conscious decision to forge careers as technology journalists. You are much more likely to be interviewed by a 22-year-old with a degree in mediaeval history than by someone who has any experience of the stuff they're actually writing about. At least as importantly, very few journalists have any experience of running a business, which makes the job of explaining the mechanics of your industry or the underlying business strategies significantly harder. Many spokespeople are unhappy when they discover journalists' uncanny ability to get hold of the wrong end of just about any stick, so be prepared to explain how things work and why, rather than just telling us what you do.

3. **Work hard.**

Journalists are deluged with information. The busiest magazine and newspaper offices receive several hundred press releases a day. Add to this dozens of daily approaches from PR companies telling bad stories about indifferent clients or offering pointless lunches with self-important American executives; an incessant stream of invitations to press conferences and drinks parties; a mass of information from the Web. In a climate like this, being seen — let alone actually heard — suddenly becomes a lot harder. If you don't make a big effort, you'll disappear into the noise.

4. **Summarise.**

Most interviews take place on the telephone, as nobody has time to spend all day in meetings. On the phone, you have no control over how long the interview will last — if you're boring or don't get your point across early on in the conversation, you'll almost certainly be cut off, especially when talking to busy news journalists with tight deadlines. Practice distilling your story into a three or four-sentence version that you can use right at the beginning of the interview to engage the journalist's interest. Never start with a five minute overview of the company.

5. **Speak clearly.**

The technology world is full of expressions and jargon that most human beings simply won't understand. The vast majority of people have never *leveraged* anything, picked *low-hanging fruit*, experienced a *paradigm shift* or *integrated an end-to-end solution*. One technology journalist used to make a point of asking CEOs and others at press

conferences if his company had a "Paradigm shift", making a point of pronouncing the "d" and "g". Executives were never to certain if he knew what the word meant or was simply poking fun. It was a point well made.

It's worth thinking about the approach of magazines such as *The Economist*, which values clarity almost as highly as it values the quality of its analysis. Learn to explain things clearly using simple words, and you'll have a much easier time.

6. Think for yourself.

If a journalist wants marketing puff, they can get it from your company report, your Web site, your PR people or the people in your marketing department. What they can't get from them is your view of the world, and the pithy quotes that bring articles to life. It's particularly worth avoiding statements from the Mandy Rice-Davies School: those things that make readers and journalists alike think "Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?". An oft-heard example of this, usually dressed up as a 'key message' by the marketeers: "We aim to be the number-one supplier of widgets to consumers". Of course you do: that's why you're in business, right?

7. Know your business.

An astonishing number of people can't tell the most basic facts about their business or their markets. An inability to reel off facts about numbers of customers or subscribers, size of markets or anecdotal evidence about trends can make you look stupid and severely damage the credibility of your proposition. If you're not sure what figures you can give, check the corporate policy and work out what you can say. Never say 'No comment' or 'I'm afraid I can't give you those figures'. The hack will find someone else who can.

8. Recognise the competition.

Whether you like it or not, journalists are acutely aware of your competitors, and will almost certainly talk to them at some point; maybe for the same article in which you hope to appear. If you ignore their existence or refuse to talk about them, you're giving them a fantastic opportunity to put the boot in while giving yourself no opportunity to defend yourself. If in doubt, treat them generically; say things like 'The thing most people selling widgets don't understand about this market is...'

9. Enjoy it.

Most bad spokespeople adopt the traditional rabbit-in-headlights approach to being interviewed. The good ones recognise that they have an opportunity to share their expertise, make themselves sound intelligent and tell a good story. In the process, they actually look like they're enjoying themselves, or are at least comfortable with the process. There is no better way to inspire confidence.

10. Ignore all of this advice, except in the deepest crises.

Remember that the worst thing that usually happens is that you get no coverage, rather than the savaging you expect — and the way to avoid that is to be interesting.

Press Releases

Ask most journalists the biggest pain in their lives and after much prompting, they will tell you it is press releases. An editor on a trade magazine or technology journalist on a newspaper will probably get in excess of 100 press releases a day. So how do you make yours stick out?

A press release is one of the primary ways you can communicate news about your company to the media. Reporters, editors, and producers are hungry for news, and they often depend on releases to tip them off to new and unusual products, company trends, tips and hints, and other developments.

But what happens if your company has some earth-shattering news it wants to communicate, something which you are sure will be of interest to readers, how do you get your press release read in the deluge?

Use these 10 tips to write a release that will get noticed.

- 1. Use an active headline to grab the reporter's attention**
The headline makes your release stand out. Keep it short, active, and descriptive; in other words, use something like "man bites dog" instead of "dog receives injury thanks to man." Most reporters spend less than 10 seconds reading a press release. One editor, only half-jokingly, requested that press releases be put in see-through envelopes so you wouldn't have to waste time opening it.
- 2. Put the most important information at the beginning**
This is a tried and true rule of journalism. The reporter should be able to tell what the release is about from the first two paragraphs. In fact, chances are that's all they may read. So don't hide good information. And remember the six questions that every release must answer — Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.
- 3. Avoid hype and unsubstantiated claims**
A competent hack can smell a sales puff a mile away. Instead of making over-inflated statements, provide usable facts. Find legitimate ways to set you and your company apart and stress those points. To promote your business, write a release that answers questions about your business, rather than one that provides only general statements about how great or interesting your business is without saying why.
- 4. Be active and to the point**
Use language that will get the reader as excited about your news as you are. If your release is boring or meandering, they may assume that you will not be a good interview.
- 5. Keep your release to two pages or less**
On the rare occasion, you can opt for a third page if it is necessary to provide critical details. Otherwise, if you can't state your message in two pages, you're not getting to the point.
- 6. Include a contact**
Make sure your release has a person the journalist can contact for more information. This person should be familiar with all the news in the release, and should be ready to answer questions. And issue the release on your company letterhead — it looks professional and gives the writer another way to reach your firm. At the end of the release include a single paragraph "About Widget plc", mention especially any information about products or services which help establish your expertise. Also mention your location, years in business, etc. Keep it short; don't include the annual report.
- 7. Keep jargon to the minimum**
If you're in a technical field, try not to use technical terms. Many reporters are not as intimate with your company or your industry as you are. Real English, not jargon, best communicates your story. Don't use ANY of the following: Synergy, Strategic Fit, Gap Analysis, Best Practice, Bottom Line, Revisit, Bandwidth, Hardball, Out of the Loop, Benchmark, Value-Added, Proactive, Win-Win, Think Outside the Box, Fast Track, Result-Driven Empower [or] Empowerment, Knowledge Base, Total Quality [or]

Quality Driven, Touch Base, Mindset, Client Focus, Ball Park, Game Plan, Leverage, integrated, cost-effective, leading-edge, world-class.

The word 'solution' is a bugbear for many journalists, use it sparingly for the trade press, and avoid entirely for the main stream press. For most journalists a solution is something you put your teeth in.

8. **Stress benefits**

This falls into the category of "don't say it, show it." Avoid saying something is "unique" or "the best." Instead, show how people will benefit - i.e. save time, save money, make their life easier, etc.

9. **Be specific and detailed**

Marcia Yudkin, author of "Six Steps to Free Publicity" calls this the "Yes, but what IS it?" syndrome. The reader needs to be able to visualize a new product, or know how a new service works. If in doubt, have someone unfamiliar with your product or service read the release and ask them to describe what you trying to publicize. And it's better to use too many details than too few. So, as Yudkin notes, "Instead of 'Jackson's new book contains information designed to benefit any stock market investor,' write, 'Jackson's new book contains seven principles of market analysis that enable even casual investors to choose profitable stocks.' Even better, describe two of the seven principles right in the release."

10. **Proofread**

When you've finished your press release, remember to proofread it for typographical errors. If you don't have a good eye for spelling or grammar, give the release to a friend or colleague who does. If your release looks sloppy and careless, so will you.

As a post script, find out how the writer wants to receive the release — some prefer actual printed releases, others via email, some still prefer fax.