

How to foolproof yourself when a reporter calls

By Jeff Bloch

Yippee! After all those press releases you've doggedly sent to your local newspaper, the business reporter finally is calling to ask about the new manager you hired. Or if you're not so lucky, it's the health reporter who wants to confirm that your cafeteria served up an outbreak of food poisoning yesterday.

Whether the query is positive or negative, are you prepared to take that call? Sure, you might think, it's my company, so I know everything there is to say. But can you say it in 15 minutes (or 15 seconds on television)? And can you tell the story you want the world to know--even when the reporter doesn't ask the right questions?

I've been on both sides of the phone, first as a reporter for the Miami Herald and Forbes, and in the last decade as a media trainer for thousands of executives. The biggest complaint I hear from those who meet the press is that the reporter missed their point. But that's usually not the reporter's fault. A reporter's job is to talk to a lot of people--each with a different point of view--and then combine the most interesting elements into an article that can't possibly do everyone justice and probably is written on a tight deadline.

Your job, on the other hand, is not simply to answer the reporter's questions. You have particular points you want to get across, and you must do that in a way that makes the reporter want to recount them. Here are some guidelines that will help you think through the issues ahead of time.

Know your story. What is the headline you hope to see? Focus your broad knowledge of your subject into three or four key messages. Your goal is to communicate those themes early and often and get the basics across in just a few sentences.

If you're talking about a new product, for example, you might explain why the marketplace needs a new solution, describe the product and how it works, and point out why your company has the ability to make the launch a success. Or if the issue is a proposed hike in your local sales tax, you might say how much your business and others already contribute, explain how your business would be affected, point out the negative implications for consumers, and perhaps suggest alternative ways of raising the revenues.

Make it compelling. Reporters love facts and figures. If you can't divulge your sales, maybe you can talk about your rate of growth or say that you're beating the industry averages. Also, prepare examples and anecdotes that bring the information to life. Many news articles begin with a specific tale about one person to illustrate a broader subject. If that anecdote comes from you, you're in control of the story.

Talk Through the Reporter

Talk to your audience. The reporter is the intermediary. Your ultimate goal is to reach your customers or perhaps suppliers or regulators. Be careful not to use jargon they won't understand. Your messages and supporting examples should make your audience say, "I need that product," or, "I need to call that company."

Take control of the interview. You're not being interrogated, even if it feels that way. You're the expert, so it's appropriate for you to guide the reporter to the important parts of your story. You also can steer him or her away from less important issues. That

doesn't mean ignoring the questions, but you can respond to the specific question and then "build bridges" to your main themes. For example, the reporter might ask you, "How long did it take you to develop this product?" Instead of just answering, "Two years," you could add, "which was what we expected. And we think our timing is particularly good because--"

Tell your story your way. Reporters have a knack for asking negative questions. They're not being nasty (well, not all of them), but they have learned that they're more likely to get an interesting response if they play devil's advocate. Don't take it personally, don't repeat their negative language (as in, "I am not a crook"), and don't dwell on the matter. And remember, the interview begins before the reporter even opens a notebook and continues until you hang up the phone or watch the reporter's car leave your parking lot. If you tell your story clearly and speak with enthusiasm and conviction, that sends a message as important as the content of your story.

Giving Good Media

How do you get a reporter interested in your company in the first place? It's a lot like making a sale.

- Know your customer. Read the publications and watch or listen to the news programs you want to reach. Pay attention to which reporter covers the type of information you're interested in getting out about your company.
- Know your angle. What's the headline? Is there a compelling visual element for television or news photos? Make your message timely by tying it to an event or an issue that's in the news. The easier you make the reporter's job, the more likely he or she is to find the time to cover your company.
- Find the right entry point. Does the reporter prefer to receive a press release in the mail or by fax or E-mail? If you call, ask if the reporter is on deadline, and if so, make plans to call back.
- Find another customer. If the business editor isn't interested, maybe your pitch will appeal to the health and science reporter or a feature writer on the city desk. For television and radio, look for another producer.