

## Pick of the Literature

### When the Headline Is You

Jeff Ansell with Jeffrey Leeson, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010

This book, compiled by two experienced journalists for the International Association of Business Communicators, presents a different take on handling the media.

Brutally honest—for example, “The reporter’s quest is for conflict, not solutions”—this book is rich in anecdotes and hypothetical cases, where the authors offer solutions. Of particular interest to public relations professionals, the book opens the kimono on news gathering and how “news” is

selected. (Hint: It’s often not particularly done with any empirical or merit basis in mind!)

Most public relations dilemmas are touched on here—what constitutes news, what to do in times of bad news, how to construct compelling messages. The authors also dispel pervasive myths such as “good news is no news.” The most compelling part of the book, though, is the unique “take” of these two former reporters. Well worth reading.

## Case Study They’re Heeere!

Suppose you gave a party and *60 Minutes* showed up at the door. Would you let them in? Would you evict them? Would you commit hara-kiri?

Those were the choices that confronted the Chase Bank at the American Bankers Association convention, when *60 Minutes* came to Honolulu to “get the bankers.”

The banking industry was taking its lumps. Profits were lagging. Loans to foreign governments weren’t being repaid. Financings to bankrupt corporations were being questioned. And it was getting difficult for poor people to open bank accounts.

Understandably, few bankers at the Honolulu convention cared to share their thoughts on camera with *60 Minutes*. Some headed for cover when the cameras approached. Others barred the unwanted visitors from their receptions. In at least one case, a *60 Minutes* cameraman was physically removed from the hall. By the convention’s third day, the *60 Minutes* team was decrying its treatment at the hands of the bankers as the “most vicious” it had ever been accorded.

By the third night, correspondent Morley Safer (Figure 9-10) and his *60 Minutes* crew were steaming and itching for a confrontation.

That’s when *60 Minutes* showed up at our party.

For 10 years, with your intrepid author as its public affairs director, Chase had sponsored a private convention reception for the media. It combined an informal cocktail party, where journalists and bankers could chat and munch hors d’oeuvres, with a more formal, 30-minute press conference with the bank’s president. The press conference was on the record, no-holds-barred, and frequently generated news coverage by the wire services, newspapers, and magazines that regularly sent representatives. No television cameras were permitted.

But when we arrived at Honolulu’s scenic Pacific Club, there to greet us—unannounced and uninvited—were Morley and the men from *60 Minutes*, ready to do battle.

The ball was in our court. We faced five questions that demanded immediate answers.



**FIGURE 9-10**  
**Striking fear.**

For half a century, this lovable band of journalistic warriors, and their successors, have terrorized even the most steely-eyed CEO or tyrannical dictator. (Photo: BOB STRONG/AFP/Getty Images/Newscom)

- **First, should we let them in?** What they wanted, said Safer, was to interview our president about “critical banking issues.” He said they had been “hassled” all week and were “entitled” to attend our media reception. But we hadn’t invited them. And they hadn’t had the courtesy to let us know they were coming. It was true that they were members of the working press. It was also true that our reception was intended to generate news. So we had a dilemma.
- **Second, should we let them film the press conference?** Chase’s annual convention press conference had never before been filmed. Television cameras are bulky, noisy, and intrusive. They threatened to sabotage the normally convivial atmosphere of our party. Equally disconcerting would be the glaring camera lights that would have to be set up. The *60 Minutes* crew countered that their coverage was worthless without film. Theirs, after all, was a medium of pictures, and without pictures, there could be no story. As appetizing as this proposition sounded to us, we were worried that if we refused their cameras, what they might film instead would be us blocking the door at an otherwise open news conference. So we had another problem.
- **Third, should we let them film the cocktail party?** Like labor leader Samuel Gompers, television people are interested in only one thing: “More!” In the case of our reception, we weren’t eager to have CBS film the cocktails and hors d’oeuvres part of our party. We were certain the journalists on hand would agree with us. After all, who wants to see themselves getting sloshed on national television when they’re supposed to be working?
- **Fourth, should we let them film a separate interview with our president?** Because few top people at the

convention were willing to speak to CBS, *60 Minutes* was eager to question our president in as extensive and uninterrupted a format as possible. Safer wanted a separate interview before the formal press conference started. So we also had to deal with the question of whether to expose our president to a lengthy, one-on-one, side-room interview with the most powerful—and potentially negative—television news program in the land.

- **Fifth, should we change our format?** The annual media reception/press conference had always been an informal affair. Our executives joked with the journalists, shared self-deprecating asides, and generally relaxed. Thus, in light of the possible presence of *60 Minutes*, we wondered if we should alter this laid-back approach and adopt a more on-guard stance.

We had 10 minutes to make our decisions. We also had splitting headaches.

### Questions

1. Would you let *60 Minutes* in?
2. Would you let them film the press conference?
3. Would you let them film the cocktail party?
4. Would you let them film a separate interview with the president?
5. Would you change the format of the party?
6. How does the American Bankers Association (ABA) deal with the media today? Visit its online press room ([www.aba.com/press+room/default.html](http://www.aba.com/press+room/default.html)). What resources can members of the press access on this site? How does ABA make it easy for reporters to make contact?

## From the Top

### An Interview with Al Neuharth



**Al Neuharth** was born a poor country boy in South Dakota in 1924. He became a self-made multimillionaire who built the nation’s largest newspaper company, Gannett Co. Inc., and started the nation’s most widely read newspaper, *USA Today*. Since his “retirement” from Gannett in 1989 at age 65, he has been an active author, speaker, columnist, and world

traveler. He “retired a second time” on June 1, 1997, as chairperson of one of the nation’s largest private charitable foundations, The Freedom Forum, which he founded in 1991 as the successor to the Gannett Foundation,

established in 1935 by Frank E. Gannett. This interview was conducted in September 2007, on the occasion of *USA Today*’s 25th anniversary.

#### How did you know *USA Today* would work?

We didn’t. It was a gamble. But we did an awful lot of research. We hired the pollster Lou Harris, who extensively analyzed whether a national newspaper could make it. One of Lou’s conclusions was that “The TV generation won’t fight its way through dull, gray newspapers.” So we shortened stories, added color, and made an exciting product.

#### What do you read each day?

I read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* every day. I travel a great deal. One of the benefits I received in retiring from Gannett is that the company agreed to provide me with the *Times*, *Journal*, *USA Today*, and a local newspaper, wherever I am.