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Never Repeat the Poison: Avoid Negative Language

We have talked a lot in this book about toxic, negative language and the importance of using positive, active language. In a crisis, a high probability of questions from the media will lead a spokesperson to deny or confirm a statement that ends up as a negative headline, quote, or tweet.

Let's take Sarah Palin, the former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate, as an example. Her much maligned, exclusive interview with *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric is a perfect example of *what not to do*.

The interview took place during the 2008 presidential campaign at the start of the economic downturn in the United States. Couric asked a question in relation to the proposed \$700 billion government bailout.

Couric: If this doesn't pass, do you think there's a risk of another Great Depression?

Palin: Unfortunately, that is the road that America may find itself on. Not necessarily this, as it's been proposed, has to pass or we're gonna find ourselves in another Great Depression. But there has to be action taken, bipartisan effort—Congress not pointing fingers ...*

* Katie Couric interview with Sarah Palin, *CBS Evening News*, CBS Broadcasting, Inc., September 24, 2008.

Palin clearly swallowed the poison words *Great Depression* and repeated it in her response. Not surprisingly, the front-page headlines the next day were all about a *Great Depression*:

- *Boston Globe*—Palin Warns Depression May Be Looming (September 25, 2008)
- *Chicago Tribune*—Sarah Palin: Depression Fears (September 25, 2008)
- *Dallas Morning News*—Palin Says U.S. May Be Headed toward Another Great Depression.*

President Obama, as skillful and articulate as he is, has made some mistakes, too, when the stakes were high. Similar to Palin, he repeated a negative phrase. It was toxic!

During the contentious health care debate in 2009, President Obama spent a lot of time clarifying that there were no parts of the potential health bill that would “pull the plug on grandma.”† That expression quickly turned into “kill grandma,” generating T-shirts and a multitude of “kill Grandma” blogs, headlines, and even jokes on late-night TV. Not surprisingly, “kill Grandma” were the only words that the masses heard. What Obama said as a tongue-in-cheek comment was repeated time and time again on protest signs and in media interviews.

President Obama would have been well advised to stay clear of “kill grandma.” Instead of saying, “pull the plug on grandma because we’ve decided that we don’t...”‡ the president should have said, “It is none of our business how grandma wants to enjoy her life. We just want for her to be able to talk to her doctor in private without paying for it as an out-of-pocket expense.”

The rule is to clarify without repeating a negative. Remember, the catchy, short, cutthroat phrases will always be repeated, tweeted, and aggregated.

As a coach, I advise my clients to *beware of the poison*. Yes, questions are gifts, but not all are attractive. And they need to be grasped with both hands—in this case, with one’s mouth!

Buying into the negative always muddles your message. Avoid it at all costs.

* *Dallas Morning News* (Front-page headline), <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/politics/national/stories/092508dnpalpin.ab0a84ca.html>, posted 4:52 PM CDT, September 24, 2008.

† Barack Obama, “Health Care Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” Washington, DC, September 7, 2009.

‡ “Obama’s Health Care Town Hall in Portsmouth,” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/12/us/politics/12obama.text.html?pagewanted=all>, August 11, 2009.

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How the New Media Are Changing the Rules for Interviews

As we have seen, the media landscape has changed dramatically. There are new players, new rules. While the principles remain the same, there are some shifts in how the media interview game is played today, by both the journalist and the interviewee (the subject, the source, the talent).

The social media have given the traditional mainstream journalists many options for interviews. They crowdsource for contacts, sources, stories. Speed is another factor. The era of *publish now, correct later* is here. "Churnalism" instead of journalism. Few original sources. The reporting of Michael Jackson's death, for example, was mostly through secondary sources.

Let's look more specifically at some of the trends.

CROWDSOURCING

One journalist I interviewed for this book told me that if he sees 10 individuals saying the same thing on Twitter, he will report that as fact. He has 10 "eye"-witnesses. For example, if there were 10 tweets saying that New York Yankees baseball player Alex Rodriguez had admitted to taking steroids in an interview with ESPN, and that fact had been "reported" by 10 different sources on Twitter, he would report that by saying "sources" had said ...

Sources are freely available today. Many journalists have Twitter accounts and have followers. They pose questions to their fans and friends,

check story lines, engage in conversation with fellow reporters, and collaborate to get the best angle, the best quote, the best story.

They check their feeds constantly, they blog, and they use their read comments to source more stories. In a crisis, they monitor closely the key rounds and the influential columnists to see what they are saying, whom they are quoting, whom they appear to be following. You do the same.

LIMITING DIRECT ACCESS TO MAINSTREAM MEDIA

All the journalists I interviewed for this book said they would prefer an original voice, to talk to the company spokesperson directly. This is not always possible, particularly in a crisis.

According to Associate Professor at Roskilde University (Denmark), Kirsten Mogensen, who has done extensive research with leading journalists in Silicon Valley (the heart of innovation and technology in the United States), some companies have reduced or even denied direct access to traditional mainstream media. Even Google has limited access to the mainstream media. It is all about networks and who knows whom, says Mogensen.

Mogensen says that the network economy of Silicon Valley at least is hindering original reporting, good journalism. Her research reveals, "There is no direct, front-door access for journalists into the major companies in the Valley. Not even Markoff from *The New York Times*, representing one of the most prestigious newspapers in the world, can call Google's headquarters and expect to get to talk to the CEO."

"To control the news coverage, larger companies in Silicon Valley insist that the rules of personal networks be followed. If journalists want access they must be introduced by people who are already known," writes Mogensen in a paper published with co-researcher David Nordfors, Senior Research Scholar and Program Leader, Innovation Journalism, Stanford University.

Google and others are active in the social media—of course. We are talking about "Lord" Google after all! They are going direct.

* Kirsten Mogensen and David Nordfors, "How Silicon Valley Journalists Talk about Independence in Innovation Coverage," presented at the *International Association for Media and Communication Annual Conference*, Vol. 7, No. 6, November 2010.

E-MAIL AND BLOGS

Others are using e-mail and blogs to get their message across. For example, Mark Cuban, American entrepreneur and owner of the Dallas Mavericks, among other things, apparently only does media interviews by e-mail so that he has a complete record of them. According to Steve Rubel, Senior Vice President and Director of Insights for Edelman Digital, AdAge and Forbes columnist, and avid sports fan, Cuban uses e-mail so that he can correct misgivings on his blog.

Another high-profile source also changing the rules of the game is Dave Winer, an American software developer, entrepreneur, and writer. Winer takes a more subtle approach. According to Rubel, Winer answers questions on his blog without saying who the reporter is and exactly what questions were asked. He "creates a public record, something that can be useful for everyone."¹

Both Cuban and Winer have adopted this approach because they wish to avoid being misquoted and/or taken out of context. They have taken control back. It's our news!

Their approach can be useful in a crisis, where you can be the broadcaster, the reporter. You can give your perspective, your view; you can wrest control back, but the audience will judge you on your actions as much as they will on your words. How credible your information is will be determined by the prevailing context, the perception held about your industry, your product, your spokespeople. How much do we trust you?

The Cuban/Winer approach, the advent of the crowdsourcing journalist, as well as the media conferences on Twitter where all the questions and answers are seen, are yet another indication of just how much the media landscape has changed.

There is room and indeed there are many options for reporter and source alike to demonstrate transparency, openness, and collaboration.

¹ Posted by Steve Rubel, "Reinventing the Media Interview," Micro Persuasion Blog, http://www.micropersuasion.com/2006/08/reinventing_the.html, August 11, 2006.

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Lights, Camera, Action—The Interview

In this chapter we will look at the rules of engagement for interviews—what to do before, during, and after. We will look at TV interviews, what to wear and what to avoid, and finally what the rules are for a news conference, or *presser* as it is often called in MediaLand.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Before you embark on any media interviews, there are a few simple things to be done:

1. Know your audience.
2. Know your key message.
3. Practice your message.
4. Know your media.
5. Know your dress.

Know Your Audience

Good planning is essential for any effective media interview, but in a crisis it is doubly so; the stakes are much higher.

When coaching clients, particularly for a major interview or any high-stakes communication, I advocate that they use a simple three-step process that starts with the question of what is the overall impression that

you want to create given the situation. That is your starting point, *not* what you are going to say. It is a mistake to start at messaging when you have not stopped to ask yourself the key question, which is, Why am I doing this interview? What do I hope to achieve? Hopefully, the answer is more than, "Because Mary (head of media) said I had to!"

Step 1: What is my overall aim—what do I want people to think, do, or say; or how do I want them to act differently as a result of this interview? Be very specific. For example, an aim might be to reassure the residents that you are doing all you can with the resources that you have to get the job done. Indeed, the strategic reason for the interview might be to call on your neighbors, the affected community, to pitch in and help.

Step 2: Who am I aiming my message at? Be specific. Who *really, really* matters given the situation and your strategic aim? For example, it may be the head of the local community emergency response team, relevant regulators, or an organization service.

You must know about your audience, and typically there are only one or two key groups or indeed people who you are really aiming to influence through the media. Be ruthless, disciplined, and creative when you are going through this step. Get this right and it will be much easier to come up with a key message.

Step 3: What do I say that will motivate my audience to my aim? What do they really *want* to hear from me? What do they really *need* to hear from me? Hopefully, the want and the need will be the same!

Put yourself in their shoes, in the victims' shoes. Who is most affected by what has happened? You can bet your bottom dollar that that is the side the media will be on when they interview you. In a crisis, you *must* address the *most* affected first with a high degree of empathy—it must be authentic.

With this simple plan, you can get to an important strategic message. You will have the basis for your statements. And, if nothing else, you will have somewhere to bridge to when the going gets tough.

Know Your Key Message

Once you have worked out your key message, write down your key points and supporting messages, arrange them in order of importance, and, like an actor, learn your lines. Your messages will sound best if they

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION—THE INTERVIEW

are internalized. Also know your corporate values as well as your personal values when you are preparing your messages. That is what will determine the impressions that the audience will remember long after the interview is finished.

Practice Your Message

Practice delivering your statement in front of a mirror or your crisis management team. Encourage feedback and have them act as victims or key affected stakeholders. It is *very* important to read your statement and key examples aloud. It is amazing how the eye can gracefully glide over sentences until they are read aloud. Better still, learn your lines and resist reading your statement. Remember the head and the heart principle.

Know Your Media

Know the style of the reporter and the show that will be interviewing you. If it is a high-stakes one, like *60 Minutes* or a prominent current affairs TV or radio show, research other similar crises they have covered so you know what the likely questions might be. Close to the interview, watch the show and listen to the news to check if there is anything that might be related to your situation. Remember, the media issue-link. They will immediately connect your issue or crisis to something that is already on the news agenda.

Know Your Dress

If you are doing anything visual—TV interviews, recording a video for YouTube or a Web site, streaming live on the Internet—you need to think about what you will be wearing. See the “Television Interviews” section in this chapter for more information on TV interviews and what to wear. Does what you are wearing help, hinder, or support your message? Your corporate values?

DURING THE INTERVIEW

1. *Start with a strong, compelling statement* (see Section V for more details)—We mentioned *counterintuitive* earlier. Here is an example of what I mean. As I say to my clients in media training sessions,

in MediaLand everything is upside down; the punch line of the joke comes first, and then you give the background!

Let's think about how the media speak to us. They start with a conclusion, always a strong compelling statement that hooks us in to listen or read more. That is how we need to speak to them.

Start with a strong, bold statement that shows compassion—the punch line:

We are shocked and deeply saddened by what's happened here today. None of us expected that we would ever witness a tragedy of this magnitude.

Then support that opening statement with some compelling reasons or actions that demonstrate your compassion:

We rushed our trauma and rescue teams to the site as soon as we received the tragic news. We immediately called in our investigators and auditors, who will be working side-by-side with the regulators, so that we can get some fast answers as to the possible cause, and I'm meeting with all the injured late today.

Next, sum up what you have said:

We've acted quickly to get some sense of order back into our community—we needed to.

Any of this could be tweeted, shared, and swapped, and the quotes could end up on multiple platforms and seen by just about anyone, anywhere. If your crisis has global implications, it will be. Guaranteed.

2. *Be short and keep it simple*—The longer the response, the more likely you will be edited or the listener will tune out. Get to the point quickly, and do it using language that an eighth grader will understand. Follow the Robert Chandler rule of "no more than 30 words, 3 sentences, and 30 seconds." (See Box 22.1.)
3. *No jargon*—This is important in any interview but particularly in a crisis when clarity is critical. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms, too.
4. *Listen, please*—Listen carefully to the question that is being asked and *think* about your response. You have a full two seconds before

* Dr. Robert Chandler (Director, Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida, Orlando), "Message Maps: Blueprints for Pandemic Preparedness," 3n White Paper, <http://www.continuitycentral.com/messagemaps.pdf>, 2006, p. 4.

you need to respond. Take a word or a phrase from the journalist's question and use that to frame your response.

5. *Never speculate*—In a crisis, you will be asked to speculate as to the cause and who was to blame for the incident. Avoid this temptation at all costs. Say what you know to be fact. If you do not know the answers to a question, say that and then bridge to what you do know. It is also a good idea to have a compelling reason for why you cannot discuss a certain subject.
6. *Resist the urge to show off*—A crisis is never the time to display an impressive vocabulary or to present the full extent of your intellect and knowledge. Talk as you might to a neighbor, your grandmother, or a 10 year old who is probably scared. Think of the victims and what they need and want to hear from you.
7. *Be yourself*—Only you can win a gold medal of being you, so be true to yourself and your convictions. If you are confused by a question, say so. If you say something that is wrong or mistake the facts, admit your error and apologize. In a crisis, it is critical to be genuine, authentic, and human—to be seen as “one of us”—so be forthcoming to the extent that you have planned and rehearsed beforehand.
8. *Never argue with a journalist*—You will come off second best, and if it is prerecorded, that segment will most certainly air. Never embarrass a journalist either. The journalist will always have the last say, the last word on a subject—always! Best to always remember what impressions you want or need to create. Be guided by your corporate values.
9. *Avoid expressing personal opinions*—In a crisis, you will be pushed to give your personal opinion—beware. Express your compassion and commitment without making it personal. If you feel compelled to violate this rule, make certain you are very clear in distinguishing opinions from official positions and policies.
10. *Sum up at the end*—At the end of an interview or a media conference, make sure you sum up your key points succinctly and quickly. Many savvy, veteran journalists will often ask, “Is there anything else I should know/anything to add?” Often, this is when the media get their best quote or sound bite as the spokesperson has relaxed and so often spills the beans. That question is your cue to carefully sum up your key points.
11. *No such thing as no comment*—“No comment” is like a red flag to a bull. It is better to attempt an answer than to say no comment. The

phrase suggests a lack of candor, conveys a sense of secrecy, and suggests you are hiding something that you are not willing or allowed to share with the affected public, leading to skepticism and mistrust.

However, being yourself can backfire if not carefully thought through, as evidenced by the reaction to former BP Chief Executive Officer Tony Hayward with his now infamous "I'd like my life back" quote.

12. *Never raise issues*—You may feel tempted to raise issues aligned to your crisis—a bad idea. Try to avoid raising ideas that you'd rather not see in a story—new media or not. Stick to the script or agreed approach.
13. *Zip the lip*—As soon as you have made your point and given compelling reasons to back that up in 30 seconds or less, literally shut up! It is up to the interviewer to fill the space and ask another question. It is our job to get important messages across strategically according to the stage of the crisis.
14. *Assume that bloggers (covering your industry) will take information from your interview*—A year-long study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, showed that bloggers "rely heavily on the traditional mainstream media for their information."[†]

And finally, *always* assume that the microphones and recording equipment *are turned on*. Never ever say something off the cuff or joke. That ill-used word or phrase may well end up on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, the *London Guardian*, or the *Australian Financial Review*. It will most certainly be tweeted, swapped, and shared. This was clearly demonstrated during the 2010 British elections when Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, obviously forgot this golden rule during the 2010 election campaign. He was heard telling an aide that the arranged meeting with a 75-year-old constituent was "a disaster" because "she was just this bigoted woman."[‡] The rebuke was swift, forcing Brown to apologize.

* Tony Hayward, Chief Executive Officer, British Petroleum (BP). As reported by various media outlets (May 31, 2010).

† Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, "New Media, Old Media: How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from the Traditional Press," May 24, 2010. (From an e-mail newsletter, RSS feed received by the author.)

‡ Polly Curtis (Whitehall correspondent), General Election 2010 Live Blog, *The Guardian*, www.guardian.co.uk, posted 12:39 PM, April 28, 2010.

BOX 22.1 TIPS TO KEEP INTERVIEWS SHORT

1. Respond to a question with a sentence and a half.

Q: How is the weather today?

A: The weather is exceedingly hot (statement—has answered the main question), and (the bridge) I'd advise anyone who feels the heat to stay indoors near the newly installed (insert suitable adjective) air-conditioning unit (plus one, the half).

2. Adjectives add "color." Think of how to make this statement colorful: *The cat sat on the mat.* The (gray Persian) cat sat (sleepily) on the (black and white striped, New Zealand wool) mat.
3. Responses should be no longer than three short sentences, no more than 30 words, and no more than 30 seconds (Dr. Robert Chandler).^{*}
4. Every statement needs a short statement to *sum it up*.
5. Metaphors are the key to keeping a message simple. For example, "China is like a giant elephant riding a bicycle—it has to maintain a fast speed so it won't crash." It is very important for the interviewee to make the point of the metaphor rather than allowing the journalist to do that! Note the point (or the *so what* factor) in this example. One needs to be very careful with a metaphor in a crisis. It needs to be *very carefully* chosen (and tested, if at all possible) because it can backfire on you. But metaphors are a very powerful way of "getting" an important message and can help a spokesperson explain something that would otherwise be very technical.

^{*} Dr. Robert Chandler (Director, Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida, Orlando), "Message Maps: Blueprints for Pandemic Preparedness," 3n White Paper, <http://www.continuitycentral.com/messagemaps.pdf>, 2006, p. 4.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After your interview, review your tape—if you have taped your own interview. This review will be helpful if you think you have made a mistake, particularly if it involved facts and figures. However, avoid the temptation to say, “Oh, I didn’t mean to say ...” That will only flag more questions. If you blundered, you will have to live with that.

If someone from your team had been sitting in on or watching/listening to the interview, then do a quick debrief. What worked, where did the interview become animated or aggressive? Were there any surprise questions? What do you need you do differently next time? If you really think that there will be an issue when the story is aired or is in print, then get ready to put something on your blog and/or the company Web site.

Once the story is published, you have some more options. For example, if the story is inaccurate, say, the figures were incorrect, you could call the journalist and point that out, but first thank them for the story and then say something like, “I thought you’d like to know that the statistic that was published is wrong. If that were true, we’d all be millionaires; I’d be rich.” They will appreciate the more assertive, friendly approach rather than the aggressive approach, unless you wish not to have a relationship with that journalist ever again.

A simple thank you goes a long way.

TELEVISION INTERVIEWS

Television is all about pictures, pictures, pictures, so what you do—your body language—is *more* important than anything else. The nonverbal communication is worth 93 percent; only 7 percent is the words! What you wear and how you perform are very, very important, particularly in a crisis when the prevailing trust levels may be low. You have a nanosecond to convince the audience that you are trustworthy, so make that time count!

In a crisis, TV, and to a great extent the social media, is all about the emotion and drama and how it is conveyed in pictures, be that via CNN, ABC, and the BBC; or Facebook, TwitPic, Flickr, or any of the other social networking sites. You must be ever vigilant about how your crisis will be portrayed, how it will be remembered for years to come, by the symbols that have been created through the pictures.

Dress for the Part

In crisis media training and coaching sessions, clients often ask us what to wear—almost as frequently as they ask what to say!

It is very important to dress for the part. Dress according to the situation and the impression you want to create. For example, if you want to give the impression that you are in the middle of the crisis fixing the problem, caring for your customers and employees, then show that by having your sleeves rolled up, or at least do not wear a coat and tie. If you wear a safety helmet or other safety gear when working at an emergency site, wear that at a TV interview, as long as we can see your face and “the whites of your eyes.”

For example, the Australian Nine Network’s *60 Minutes* coverage of an Australian mining company at the center of the major cyanide spill in Eastern Europe highlights the dangers of appearing on the media unprepared and without having thought about impressions. The chief executive officer (CEO) was definitely wearing the wrong clothes and was in the wrong place.

This is what the viewers saw:

- Huge fish belly-up in the river being pulled out by locals with pitchforks.
- CEO being interviewed in a five-star hotel room dressed immaculately in a suit and tie.

Even if you did not hear what he was saying, the visual message was one of being aloof, uncaring, and remote. They missed a golden opportunity to do the interview on location at the site of the spill, sleeves rolled up, giving the impression of doing something about the situation and being in control. In fact, the image only reinforced typical community perceptions of mining industry executives reaping huge profits while the work conditions are dirty, dangerous, and environmentally unsound.

The disastrous Gulf of Mexico oil spill may forever be defined by the live video feed showing gushing oil and mud, seemingly forever out of control. In a crisis, *always* be thinking about the images and symbols that are portrayed.

Generally speaking, here are the rules (these rules apply to anything on the Internet, too):

- Avoid wearing pronounced stripes, checks, or small patterns, and anything shiny.
- Gray, brown, blue, or mixed-colored suits and dresses are best.
- Gray, light-blue, off-white, or pastel shirts or blouses are best.

- Women should wear neat jewelry or none at all, depending on the circumstances.
- Take your keys, phone, and pen out of your pockets.
- Avoid having a haircut right before the interview.
- If makeup is offered, use it, particularly if your interview is in a studio.

FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

If you are doing an interview face-to-face, look at the interviewer, *not* the camera. Maintain the eye-line, which is somewhere between the forehead and chin, during the entire interview. If your eyes flicker around during a TV interview, you look uncomfortable, and possibly a bit shifty. If you keep your eye-line focused on the interviewer, you will come across as being in command of your subject. Just try and relax and take your time. And remember to convey the right emotion—if people have died, smiling will be inappropriate.

Not all TV interviews will be in a studio. Most likely you will be doing interviews at the scene (of the “crime”), so be careful where you hold the news conference. The TV news producer or cameraman will want you to stand in front of the most devastating vision he or she can find—not necessarily to your advantage.

Images are everything, and often it is the pictures that define a crisis. You can negotiate where to do the interview, but make sure that the backdrop enhances, not hinders, your message. For example, the boardroom is the most inappropriate place to do your interview. What does that say about your values—locked away behind closed doors?

Think about the overall impression you want to create and have your TV interview in a venue that conveys the impression you wish to create—presumably that you care and that you are doing all you can to fix the problem. A vision of the CEO with his sleeves rolled up or at least in a shirt working at the scene or talking to victims will be better than a stiff upper lip shot in a boardroom. Witness U.S. President Barack Obama visiting the oil-ravaged coast of Louisiana in his shirtsleeves.

Animation and Gestures

Stand still! You would be amazed how much people will walk around when they are being interviewed for TV news. If you always “talk” with your

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hands, as I do, that's OK, just don't overdo it. It is a problem if your hands cover your face! Also be aware of knocking your microphone and other sounds that may interfere. Also, be aware of exaggerated movements or unconscious movements such as flicking your hair or tapping your fingers.

For TV news, stand comfortably with the majority of weight on one foot; imagine that it is rooted in cement. That should keep you still.

Your body language is important, so make sure that your words match your actions. You need to be slightly more animated and larger than life. Pep up your delivery so that it is energetic, rather than dull and low-key. TV is entertainment, after all, and broadcasting is a performance! The more engaging you appear, and the more you can express the emotions others are feeling, the more interested and involved the audience will feel.

Please, no bobbing heads!

Sound Good

Always take time to warm up your voice. You will come across as more articulate and authoritative. It will help prevent a "frog in the throat" during the interview. Sip room-temperature water before and during the interview. Never drink anything too hot or cold or anything with milk in it. Otherwise you will be constantly clearing your throat. A colleague of mine used to sound out the letters of the alphabet in an exaggerated form before he went on air.

Speak in Stand-Alone, Whole Sentences

For a clean sound bite for TV and radio news and a clear, concise quote for print, it is best to speak in complete, whole sentences. This will also increase the chances of your being accurately quoted. For example, if the question was how the weather is today, you would respond with:

The weather is raw, the wind is biting and chilling to the bone, and the skies are very gray, dull, and overcast. I would advise everyone to stay inside (30 words). (You could add, "particularly as it's flu season.")

PHONE INTERVIEWS

A lot of traditional media interviews take place over the phone. Radio is mostly done by phone, and the vast majority of print interviews will be by

phone. In a phone interview, just like the listener of a radio program, you have no visual clues to the interviewer's expression, general demeanor, or attitude. It gives the interviewer great flexibility and offers you, the spokesperson, some advantages, too. There are some disadvantages as well.

Let's think about the downside, particularly in a crisis. You will drop your guard, weaken the performance, and without the eye contact you may become more open, more confidential, and more revealing. As George Merlis says in his book *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance*, "The telephonic openness to which most of us have become accustomed is a pitfall for phone interviews ... the phone has a way of lulling us into a state of self-revelation, and may lead us astray from our agenda."^{*}

So, how do you keep focused and still in performance mode? For starters, stand up and gesture wildly. Your energy will flow better, and you will sound more animated and more present. And, if you can, conduct the interview in another space, away from your desk, away from your busy workday.

Put your messages in bullet form on a large piece of paper in front of you so you can see them easily. For some people, it also helps to have some reminders in front of them, like *slow down, be specific, remember to sum up, give examples, remember the victims*.

Some clients also find that having a smiley face in front of them or a picture of the damage or another important visual clue helps them stay focused.

Remember, tone is very important in a media interview. Make sure that you adopt the right tenor and calibrate your responses according to the stage and the panic your target audiences are feeling.

Impressions matter as much over the phone as they do in person.

One final piece of advice—once you have made your point, remember to zip the lip and wait for the next question. For a print interview it may take a while for a journalist to ask follow-up questions as he or she is busy typing your responses into the computer. Be patient and resist the temptation to fill the silence. Typically, reporters will tell you they are using their computers to take notes or to write stories as they go. In most countries, reporters are also obligated to tell you if they are taping you. Not so with citizen-journalists.

You may also want to tape the interview. Some journalists may object, but you could make it a condition of the interview, particularly if you are

^{*} George Merlis, *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance: Getting Your Message across on the AIR, in PRINT, or ONLINE* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2004, p. 153.

expecting a tough or hostile line of questioning. Like the reporter, you need to tell them you are recording the interview. Make this known at the beginning of the interview.

The stakes are very high when you are in crisis mode. You need to be as prepared in a phone interview as you would for an “all-in” media conference. Write down your key messages and be prepared to read them, but *read them with feeling, read them as if your life depended on it—it just well may.*

RADIO INTERVIEWS

Remember, radio is all about the voice. When you are interviewed in a crisis, your tone of voice will be critical and will convey as much if not more about the crisis as your words.

The other key factor with radio is that there are no pictures. You need to use words and phrases that help conjure the appropriate, relevant pictures for the listeners. This will take some careful planning when you are in a crisis.

You need to use short, succinct words, and you need to speak slowly and deliberately. And by *slowly* I don't mean listless, without energy. Passion, energy, and emotion are key to a successful radio interview, particularly if it is talk-back. Strange as it may seem, you can hear a smile, so smile if it is appropriate (it may not be in a crisis). Sadness, determination, compassion can all be heard or missed if that is what the audience is expecting. People will quickly tune into evasiveness and be quick to judge. Openness, accountability, transparency—they are the mantra for crisis radio interviews. *Your tone is everything.*

If you are the spokesperson, you will need to know whether you are live—nearly all radio talk-back is live—or taped for radio news.

For radio news, the journalist will be looking for two or three short, snappy, clean sound bites—around 15 seconds in length. By *clean* I mean no extraneous noise, no *ums* and *ers*; a complete, whole sentence that can stand alone. Remember that the journalist's question is rarely heard and that you will be edited out of context, so you will need to repeat your message at least three times to increase the likelihood of your key message being a sound bite. But that key message needs to be colorful, have meaning, and be jargon-free. Repetition simply means saying the same thing in three different ways.

If you are on talk-back radio and you are faced with contentious issues from angry or upset callers, then acknowledge their point of view—briefly—and then bridge to your key message. You can never avoid a question,

and sometimes callers ring a show simply to vent and may never have a real question. It is up to you and the host to determine beforehand how you wish to handle this situation. If you agree, then agree with them. But still remember to bridge to a key point.

Once you have made your point, remember to zip the lip and resist the temptation to circle back to the interviewer's and caller's question. Better to leave the audience with your thought in their mind than the contentious one that was raised.

Remember, questions are gifts! And please, one thought at a time, one thought to a sentence. Practice this discipline.

PRINT INTERVIEWS

Print was the first mass media and today still holds an influential place in affecting public opinion. While readership may be declining and journalists from newsrooms around the globe are being let go, newspapers are the source of original reporting, and they still set the agenda for many TV and radio programs.

As Chris O'Brien of the *San Jose Mercury News* said in an interview for this book, "Newspapers are the place of record."^{*} They can do the backstory, they analyze. And many, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, have a powerful online presence.

And we know from the 2010 Edelman Trust Barometer, articles in business magazines are highly credible. Independent sources such as analysts and academics are trusted sources, and they are who the media tend to gravitate to in a crisis, particularly in Stage Two. That is the modus operandi for the cable TV shows. How would CNN exist without its "experts?"

So, the print interview needs to be taken seriously. Your quotes are likely to be copied and pasted, tweeted, swapped, and shared around the world. To quote Merlis: "While the commodity of the broadcast media is time, the equivalent commodity in print journalism is space (albeit dwindling)."[†]

Here are some basic rules when doing a face-to-face interview with a print journalist:

- On meeting the journalist, give him/her your business card and treat him/her like a valued client. The business card will demonstrate two things:

^{*} Chris O'Brien, *San Jose Mercury News*, interview with author, September 4, 2009.

[†] George Merlis, *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance: Getting Your Message across on the AIR, in PRINT, or ONLINE* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2004, p. 153.

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- That you are a potential source and available for follow-up questions.
- It gives the journalist a very quick overview of how far he/she can go with his/her questions based on your title (e.g., if your card says Manager/President, he/she will expect that you know a lot about the company and can speak to almost anything!).
- Speak in complete, whole sentences; use good grammar. If you fail to do this, you may be paraphrased and not directly quoted—this could lead to your being quoted out of context. So, say “The weather is fine” as opposed to “fine.”
- Avoid *its, that, them*—Be specific, otherwise the journalist is highly likely to make an assumption about what you mean, and it is also highly probable that he/she will not make the same meaning as you!
- Listen carefully to the reporter’s questions and use them to construct a quote, or at least a response.
- Plan at least one good analogy *before* your interview that sums up your point of view. Use that analogy to anchor your key message. Please, please, please test that analogy before the interview, too!
- Maintain good eye contact—Otherwise you may come across as shifty—not a good look in a crisis.
- Avoid negatives—These will lead to denial headlines and/or quotes, which will hinder your efforts and overall intent in a crisis. As we have seen, negative language is toxic.
- Avoid jargon—Even if you think that the business term you are using is understood, the journalist may attach a different meaning to that phrase than you do. If you do use jargon, immediately follow up with, “That’s our jargon for ... ”
- Remember that you know more about your company or issue than the reporter—This is a good and a bad thing in a crisis. While we want openness and transparency, there are some things that only you and the board or the boss need to know. It might be the name of a victim, and you know it, but the family has yet to be informed. Say *only* what you know to be fact.
- Be passionate—Take some enthusiasm and appropriate emotion to the interview given that you are in crisis mode. If you are saddened by the event, then say so and mean it. Remember the head and the heart principle. As I say to my clients in coaching sessions, unless you are prepared to be human and give of yourself, send a postcard. If you are the storyteller, then *love* your story.

- Think of two to three main points you would like to make about your subject. Gather facts, figures, and anecdotes to support your points. Anticipate questions the reporter might ask and have responses ready. Stories are the lifeblood for print reporters. In a crisis, particularly in Stage Two, be prepared to tell a story about the “heroes” and commend them. Remember that Stage Two is all about the victims and your response. Stories *will* help you get your message across.
- Have printed materials to support your information whenever possible in order to help the reporter minimize errors. If time allows, offer to e-mail the reporter printed information in advance of the interview. This might be a map or a chart that shows the way you are fixing the problem.
- Remember your body language—In a crisis it is critical that all your actions match your words. The meta-messaging that a skilled journalist picks up on could well determine how he/she frames the story. Adjectives like *bold*, *blunt*, *angry*, *bewildered*, *exhausted* are all based on your body language—how you look and sound.

E-MAIL AND TWITTER INTERVIEWS

Given today’s lightning-fast age, you are just as likely to be e-mailed and/or tweeted a list of questions and be interviewed that way. Easy, you say; I will write my responses and they will be reproduced as I wrote them. Not necessarily. Your response may be shared with other reporters in the newsroom or on their list of followers to check out the story idea.

So, set the rules of engagement up front. I learned the hard way—humbling for someone in my profession. Some years ago, I received an e-mail from a trusted journalist—or so I thought. My clients and I had been a source for many of her stories in her influential column in the “Technology Section” of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She was asking what if I had heard about a criticism of media training. I quickly sent a response only to find it taken verbatim in her column the next day! She never divulged her intent and I never asked! The quote was OK, but it would have been so much better if I had taken a little time to think about my response and asked her a series of questions before I wrote anything! All’s well that ends well, as we then had an extended interview—again only by e-mail—and she wrote a feature story for her newspaper.

Lessons learned:

1. Assume that you are being “interviewed” if you get an e-mail from a journalist. Anything that you commit in writing can and will be used.
2. Always behave as if everything and anything you say can appear on the front page of the major newspaper in the land, for example, *The Wall Street Journal*.
3. Ask the reason for the question before you commit to anything.
4. Take a few minutes to plan, as words and phrases can be taken out of context and used anywhere in an overall story.
5. Ask what the purpose of the interview is, where and how the information will be used, and if the journalist intends to speak with anyone else on this issue. In a crisis you can assume that they will.

You need to plan like you would for a print interview—good grammar; compelling language; complete, whole sentences. Be short and succinct, and make your quotes stand out.

For tweets, the journalists need a series of headlines. See if you can contain yourself to 120 characters, as the journalists may want to link your comment, and you may also want to put in a link to your Web site and/or blog.

And remember, what is on the Internet stays on the Internet. As Renae Nichols, communications lecturer at Pennsylvania State University, stated, “You cannot take sin back.”^{*} The damage is done, so take care and time with your response as much as you would for any interview, particularly in a crisis situation.

DEALING WITH BLOGGERS

First, treat bloggers like mainstream journalists with a special round or as an influential columnist. You would treat that journalist a little differently from a daily news reporter. Apply that same principle when dealing with bloggers. The big difference is that they have no editors—there is no editorial chain of command other than their loyal followers and readers.

^{*} Renae Nichols (Senior Lecturer, Communications, Pennsylvania State University), interview with author, April 10, 2009.

Bloggers are most likely to be writing about a niche, a subject they feel very connected to and are passionate about. They are likely to be very connected and have specialist knowledge and/or experience. And they are most likely to be purists and will jump quickly on issues that have a strong ideological underpinning. This was amply demonstrated by the Motrin front baby carrier ads in 2008 and again in 2010 with the Pampers Dry Max diaper controversy. The Mommy bloggers were central to those stories. They called for boycotts, asked readers to alert the mainstream media, and caused much heartache for Johnson & Johnson and Proctor & Gamble.

The Mommy bloggers are an outspoken lot. Peter Shankman, of HARO (Help A Reporter Out) fame and somewhat of a superstar in the new media space, describes them as one of the most vocal, quickest to blog, "strongest-to-band-together-and-form-one-opinion-like-the-Borg" collectives out there—The Mommy-Blogging community.^{*} One Tweeter posted, "note to self ... never piss off moms ... especially bitter moms ... they can be a nasty bunch)."[†]

While moms will be fiercely protective of their young and will fight for their cause (and so would I), so will just about any purist. Shell found that out when a father-and-son blogging team almost brought the company to its knees. A United Kingdom blogger, who is ex-British military, claims that the team's blogging efforts have cost the oil giant \$15 billion—yes, \$15 billion!

Alfred Donovan, now 90-plus years old, and his son John have been collecting and publishing information online about Shell's activities since 2001. Not only have they been actively campaigning against the company for nearly a decade (they started in 2001), but they own the domain name *www.royaldutchshellplc.com*—Shell's proper name, you guessed it, Royal Dutch Shell.

According to an interview on their blog, the site receives millions of hits per month and many of the people using the site are Shell employees.[‡]

Influential—you bet. The Donovans and their blog are regularly quoted in the mainstream media—no doubt that the father-and-son team is an ongoing headache for Shell.

Face it—blogs are highly emotive. They are also unlikely to offer sourcing of any kind, it's mostly the blogger's opinion. The 2009 Pew

^{*} Peter Shankman, Help A Reporter Out (HARO), "Moms and Motrin," *The New York Times*, <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/11/17/moms-and-motrin/>, November 17, 2008.

[†] Ibid.

[‡] Glen Frost, Editor, "Blog Costs Shell US\$15 Billion," *The PR Report*, February 14, 2010. (Interview posted on Donovan Father-and-Son Blog, www.royaldutchshellplc.com.)

Project for Excellence in American Journalism State of the Media Report (Annual Report on American Journalism) showed that nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of bloggers had no sources and 22 percent had just one.

One could argue that the influential Huffington Post is one giant blog—certainly an influential news site and one that has the respect of many, including the prominent public relations firm Edelman. Writing on his blog, Richard Edelman, the firm's president and CEO, says that "Edelman considers the Huffington Post a viable first option for clients."

Craig McGill, Managing Director and creative guy at Contently Managed, digital and social media public relations consultants based in Scotland, offers this advice for dealing with bloggers:

1. You cannot control the message—Not that you really ever did! "You can send a blogger all the stuff you want; if they don't like it, they don't like it. And they will tell the world. What you can do is have a conversation."
2. Never send a press release—Send them a link to your release, if you must. Bloggers like to break stories or (more often) comment on something seen elsewhere, but they will never (or very rarely) just reprint your press release.
3. Take them seriously—Do not treat them like second-class citizens. If you want them to take you seriously, then you take them seriously and extend any courtesy that you would extend to the mainstream media.
4. Make life easy for them. Have copyright-allowed images/audio/video on your site that they can use without asking you.
5. Accept that nothing you say is off the record and that every e-mail you send the blogger may end up public. Ditto with phone calls—ah, we have heard this advice before!
6. Remember the odds are that the blogger will Google the hell out of you before replying, so make sure your online credibility is strong.
7. Most of all, remember that *it is all a conversation. Always introduce yourself.*[†]

* Posted by Richard Edelman, "Huffington Post; Taking the Next Step," 6 A.M. Blog (EdelmanBlog), http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2009/07/huffington_post.html, July 27, 2009.

† Posted by Craig McGill, "15 Tips for PRs Dealing with Bloggers," Contently Managed Blog, <http://www.contently-managed.com/blog/2009/08/30/15-tips-for-bloggers-dealing-with-prs/>, August 30, 2009.

NEWS CONFERENCES

The news conference, or presser, as they are also known, have long been the staple "diet" for crisis media management. Most often, a news release with a subsequent phone interview will suffice, but rarely if ever in a crisis, as the media demand will be high. Reporters will be swarming everywhere, cell phones will be overloaded and resources stretched. A news conference will be the best option when:

- Media are gathering onsite.
- There are many requests for the same information.
- The news is important enough to interest all mainstream media, plus bloggers and other special interest media (e.g., Fort Hood).
- There is more than one spokesperson needed (e.g., CEO plus technical expert/subject matter expert and/or emergency services representative).

Avoid holding news conferences when:

- Most media are on deadline.
- Information is needed more quickly.
- Few details are known.
- There is limited media interest.
- You are not the principal player in the crisis.
- There is no trained or rehearsed spokesperson.

Even when media are gathered onsite, it is sometimes appropriate to hold an impromptu or "door-stop" conference. That is, bring the spokesperson to the media, allowing him or her to conduct what is known as an "all-in" interview.

A news conference signals that your story (your crisis) is important, that you are putting your face on the story, and that you are making yourself accountable in some way, or at least offering some explanations. There are often very high expectations, so you need to be prepared.

The U.S. Fort Hood shootings in 2009, demanded a news conference. The interest in the story was huge. It had national and international implications, and a news conference was certainly an effective way for the Army to reach a huge number of people simultaneously. CNN and many other networks carried the news conferences live, as many citizen-journalists told their story through tweets and posts to Facebook. So too, with the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, where news conferences became a daily occurrence, as the interest was so high and the impact so huge.

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Let's look at how a news conference might work in the digital age.

- Stage One (basic facts are told—what happened stage)
 - Story breaks on Twitter, video posted to YouTube, company named.
 - Citizen-journalists abound—often breaking news. This stage is all about *speed*! And these citizen-journalists may be your staff (e.g., Fort Hood), so be aware and have that policy in place.
- Stage Two (facts are dissected, added to, discussed; the response is highlighted; the unfolding drama stage)
 - Company posts YouTube response.
 - Company tweets to its followers and publishes links to company Web site and other key players like a government authority or emergency relief organization.
 - Mainstream media gather at headquarters or company site for firsthand reporting.
 - Said company holds media conference with key influential bloggers via Twitter and Skype, and in person with mainstream media (TV, radio, national and international newspapers, news agencies, local daily papers, and trade press).
 - Company spokesperson gives one-on-one interviews for key media outlets after the news conference.
 - Company edits and posts interviews to its Web site and to YouTube via a Flip camera, and publishes pictures to Flickr—all properly tagged.

Yes, busy. There are multiple channels to manage and monitor. You'd better have a technically savvy social media player on your crisis communication team.

MANAGING A NEWS CONFERENCE

1. *Designate someone to manage introductions, start and finish*—This person could be the head of corporate communication, public relations, or operations. Their role is to introduce the spokesperson and set the stage for the news conference, explaining the format and time allotted for questions.
2. *Spokesperson starts with a statement*—Hopefully not read and no more than two minutes. Better to deliver your opening remarks

(sound bites in their own right) from memory, particularly the first 20 to 30 seconds.

3. Like any major political news conference, *choose different reporters* from the scrum so you do not allow any one reporter to dominate the conversation.
4. *Keep your body steady*—If you move, move very slowly. A good piece of advice from George Merlis is to imagine that you are underwater: “Visualize how the resistance of the water keeps you from making rapid movements when you are in a lake, a pool or an ocean. That is exactly how you need to be in front of a camera.”
5. *Call for questions and set a time limit*—For example, “We’ll take questions for the next 10 minutes.” Otherwise you will be there all day!
6. *If questions ramble* or there are multiple questions in one question, just pick the one that works best for you and answer that one.
7. *Work the room*—When making your statement, start at the center, then move to the left and turn your attention to the right. If you get a friendly question, end looking at that reporter. You may get a follow-up question, or you can return to that reporter at another time. If it is more hostile, subtly turn your attention to another part of the room when you have finished. Wrap up the news conference by taking a question from a friendly or at least a neutral reporter. Or you can wrap up by taking a question from someone you know, someone with whom you can predict their line of questioning.
8. *Keep an eye on the clock*—If you have set a time limit, it is a good idea to stick to it, particularly if you have given the reason as wanting to get back to the investigation, clean up, or getting to the bottom of what happened. If it is a very tough situation (e.g., deaths), say that you will take questions for 15 minutes, and at 12 minutes say, “We have time for two more questions.”

In addition to posting an edited version or sound bite to your Web site, you may want to provide an audio transcript of the news conference, particularly if the news conference was held via phone. This allows you to reach many audiences at once.

For example, during the anthrax attacks in 2001, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) often held routine news conferences

* George Merlis, *How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance: Getting Your Message across on the AIR, in PRINT, or ONLINE* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 2004, p. 161.

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daily. Vicki S. Freimuth, Ph.D., who was director of communications at the CDC during that time, said that it was rare for the CDC to hold a press conference before that crisis.

These press conferences began as telephone-only events but evolved into both in-person and phone events. By including phone, we were able to allow many other stakeholders to listen to the conferences live and receive updates at the same time as the media. In addition, we provided transcripts of the press conferences on our Website within a few hours, allowing a much larger audience access to the information.*

The veteran U.S. crisis counselor Jim Lukaszewski and others advocate *inviting key stakeholders* to your news conferences so they hear the news firsthand, unfiltered. The 2001 CDC example is testament to this advice.

As with every media encounter, make darn sure your spokesperson is prepped, briefed, trained, and well-rehearsed.

* Vicki S. Freimuth, "Organizing for Effective Communication during a Crisis," International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), *CW Bulletin*, Vol. 4, No. 2, February 2006.