

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

The Ammerman[®]
Experience

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Your First Line of Defense in a Crisis

Quick Bites

Executive Communication Skills

Among our recent assignments was a coaching session for the president and CEO of one of the world's largest petroleum companies. We helped prepare him to speak at last month's Cambridge Energy Research Associates conference in Houston.

That assignment and others like it got us thinking: According to research, executives who earn more than \$250,000 a year cite communication skills as the primary factor in achieving success. But just what communication skills must today's executives master? Here's our checklist:

- They must know how to craft and deliver an effective presentation.
- They must be able to communicate effectively with the news media – through informational interviews (including satellite interviews), press briefings and news conferences.
- They must be able to handle the communications implications of a crisis.
- They must know how to reach and motivate employees.
- If their company is publicly

When an explosion at a Houston-area forging plant killed eight workers and injured another two, reporters quickly arrived on the scene in search of information. One of the first persons they approached was a volunteer from the Cy-Fair Fire Department. The young man's instincts told him to be careful about how much he said, prompting him to comment, "I know you guys are trying to get it out of me." In response, the reporters simply remained silent, so the firefighter continued, "It reminded me of Hollywood in there. . . It's pretty bad; I've never met a plane crash before, but I'm sure some of the situations in there are similar." He then went on to talk about "many bodies" and "body parts."

What those reporters did was right out of Journalism 101: they got the firefighter to "fill the silence." Most of us are uncomfortable with silence, so if reporters simply keep quiet, chances are the interviewee will start talking – and may say something quotable . . . something damaging . . . something that can be aired on the nightly news or printed in the morning paper.

Today, most crisis-prepared organizations have identified and trained spokespersons who can interact successfully with the news media. These are the PR folks, executives and "content experts" – the people with primary media relations responsibilities.

But crises can occur in inconvenient places and at inconvenient times. So the first contact a reporter may make could be with a first responder – a police officer, a hazmat professional, a security guard, a shift supervisor, a firefighter, a receptionist. It's critical that these individuals know the "rules of the road" so they too can have a successful encounter with a reporter. Although your first responders might not serve as your key spokespeople, they should be trained to understand the reporter's role in an operational crisis. Your company image is at stake, and all it takes is one bad interaction to ruin your company's reputation.

We believe there are three likely media roles for first responders:

One is "meet and greet." In this role, the first responder lets the

traded, they must know how to communicate with the financial community, including analysts and shareholders.

- They must be capable of speaking extemporaneously, including knowing how to introduce themselves, others and their organization, at a moment's notice.

In short, executives who can communicate clearly, concisely and charismatically – face-to-face, on video, one-on-one, to large groups and small – will get others to listen to, hear, understand, and act on what they say. They will also have lots of job security.

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Have You Seen An Inconvenient Truth?

April 22, 2010 marks the 40th anniversary of Earth Day. No doubt, some folks will celebrate it by watching (or re-watching) former Vice President Al Gore's 2006 controversial documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Have you seen it? If not, and if you use PowerPoint in your presentations, you might want to check it out. Here's why: the documentary is essentially a PowerPoint presentation Gore delivered more than a thousand times to audiences around the world. But unlike a lot of PowerPoint presentations – poorly designed and delivered – this one's impressive. You'll see examples of how to use visuals effectively, and how to communicate technical information clearly. What's more, you'll see some great platform skills. That's right: that stiff, unemotional communicator we saw run unsuccessfully for president in 2000 delivers his environmental message with passion, humor, creativity and some unusual props. Regardless of your views on Gore's global warming message, this film is worth examining as an example of effective presenting.

Looking for other examples of effective speakers? **TED** is a nonprofit devoted to what it calls "Ideas Worth Spreading." It started out as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: technology, entertainment and design. But its

reporters know that the organization is aware of their presence. (It's not uncommon for reporters to show up – only to be ignored – intentionally or unintentionally.) This individual also escorts the reporters to an appropriate location such as a conference room, or asks them to remain in the lobby, parking lot or wherever else they might be. The first responder's primary message is that a designated spokesperson is on the way. If possible, he or she should also provide an estimate of when the spokesperson will arrive.

Reporters are usually quite skillful in getting first responders to provide some of the information they're looking for. They do this by being friendly and starting out asking easy questions, such as, "What does your company do?" or "What happened?" But then the questions become more challenging and potentially damaging. And once the first responder begins to answer those initial questions, it's tough to know when to stop. So, it's critical that first responders know their mission: to be polite and affable, but not be a source of any information. (In the first exercise in our [First Responders Media Training](#), we typically get participants to say too much and stay too long.)

Because reporters may decide to "wander around" in search of information while waiting for the spokesperson, first responders may also want to keep an eye on the media. And if appropriate, they can offer the reporters coffee or other refreshments.

What if it will be quite awhile before the spokesperson arrives? Reporters work on tight deadlines, so they are unlikely to wait passively while their competitors file their stories. So another role for a first responder could be serving as a temporary spokesperson. The idea here is for them to provide some basic information about what has happened. The best approach is to read a short statement (which can be drafted with the help of others in the organization), but take no questions. Quickly meeting some of the informational needs of the media can help prevent reporters from concluding that the event is worse than it really is, or reporting incorrect information.

By the way, reading a prepared statement is a smart thing to do. It keeps you from speaking extemporaneously – perhaps saying something you shouldn't or leaving something important out.

A third possible role for a first responder may be to conduct a press briefing. Unlike a news conference, which tends to be longer and more formal and structured, a press briefing is more impromptu. It might be held in a conference room, a lobby, a parking lot or even out in some field. Here's how to conduct one:

1. Approach the reporters confidently and introduce yourself. Give your name (spell it to ensure accuracy) and the name of your organization.
2. Set some ground rules. Reporters tend to think the press briefing is theirs. But it's not; it's yours. Setting ground rules can sound something like, "I have limited information at this time, but I'm here to tell you what we know. I have a prepared statement I'd like to read. Then I'll take a few questions."
3. Read your statement.
4. Next up, answer a few questions.
5. Finally, end and exit the briefing. Literally, turn and walk away. (Of course, first thank the reporters and say some concluding remarks.) While this might seem impolite, it's actually the right

scope has broadened. On TED.com, you can find some of the best talks from TED and its partners available for free. More than 500 TEDTalks are now available, with more added each week. The videos are released under a Creative Commons license, so they can be freely shared and reposted.

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Staff Changes at The Ammerman Experience

Dave Scallan has been promoted to vice president. After three years with The Ammerman Experience, Dave has strengthened our firm's energy business, enhanced client relations and contributed to the high level of crisis communications training we've offered for more than three decades. While at Ammerman, Dave has traveled the globe and worked with everyone from CEOs to front-line employees. When role playing as a reporter, Dave has an uncanny ability to surprise clients with questions that demonstrate significant knowledge of their organization – something he accomplishes through extensive online research. In his new position, he will continue to focus on business development and will continue to participate in a variety of communication workshops.

Before Dave joined Ammerman, his career as a journalist spanned more than a decade, and included assignments in Abilene, Dallas and Houston. In Dallas, he worked at WFAA with legendary sports director and anchor Dale Hansen. Dave graduated from The University of Texas at Arlington with a degree in business administration.

David Casey has joined The Ammerman Experience as marketing communications manager. He is responsible for the operations side of our business as well as for marketing communications. His previous experience includes assignments at Hill & Knowlton, Waste Management and Texas Region 4 Education Services.

thing to do; you'll appear authoritative.

Any interaction with the news media can be a challenge, but having a game plan (and executing it) can make the encounter a lot less stressful and much more successful.

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Ammerman's Overseas Adventures

The first three months of 2010 proved to be quite a quarter for The Ammerman Experience – travel-wise, that is. Our international travel team logged more than 70,000 air miles in the first ten weeks alone, stopping in Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Brazil, Argentina, England, Trinidad & Tobago, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Talk about globetrotting!

This particular series of international assignments involved providing [media, crisis spokesperson, first responders](#) and [crisis team training](#) to more than 100 people working in more than 20 countries.

Because journalism practices vary throughout the world, for our international media training, we frequently partner with a local media expert who provides insight into how the local media operate. For example, in Dubai, we asked Yousef Rafayah, an experienced CNN journalist, to offer some tips on dealing with different print and broadcast media in the UAE.

Our travels are far from over. Before the year is out, we'll touch six continents and more than 20 countries. If your company is interested in having our team come to one of your international locations, give us a call. We'll provide your overseas employees with the same high level of training their colleagues in the states are getting. It doesn't matter where you need us; if we can get there, we will.

Some interesting facts we learned during our travels:



Singapore is the only country in Asia which has English as its first language. The other three official languages: Malay,

David serves as New Professionals chairman for the Public Relations Society of America's Houston Chapter, and on the board of the Public Relations Foundation of Houston. In 2009, he served as event chairman of the Houston SleepOut, a charitable event that raises awareness and money for SEARCH Homeless Services. David graduated from Texas State University with a degree in mass communication.

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2010 Ammerman Public Training Dates

Effective Media Communications Training

June 8
August 10
September 14
November 2

Effective Presentations:

June 9
September 15

Advanced Media Skills for Communications Professionals

November 3-4

The Ammerman Experience Public workshops are scheduled on a first-come, first-served basis, and are available to a limited number of attendees to ensure maximum personalized attention. To register for a course, contact our office at 1.800.866.2026.

The above schedule lists Ammerman **public** workshops. For available dates for private (individual or group) training, please contact The Ammerman Experience at 1.800.866.2026.

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Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil. Ken Haseley and Dave Scallan at the Merlion.



The Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia are the tallest twin buildings in the world. The 88-floor towers are connected by a skybridge on the 41st and 42nd floors. Ken Haseley, calm in the face of the impending storm, as always.





Dubai is one of the seven emirates (states) of the United Arab Emirates. It's home to Burj Khalifa, the tallest man-made structure in the world (160 floors). Ken Haseley, model.



Southern Brazil is largely made up of two types of people: Cariocas, those that hail from Rio de Janeiro, and Paulistas, those from Sao Paulo. Rio de Janeiro ("River of January") is known for Carnival, samba, Bossa Nova, beaches such as Copacabana and Ipanema, and the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer (named one of the New Seven Wonders of the World).

Even though Trinidad & Tobago is only six miles off the coast of Venezuela, the country considers itself part of North America. T&T is the birthplace of steelpan, calypso and limbo. Strangely, no photo of Ken or Dave doing a limbo!

Our firm is a pioneer in understanding the link between effective communication and professional success. What we've learned and what we teach can improve your performance . . . and that of others in your organization.

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