

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

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Choosing Your Weapons

There are five basic types of business spokespersons: The CEO, the topic expert, the communications staffer, the public relations agency person (aka the Flack) and the lawyer. Who should talk to the press when? Are there guidelines?

Glad you asked. There are guidelines, but there are also exceptions.

If there has been a death, the CEO should speak. If there has been grave bodily injury, probably still the CEO. If the word “tragic” is being used to describe the situation - well, you get the picture. Add to that anything that would make your company one of the top news stories, and you must consider sending the top person. People often ask if sending out the highest-ranking executive signals that something is very important and that, by sending out an underling, you might go unnoticed or at least end up at the bottom of page 12, which you would prefer. Yes, sending [The Jefe](#) may well signal that something important is going on, but you might want to err on that side. Having a higher-ranking person than needed really does no harm, but sending out a lower-ranking person can make a company look oblivious, uncaring or incompetent. That image does not sit well with the public who may end up on your jury, so always try to look at the bigger picture when making the choice.

Topic experts are used when things need to be explained or questions answered that are of a technical or complex nature. Big Cheeses usually give Big Pictures. It is after that when topic experts are employed to handle the details. Remember that a topic expert isn't always the one with the most experience. It may be the person who simply knows the most about what is going on today. Still, one must be careful to choose people who are well prepared to talk with the media. Unfortunately, many companies still overlook their back-room brain-power when it comes to media training and preparedness.

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Quick Bites

What are they saying?

The world online is so vast, so inaccurate, so unknowable. While no one can keep track of everything, here are a few tools you can use to keep the information you choose coming to you.

Maybe you have already signed up for feeds. Now you can bunch them together with [Monitor This](#). They offer the tools to subscribe to up to 22 different and popular search [RSS](#) engine feeds at the same time.

[Bloglines](#) is another information aggregator that boasts on its home page of kudos from *The Wall Street Journal* and *TIME Magazine*.

And you know that Google had to be in on this game.

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Now let us imagine that the topic is neither tragic nor complex, no funerals and no rocket science. This is usually a job for an external-communications spokesperson. When a reporter needs a quick quote or the topic is noncontroversial, that is perfect for a spokesperson, as are many other things that are not suited for someone else. Stating policy and handing out facts is what the ExComs do often and do well.

What about the professionals you pay to consult on these things? When do you send your public relations firm to face the press on your behalf? Fugetaboutit. Paid advocates are viewed with suspicion because the public sees them as spin-meisters and fact-evaders. The public wants to know “Why can’t this company speak for itself? What are they afraid of?” Use your PR agency’s brains freely, but it is rare that their bodies should be commandeered as well.

Then there is the company attorney. Some attorneys simply love to be in the spotlight; others loathe it. Some are personable and compelling; many are not, and they evoke feelings of distrust from the public. Unless you are using your lawyer as a topic expert, think hard about sending counsel out to do this job. When the public sees an attorney, they think someone must be guilty of something.

Now you have a very basic framework for choosing the right person for the right job, but all bets are off if the person with the right title cannot deliver the message in the most effective way. If your CEO has the charisma of a mosquito bite or your topic expert rolls his eyes at those who don’t understand the tax code, it is time to talk tough about their skills and ask them to [take the class](#). People can learn how to take control and steer an interview while avoiding the traps that have felled so many others.

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SMILE!

Alan Funt (*Candid Camera*) Was a Visionary

When George Orwell suggested in [1984](#) that Big Brother would someday be watching our every move, he was only partly right. Instead of just Big Brother over our shoulders, everyone is being watched by everyone. The Senator Paul Allen “macaca” incident, where he was videoed in an alleged racial slur, may have added to his defeat. The Michael Richards (aka - Kramer) public tirade captured on videophone was a shot seen round the world, yet it was just another salvo in the skirmish over who has the power over information.

It isn’t just celebrities who are subject to the citizen paparazzi. And as the Allen incident proved, even those who should know better may let their guard down when they see no members of the press around. But the democratization of the media, whether good or bad or both, is here and it is real. We live in a world where career-ending, reputation-crushing faux pas soon are linked to [Smoking Gun](#), the [Drudge Report](#) and then to the nightly news.

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[Google Reader](#) is the product, and they say that they will let you know when any of your favorite sites update.

And here is a place that lets you create your own search engine. Say you simply want to monitor the top websites for wine or weimaraners or String Theory. Plug your locations in, and [Rollyo](#) creates a “searchroll,” which they describe as a search engine of just your chosen sites. Or use popular ones already created by others, like Everything Star Wars or Debra Messing’s favorite shopping websites.

These tools have many fun, personal uses, but use them at work as well to keep up with the latest industry gossip or track what consumer complaint sites are saying about your product.

There are also plenty of paid services and software packages that will track any information you like. We do not personally vouch for any of the above, but they are all free.

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Yadda yadda = Ka-ching

What about the oldest form of keeping up with the latest word? Talking still ranks as the most used method. Imagine that! While some offices are buzzing and others library quiet, every worksite has a certain amount of non-essential chatter taking place. So just how much socializing goes on in an average office? Our [mates in the UK](#) have researched this issue and even done the numbers.

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You don't have to be a senator or a starlet to get that sort of attention. If you are just waking up to [YouTube](#), be advised that even small local incidents have a way of becoming big through the power of online video.

For instance, in October, Houston police went to investigate a noise complaint at a bar with a live band. [A melee ensued](#), complete with Tasers, which was captured on video and quickly posted to YouTube complete with allegations that the cops were guilty of excessive use of force. The story was just as quickly posted to [MySpace](#) and a number of local blogs. Well known websites about the music business then added the story as well. Within a few days, tens of thousands of viewings had taken place, and in less than two weeks, viewings of the three videos on YouTube reached three-quarters of a million. The bar itself holds only 300! Police investigations of noise complaints are an everyday occurrence, yet the postings helped bring a dozen people to the next city council meeting to protest police action. At that point, [old line media](#) covered the story as well.

What is the lesson here? For at least a decade, the good advice (still ignored by many) has been do not say anything in an email you wouldn't want forwarded to your boss/mom/lover/worst enemy. Now that telephones capture video, you must simply assume that anytime you are in public, you may be recorded. And the definition of "public" is expanding all the time and probably includes your desk. It may even include (... oh, never mind; even we don't want to go there).

While the quick video is getting attention, a much older technology is also making waves due to the ease of dissemination. It seems a number of Americans have taken the advice of the disembodied voice that chants, "This call may be recorded for training purposes," and now the customer is recording the customer service call, too. Remember the man who tried to [cancel his AOL account](#) this past summer? He recorded the call and posted it to a blog, and before long, servers crashed from people wanting to listen, and then the major news organizations picked up the story that prompted other consumers to post their own AOL stories all over the Net. The next thing you know, AOL has a PR nightmare on its hands at a time when it is already losing customers.

As consumers, we all have stories to tell about bad customer service. When it is good, we are shocked. What should be the norm now comes as a surprise. But businesses continue to see customer service call centers as a burden and expense instead of a place to retain customers and sell them new products and services. With their phone-prompt labyrinth, endless waits where we are told they are busy helping other customers (yeah, right!) and horrible on-hold music and infuriating commercials, they make consumers seethe. Finally, a script-reading drone comes on who offers no help at all or simply drops your call. This sends customers to the competition and to the Internet to post their anger, share their pain and extract revenge. Google the phrase "customer service hell" and you get more than 11 million hits.

This is the way we live now. The rise of citizen "journalism" and low-cost technology means the power over information has gone topsy-turvy. Reputations are made and unmade in a snap. It is our regret that the world of accountancy has not yet come up with a dollar amount for reputation. If they did, it might help those companies who still don't get it to decide to treat us like the valued customers they say we are.

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More Than Business, a small-business insurer, estimated that 18 million working hours a *day* are lost in the UK because employees are busy yakking instead of doing their work. What we call water cooler talk about things like sports, TV shows and each other takes up about three hours a week for the average worker. However, the article points out that socializing certainly is to be expected and should not be viewed necessarily as negative. The morale and camaraderie that forms at a workplace are a result, to some degree, of the workers enjoying their time with each other. Furthermore, what seems like chitchat can sometimes end up solving problems and generating great ideas. The cost in dollars and cents? In pounds it came to 43 billion per year. If we do the conversion and multiply by our approximately five times the population and assume similar pay scale, we get about 410 billion annual bucks for the U.S.

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2007 Ammerman Individual Enrollment Training Dates

Effective Media Communications

March 1
April 17
May 8
June 12
July 17
August 14
September 18
October 11
November 6
December 4

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You know that every customer contact counts, but you don't know how your people on the phone really sound? [We can help](#) with that, too.

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Terri Ammerman named President and CEO

Terri Ammerman has been named President and Chief Executive Officer of The Ammerman Experience. Terri succeeds company founder Dan Ammerman, her father, in the role. More than three decades ago, Dan accurately predicted that organizations would need help in managing crisis situations and communicating effectively with the news media when the pressure was on. His founding of the firm in 1973 makes him one of

the pioneers in crisis management and media training. Today, The Ammerman Experience is one of the oldest and leading communication skills development firms in the world.

Terri joined the firm in 1981. Since then, her role in the company has changed as the need arose. From Supervisor of Client Services, she moved on to the role of Director of Marketing and was later promoted to President and Chief Operating Officer. She has held that role for the past eight years.

Terri has worked with clients throughout the United States and the world, providing counsel and training for a variety of issues and events. Throughout her career, Terri has trained or interviewed more than 8,000 executives, including CEOs of many Fortune 500 companies. She is known for her challenging interview style and is an in-demand speaker for companies, organizations and educational forums. As President and CEO, Terri plans to continue her father's mission and integrate her own commitment and dedication into her leadership role.

Effective Presentations

March 2
June 13
September 19

Advanced Media Skills

April 18-19

EMC Refresher

June 14
September 20

Effective Media Communications for Marketing Professionals

April 20

The above schedule lists Ammerman individual, public workshops. For available dates for private (buy-out) training dates, please contact The Ammerman Experience at 1.800.866.2026.

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.

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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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