

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

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The News Media Today: An Ammerman Experience Perspective



You've heard the complaints: The news media are biased. They're liberal and were in the tank for Barack Obama. Talk radio is overwhelmingly conservative. The media sensationalize the news.

We'll let others engage in that debate. What we will say is that the news media have changed, and those changes have implications for any organization that interacts with reporters. Here's our take on some of the changes and what they mean for your media relations efforts:

- **The news business has been transformed from one tied to public service to one linked to profit and entertainment.** That means that what's considered newsworthy and how the story is covered and reported have changed. For example, a company event or issue that might have been ignored by the news media in the past may now get the limelight or even be treated as a crisis. In short, expect more media inquiries about subjects you might consider marginally newsworthy or not newsworthy at all.
- **America's infatuation with celebrities has had a profound effect on journalism.** Today, much television news is delivered as theatre, often with journalists serving as celebrities (think Anderson Cooper). High-end graphics, music, quick edits and unusual camera angles are commonplace. Some call this the "tabloidization" of the news. You may not like it, but it's no reason to shut reporters out. Remember, they'll write their stories – with or without your help. Better to cooperate.

Quick Bites

Aim for the Amygdala

Did you know that the human brain has two memory systems? It's true. In one part of the brain, the hippocampus, we store our ordinary, day-to-day experiences – for example, the route we take to and from work. But another part of the brain, the amygdala, is for emotionally charged experiences. Anyone who's experienced a house fire is sure to remember that event in vivid detail for years, perhaps forever.

So what does this have to do with communication? Much of the information people communicate is forgettable. For example, after listening to a 10-minute presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, accurately evaluated and retained only about half of what was said. Within 48 hours, that 50%

- **Sound bites have shrunk.** When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he could expect 45 seconds of what he said aired on the evening news. In the most recent presidential election, candidates were lucky to get about 7 seconds. Today, both broadcast and print reporters alike prefer 6-12-second answers to their questions. Unless you're talking to NPR or PBS, it's important that you answer questions succinctly to avoid being interrupted or edited.
- **In today's highly competitive media environment, anyone can become a news source** – a next-door neighbor commenting on a domestic dispute, a disgruntled employee, etc. In fact, with technology such as camera phones and Internet sites such as YouTube, anyone can become a "journalist." Embarrassing videos or photos involving your employees may find their way to a news outlet. In light of some news outlets' more relaxed standards of confirmation, accuracy, taste and fairness, it's clear that corporate transparency and credibility are more important than ever.
- **Expect more contact with junior-level journalists.** The growth in traditional and new media outlets, along with economic pressures on news organizations, means less-experienced reporters make it to the big leagues earlier. Use of freelancers is also growing so you'll need to be more patient and do more "hand holding." For example, don't assume the reporter has a solid grasp of the topic or will admit to anything less; instead, assess whether he or she fully understands what you're saying. If you detect problems in comprehension, backtrack and explain the subject a different way. (Be careful not to be condescending.) Other helpful strategies include encouraging the reporter to call you for follow-up questions, or if the story is highly technical or complex, volunteering to review it for accuracy.
- **Be prepared to respond to media inquiries more quickly.** Thanks to cable TV and the Internet, today's news cycle is 24 hours. And TV makes frequent use of "cut ins" (interrupting programming for breaking news) and "crawls" (running information across the screen). The public expects and gets instant news. Likewise, they expect an instant response from you. In a crisis, you have about 15 minutes to respond.
- **Don't underestimate the value of newspapers.** Readership may be declining, but newspaper reporters still outnumber electronic journalists and still do most of the original reporting. Local newspapers set the news agenda in most cities. Many of the items on TV and radio are lifted right out of newspapers. Get to know the newspaper reporters who cover your organization, and cultivate a positive, business relationship with them.

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drops another half to a 25% effectiveness level. By the end of the week, that level goes down to about 10% or less.

Often, the problem is vague, conceptual or jargon-laden communication. What does it really mean when a company says it "occupies a leading technology position in its industry?"

One way to move from the abstract to the concrete is by telling stories. Human beings are storytelling creatures. We're hardwired to pay attention to stories. And to remember them. So, tell us about your leadership in technology by describing your technology center. How big is it? What kind of equipment does it have? What sort of people work there? What kind of problems are you trying to solve? Better yet, what kind of problem have you solved . . . for a particular customer? Details. Details. Remember, people are drawn to what they can see, hear, smell, taste and touch.

Stories are powerful things. If your story makes it to the amygdala, people will remember it. And that's what you want them to do.

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"There Are No Guarantees." Ouch!

One of the trickiest questions you might get from a reporter or during the Q&A portion of a business presentation is whether you can provide a guarantee. "Can you guarantee that an explosion will never occur at your plant?" "Can you guarantee that there won't be any layoffs?"

The Doctor Is In. Or Is He?

Many times when it comes to speaking on behalf of their hospitals, physicians give PR professionals a case of the stomach flu. This usually happens for a number of reasons:

- Physicians' schedules don't mesh with those of the reporter.
- Doctors don't understand why they need to be the spokespersons on certain subjects.
- Doctors do a great job talking about an issue but fail to get visibility for their hospital.
- They fear the news media.

It seems that physicians fall into two types – those who love to deal with the media and those who hate it. In most other professions or industries, these two divisions aren't as pronounced. But within healthcare organizations, it almost always seems that doctors are either begging for face time or running for cover when they see a news van pull into the parking lot.

Some physicians simply don't understand why it's important that they be the spokesperson on key issues for the hospital. A lot of this has to do with ethics. Doctors feel that publicizing themselves is exactly what ethics panels have told them for years not to do. However, once someone explains to the docs that they are "content experts," serving as instruments to help deliver important messages – messages that might even save lives – they often have a change of heart.

Sometimes this can be explained by the hospital's communications professional; other times it may take an outsider without a perceived "agenda" to convince the doctor that he isn't promoting himself, but rather that he's using the media to deliver helpful information to current or potential patients. Media-resistant doctors frequently become eager to learn how to interact with reporters once they realize that media interviews are a way to convey credibility – their own as well as their hospital's. And this is one way to reach people who might otherwise have ignored care or treatment.

Once the "once-hesitant" physicians become "believers," then the issue of getting the hospital's message out comes into play. It's not uncommon for communications pros to comment on how fantastic a doctor did during a media interview, but that he or she failed to mention the name of the hospital or what it's doing to help people with a certain health issue.

This is where it's critical for someone – either a communications professional or an outside firm – to coach the doctor prior to the interview. The focus of that coaching? Message development and delivery. In other words, make sure the messages are appropriate,

Your instinct with such questions may be to respond by saying something like "No, I can't guarantee that" or "There are no such guarantees" – understandable responses. In fact, when we ask such questions during a training session, most of our clients take the bait and deliver these usually true statements, but damaging quotes.

Here's a better way to handle the guarantee trap. Resist the temptation to acknowledge the obvious – namely, that you can't give a guarantee. That's usually what most people begin with, but then they go on to elaborate: "What I can say is that our company takes safety very seriously, and we're going to do everything we can to ensure that our employees and this community are protected." By responding this way, you still answer the question but don't deliver the potentially embarrassing statement.

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Tour Dates

We welcome the opportunity to share our expertise at professional meetings and functions.

Look for our Ammerman experts at this upcoming event:

The Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) Annual Conference

The OMNI Hotel - San Antonio, Texas

February 18, 2009

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concise and memorable, and show the spokesperson how to get those messages into the interview.

A doctor, or any professional, for that matter, who is comfortable appearing on camera or who knows how to interact well with print journalists will begin to say “yes” to those interview requests that he or she might have had no time for in the past. And everyone from the reporter to the patient watching or reading the news at home comes up a winner. And who knows? Even the doctor may be amazed how many media “house calls” he or she can make in just five or ten minutes.

The Ammerman Experience is no stranger to working with physicians and other health care professionals. One of the very first physicians we trained to interact with the media was Dr. William DeVries, the surgeon who performed the first artificial heart transplant. The patient, Barney Clark, lived for 113 days following the procedure that generated international media coverage. After this groundbreaking operation, Dr. DeVries was recruited to work for Humana Hospital in Kentucky. Before he performed the second artificial heart transplant there, he insisted that his entire team be media trained by our firm.

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2009

Ammerman Public Training Dates

Effective Media Communications Training

February 6
March 10
April 21
June 9
August 11
September 15
November 3

Effective Presentations Training

March 11
June 10
September 16

Advanced Media Skills for Communications Professionals

April 22-23
November 4-5

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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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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