


# Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

The Ammerman®  
Experience

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## A Visit from America's Most Feared TV News Magazine

### Quick Bites

#### Sixty Seconds of 60 Minutes Trivia

- *60 Minutes* is the first regularly scheduled program in American TV history not to have ever used any type of theme music. The only theme sound is from the signature Aristo stopwatch in the opening title credits, before each commercial break, and at the end of the closing credits.
- The show's 42nd season premiere took place on Sunday, September 27, 2009.
- In tone, *60 Minutes* combines the probing journalism of the 1950s CBS series *See It Now* with Edward R. Murrow and the personality profiles of another Murrow program, *Person to Person*. Program creator Don Hewitt called this blending "higher Murrow" and "lower Murrow."
- *60 Minutes* has aired at 7 p.m. Eastern for more than three decades, making it not only the longest-running primetime program currently in production, but also the TV program broadcasting for the longest length of time at a single time period each week.

At the start of this year's fall TV season, two of our clients were prominently featured on a national news show someone once described as having "the freedom and the money to go wherever they want, the clout to get access, the talent to do any story they want, and that great big audience just sitting there waiting for them every Sunday."

That's right; our clients appeared on *60 Minutes*.

For some companies, a call or visit from *60 Minutes* triggers a standing order of "no cooperation." Perhaps they feel their side of the story will end up on the cutting room floor. If your company is approached by *60 Minutes* (or any other investigative reporter for that matter), it's important to know how these journalists work.

Here's a behind-the-scenes look at America's most popular, most controversial, most feared TV news magazine.

For a story to appear on *60 Minutes*, it must meet several criteria: First, it must have national importance.

Second, it needs a clear plot involving dramatic conflict, such as an individual against an institution. (Good guys versus bad guys.) *60 Minutes* differs from traditional TV newscasts in its use of multiple story lines within a single narrative, a device more commonly associated with day-time soaps or prime-time dramas.

It must lend itself to pictures. (The show is partial to stunning camera work and sometimes purchases exceptional footage from outside sources.)

Finally, the story must be told in 13 minutes.

- The program has rarely been pre-empted. Two notable pre-emptions occurred in 1976 and 1977, to make room for the annual telecast of *The Wizard of Oz*, which had been recently returned to CBS after having been shown on NBC for eight years.

## Yikes, Lesley Stahl Is Here!

When Lesley Stahl showed up in a small Virginia town, one of our clients figured it was only a matter of time before he'd get a call from someone at *60 Minutes* about an issue involving his company. So he did what we encourage all our clients to do in such a situation: call Ammerman.

Our call came at 11:00 a.m. on a Wednesday. During the call, the client provided a quick summary of the issue and then immediately E-mailed us some additional background information. A conference call involving him, four of his colleagues and three Ammerman staff members (two of whom were at an airport in Arkansas) was scheduled for 2:30 p.m. In that call, we provided some insight into how *60 Minutes* operates, a major concern of the client. We also posed some questions, concurred with a number of decisions the client had already made, and offered some recommendations of our own, such as preparing for the call from *60 Minutes* and prepping a possible on-camera spokesperson.

It was agreed that [an Ammerman media coach](#) and "reporter" would travel to the client on Sunday for a Monday coaching session simulating a typical *60 Minutes* interview. Before the week ended, someone from *60 Minutes* contacted the company outlining the story idea and requesting information, including an interview. Before heading out on Sunday, we obtained video of several environmental-related stories Lesley Stahl had done in the past, and sent them to the client to provide an example of Stahl's interview style.

One of five stories comes from viewer mail, and a number of stories are always in the queue. Sometimes a story seems to have promise in the beginning, but later it may not. So each producer is usually working on 5-6 projects at a time, hoping that no more than one or two will fall apart. An inquiry (or even an interview) from *60 Minutes* is no guarantee you'll be featured on the program.

Producers are the workhorses behind *60 Minutes*. They are usually skilled journalists who do most of the research, find people to interview, negotiate ground rules, arrange scheduling, direct the taping and often come up with the lines on-camera talent will say. Half their time is spent on the road (an average 100,000 travel miles each a year), assembling different elements before the on-air talent fly out and finish the story. *60 Minutes* recognizes its producers by name on the banner shown behind the reporter at the story's opening – the only news program that gives such on-air credit to producers. Your first contact with someone from *60 Minutes* will likely be the producer.

The show pioneered many of the most important investigative journalism techniques, including hidden cameras and "gotcha" visits to the home or office of an investigative subject. The *60 Minutes* format involves making the hosts the reporters who mediate the conflict by siding with one participant in the conflict.

"Reverse questions" are a *60 Minutes* staple. Because just one camera is used during field interviews, and because it can focus on only one subject, reporters have to re-record their questions after the actual interview. The questions are then spliced together with the answers. Although CBS insists that these "reverse questions" match the original questions as closely as possible, there's no denying the reporter is allowed to polish his or her performance, while the interviewee's answers have to stand as originally delivered. Advantage: reporter.

Another reporter advantage relates to on-air time. Reporters may appear in thirty shots in a 100-shot segment (interview subjects typically get fewer than five). And reporters get more visual or frame space. They are almost always shot at a further distance than the subjects they interview. In contrast, their subjects appear in extreme close-ups, usually with the top of the head cut from the frame. If reporters were framed in close-ups, they would appear equal to the people they're interviewing. Giving reporters more space makes them appear in greater control. Victims and villains shot in tighter close-ups appear less in control.

Also, reporters are the only individuals on *60 Minutes* permitted to address the viewers directly. If an interview subject looks at the camera too long, this privileged reporter shot – customary in TV news – is violated, and the shot is usually considered ruined.

The *60 Minutes* process is very studied and precise. It involves professionals who know how the "game" is played. Heck, they invented and perfected it. But that's not to say you shouldn't cooperate. In the next issue of *Advisor*, we'll provide some advice on how to participate – and come away with your credibility and reputation intact.

Monday's coaching session with the company executive identified as the likely spokesperson involved reviewing effective media interview strategies, helping to identify or refine key messages, and, of course, doing a number of practice interviews – both sit-down and stand-up.

When you face a crisis or tough media interview, it's nice to get an outsider's perspective. And among the things we do for clients is serve as a sounding board and a source of information. So, a reminder to our clients: we're here to help. We're available 24/7 in an emergency. And when you call us, you won't get an answering machine; you'll reach a real person who will put us in touch with you – typically within 15-20 minutes. After conferring with you, we may tell you that your proposed approach is exactly what we would do. Or we may suggest an alternate approach. We may even do a practice interview with you by phone. And for people we've trained, we don't charge for this service. Rapid response: it's one of the benefits of working with [The Ammerman Experience](#).

## Investor Conference Calls: 10 Mistakes to Avoid

If quarterly earnings conference calls are part of your company's investor relations efforts, you might want to check out a recent article written by a member of The Ammerman Experience team. *Beware: Conference Call Slip-Ups* appeared in a recent issue of *IR Update*, a publication of the National Investor Relations Institute. The article identifies ten typical mistakes to avoid during conference calls with analysts.

Not involved in your company's investor relations activities? Why not forward this article to your IR professional or your CEO or CFO?



[Click here to download the article.](#)

## Important News to Communicate? Unleash the Power of an Interview

When two worldwide oilfield services companies (with combined revenues of more than \$17 billion) decided to merge this past August, there was a lot of information that needed to be communicated – quickly – to a variety of internal and external audiences. Among the tools the companies' communications pros used to reach those audiences was one that's often overlooked – the sit-down, recorded interview.

The day the merger agreement was signed, the chairman of each company sat down together and responded to questions posed by a seasoned former journalist. In this case, the interviewer happened to be from The Ammerman Experience. After two short 15-minute takes, the interview was quickly edited and made available to the 57,000 employees of both companies and to anyone else via a link on each company's website.

If your organization is planning a major acquisition or faces some other significant event, don't overlook the power of an interview. To paraphrase from a once-popular commercial: They're not just for reporters anymore. Here are some guidelines for developing a first-class product:

- **Determine your key messages:** Every successful communication effort starts with knowing what key points you want to make. Write them down. If the interview is designed for multiple audiences, factor that into your messaging.
- **Develop a script:** This is an outline containing the topics or questions that will be explored in the interview. Depending on the preference of your executive(s), you might want to provide key response points. (Some execs like help in identifying key points; others prefer to respond without any coaching.) In any event, the scripting process should not include developing complete responses that are meant to be delivered verbatim.
- **Review interview essentials:** Remind your executive(s) to use the same techniques that work in media interviews: short, crisp responses rather than long-winded, rambling answers. Powerful soundbites (e.g., stories, analogies, examples). No jargon. High energy instead of the business "poker face" (if the subject lends itself to a more animated delivery).
- **Practice:** Give the interviewee(s) time to prepare. Most executives have limited time and short attention spans, but they're quick studies. However, try to do a practice run before turning the camera on. Your goal is to get them to

2010

## Ammerman Public Training Dates

### Effective Media Communications

January 12  
February 5  
March 9  
April 20  
June 8  
August 10  
September 14  
November 2

### Effective Presentations:

January 13  
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.

respond conversationally. Tell them to think in terms of talking to a relative, friend or neighbor.

- **Aim for high-quality production values:** This probably means hiring an outside crew to handle camera, lighting and sound. (One of our clients also provided someone to handle make-up.) Remember, audiences who watch the interview will be judging its quality based on what they saw the previous night on television. Don't do it on the cheap.
- **Use a skilled interviewer:** Successful interviews don't just happen. The person asking the questions plays a critical role in making the interview work. Skillful journalists spend years perfecting their craft, including learning how to frame questions and sift through answers to develop follow-up questions. They set the tone of an interview. If there's no one in your organization who has those skills, go outside to get them.
- **Think marketing:** How can you use the final product? Ask yourself whether the interview is appropriate for multiple audiences. For example, in the past, such interviews were often produced exclusively for employees (with the videotape shown at employee meetings). Today, technology exists that enables a variety of external audiences (shareholders, analysts, customers, etc.) to get immediate access to the information contained in those interviews.

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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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