

DON'T STOP THE PRESS

Talking to journalists may seem a terrifying prospect, but it is excellent free marketing if you do it correctly, says Charlie Corbett

It is helpful to look upon the media as you would a chainsaw. In other words, an incredibly useful device if handled correctly, but with the potential to do great harm if not. The most important point to remember when handling the media is that the reporter at the other end of the phone, sitting opposite you in the coffee shop or languishing at the bar, has a job to do. He or she is never off duty. Handle them with care. This might seem an obvious point to make, but it can be all too easily forgotten – particularly after a good lunch and one or two glasses of wine.

Journalists are not, on the whole, 'out to get you'. They do not all conform to the stereotype of the hard-drinking tabloid hack that would sell his granny for a story. The vast majority of journalists are respectable and professional, whatever Lord Leveson or Hugh Grant might have you believe. But every journalist, no matter what his or her morals, has three things in common: they have a deadline to meet, an editor to assuage and a story that needs grinding out. If you frame all your dealings with the media around these three fundamental tenets, then it will be a great help, not only to the harassed reporter, but also to you.

Establish the ground rules

With this framework in mind, it is sensible to start with the basics: how to speak to journalists. Before you even open your mouth to a reporter, whether it is the chief business correspondent at *The Times* or a junior reporter at *Airfix Model World*, it is critical to understand the jargon. If you want to control the words that appear next to your name, in print or online, then you need to fathom how quotes are garnered and attributed.

At the outset of any interview with a journalist you need to establish the ground

rules. This is why understanding the jargon is so important. Remember, there are three different types of comment you can make to a reporter: those that are 'off the record', those that are 'non-attributable' to you and those that are 'attributed' or 'on the record'. It is hard to underestimate the importance of learning the difference between these three types. This is what they mean:

Attributed (on the record): This means your comments will be published against your name. "We are launching a £50m bond," Jane Jones, vice president of finance at Acronym Bank, said. It is like being on live television. What you say will be printed verbatim and attributed to you personally.

Unattributed: The quote will be printed verbatim, but your name will not appear against it. For example: "I'm not surprised we didn't raise the money. Our balance sheet is a mess at the moment and we need a new chief executive," said a senior Acronym Bank executive, who did not wish to be named.

Off the record: This is commonly misunderstood. It means that neither your comments nor your name will appear in the story. If you tell a journalist something you have said is 'off the record' it means

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you do not want your comments or name mentioned at all, in any form. Literally speaking, your comments are not to be recorded. They are *not* for the record.

In addition to this, avoid telling a reporter: "No comment." If there is a crisis at work and your company is splattered all over the media for all the wrong reasons then, whatever you do, avoid this line. 'No comment' always comes across as an admission of guilt. So, for example, a story might appear in this way: "*The Daily Echo* called Wee Tots Ltd to answer to allegations that rusty nails had been found in the company's baby food. JJ Simmons, a senior executive at the firm, made no comment." It doesn't look good.

There is an easy way around this. If a reporter calls you out of the blue and asks for a comment at a time of crisis, simply put down the telephone without uttering a word, or – more politely – ask to call them back. You can then consult with the rest of the firm, investigate the allegations and find a way to take better control of the news flow. Never ignore the call, however, or the reporter who made it. If you do, the story will likely get written anyway, but without your input.

To understand all is to forgive all

Once you have understood the jargon, the next step is to understand journalists. Who are they? What are their motivations? Who do they work for? What is their deadline? Who reads the magazine or newspaper they report for? Once you have answered these questions, it will become far easier to manage the media. You will know, for example, that Ivor Scoop works for *Treasury Week*, that his deadline is every Wednesday at 4pm and that he needs to find four stories a week in order to fill his section. He might also have to write breaking news for the magazine's website,



HOW TO SPEAK TO THE PRESS

The Victorian writer and poet Rudyard Kipling once wrote: "I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When; And How and Where and Who." It is a maxim drummed into journalists from the moment they start their careers. It is also a good way to frame some top tips on how to deal with the press.

◆ **WHAT:** At the heart of every news story or feature is the 'so what?'. It tells the reader why this story matters to them directly. Work out the 'so what?' in the reporter's story and frame your comments accordingly.

◆ **WHY:** Try to understand the motivation behind why newspapers and magazines are written, that is: to inform and to entertain. It might seem obvious, but too many people forget the most important ingredient: the reader.

◆ **WHEN:** Timing is critical. Find out when journalists' deadlines are. It means you will always know the best time to contact them. In other words: not on deadline.

◆ **HOW:** Understand how a news story is put together and how your comments will be attributed. Bland platitudes and evasive language will be rumbled. If you are put on the spot and can't think of anything to say, say nothing and defer.

◆ **WHERE:** Find out where your comments are going to end up. A feature? A breaking news story? A blog? It is important to get as much context as possible from the journalist before you start an interview.

◆ **WHO:** Who are the newspapers, websites and journals that report on your business? What kind of coverage has your company received in the past and who are the journalists? Read their stories and try to build a constructive working relationship with them.

*With apologies to Rudyard Kipling.

maintain his Twitter feed and write his weekly blog, "Treasury Gold".

In other words, like all journalists, Ivor Scoop is very busy. And no doubt he has an equally busy editor who requires his constant attention. What Ivor Scoop needs is good, original content that will fill his page of the magazine every week, keep his editor happy and give him plenty of inspiration for features and blogs.

Build relationships

There are two ways to deal with Ivor: you can ignore him completely and refuse to engage on any level. This is a bad idea. Not only when it comes to reacting to negative news – Ivor will write the story anyway so you might as well put your side of it – but also when it comes to reporting positive news. You are more likely to get the successful close of your £10m bond somewhere near the front of the magazine, alongside a glowing quote with your name next to it, if you have built a relationship with Ivor.

You cannot ignore the press. It won't go away. So you might as well understand its motivations. And then work out a way to manipulate them in such a fashion that it will benefit you or your company.

If you build a constructive relationship with Ivor and other journalists that cover your particular area of business, then it can be fruitful for all concerned.

Once an underlying basis of trust has been built up, both good news and bad news – for these two imposters are just the same* – can be dealt with efficiently and effectively. A constructive working relationship with the media can result in the best free marketing that you or your company can get, as well as go a long way to limiting the damage in a crisis. But an inability, or unwillingness, to understand the motivations of the media is akin to buying a new chainsaw and then ignoring the health warnings. ♥



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