



## ***Great Spokespeople are Made, Not Born***

By Barbara Lezotte, APR

So, you're it. You're the one the media calls when there's a crisis. You've earned (or have been handed) the responsibility for speaking for your organization. You get to face the cameras and stand up to the microphones, and you shudder at the thought of all that can go wrong. Pressure.

It's tempting to assume that good spokespeople were outstanding public speakers by the second grade. The reality is that with a little work, most people can be very effective when facing a crowd of reporters or a tough editorial board, perhaps even Skubick's *Off the Record*. It's a matter of preparation, planning and lots of practice.

### ***Don't leave your response to chance***

You'd never take an important test without assembling all the information and resources necessary to pass it. Do the same when you are to be tested by the media.

Anticipate what you will be asked. Develop your answers. Make them short and to the point. Time spent crafting a concise, "quotable" response is always a good investment.

Part of your preparation should be to gather information from the reporter and determine the focus of the story. What is the deadline? Make use of any time you may have to prepare a more informed response that gets to the heart of the issue.

### ***Get to the point quickly***

Determine your key message or top three points and rehearse them out loud until they flow smoothly. Jot them down on the back of a business card and study them until you can see them in your mind's eye. (Yes, they should be that short.) Most television interviews will only use five to 18 seconds. Newspapers want a quote that answers the pertinent questions at hand. Your perspective or the perspective of your organization is what they're after, not a lot of background the reporter probably already has. What questions do you **want** to be asked? Try to guide the reporter, especially if the topic is technical or complex. Which questions are unavoidable? Is there one you hope you won't be asked? Expect it to be one of the first.

### ***Rehearse until it hurts***

Work with a colleague or counsel who's willing to fire the tough questions at you and give you feedback. Practice in front of a mirror to really hone your answers and assure that you're

projecting a relaxed, friendly attitude. If possible, videotape your responses and critique them. Are you believable? If you know you will be facing multiple questioners, have several people fire questions at you. Study your approach. Do you project credibility, calm and confidence?

Once you've made your key points and reinforced them with the reporter, you can provide additional information, but avoid going into too much detail, unless it's an in-depth interview with a longer format.

### ***Honesty is still the best policy***

Your credibility for the interview at hand and any in the future should be of primary concern. Tell the truth even when it hurts. You may face the difficult situation of being asked to give confidential information or to reply to a question which you simply can't answer. It's always better to say, "I'm sorry. I just can't respond to that," or "I'm not able to provide that information at this time," than to give erroneous or misleading information. Once you lose a reporter's trust, it's gone for good.

#### **A few more tips:**

- **Respond promptly when a reporter calls.** Make every effort to work with the reporter's time frame and provide the information needed.
- **Nothing is "off the record."** If you don't want your statement to appear in tomorrow's paper, don't make it.
- **Never "play it by ear."** Unplanned responses are often the ones interviewees most wish they could retract.
- **Speak from the viewpoint of the public interest,** not your organization's.
- **Avoid the impersonal, corporate "we."** Speak in personal terms whenever possible.
- **Don't lose your cool** or patience in the interview. You'll negate anything positive that came before and risk your long term credibility.
- **Avoid responding with a mere "yes" or "no."** If you are asked a direct question, make every effort to respond in an equally direct manner. Take the opportunity to incorporate your planned answers into your response.
- **A "No comment" response looks bad** in print and on camera. It fairly screams, "We have something to hide!"

Every opportunity to interact with the media will help improve your spokesperson capabilities. Practicing before you're under pressure is essential, but the experience you gain in the glare of the media spotlight will perfect your skill like nothing else. **The best spokespeople are made, not born.** 