

## Penetrating the Media's Psyche

Ever sit open-mouthed in amazement while reading a news story? Ever get so irritated that you hurl pillows at your television? If so, you're not alone.

"We're all tired of the teasers, of the stories that go nowhere," says Gerard Braud of Gerard Braud Communications. "Reporters set up a situation, promise hard legwork but when you see the story, you get facts that are either loosely related or aren't related at all. It's a big letdown."

For communicators, however, it can be much worse than a letdown. It can be a disaster. Reporters will act as judge and jury if you let them," says Braud. "Too many reporters have only three things on their mind. 'One, this story has to be great because I want to impress the boss. Two, I want to win an award. Three, I want to put this story on my resume so I can get a more prestigious, higher paying job.'"

Braud knows. Before starting his consulting firm, he worked for 15 years as a reporter in print, radio and television. "I left the business because stories were getting more and more superficial," he says. "Reporters were also lumping all sorts of unrelated facts together to make it appear that something sinister was going on in corporate America. Where communicators see a company working in the best interests of its employees and customers, reporters connect the same dots to come up with a picture of the monster that lives under the bed."

So Braud urges corporate America to be a "control freak." That means executives must end their denial about the severity of negative news, while corporate communicators have to go above and beyond what they do now to protect their company. "A lot of communicators just go through the motions," he says. "They write a crisis communications plan, but they don't test it or review it annually. They conduct media training but don't hold refreshers on a regular basis. They often don't role play with executives before an interview. Like Tiger Woods, you must practice your technique constantly. That's the only way to win."

Communicators can also take the offensive – and penetrate the media's psyche. "Corporate communicators are covered by the same first amendment rights as the media," Braud explains, "and they have the right to inquire into reporters' motives." If communications professionals can penetrate the media's psyche, they can predict the behavior of reporters, editors, and producers. They owe it to their organization to go that extra mile. Doing so will also enhance their reputation and increase their value.

"You have the right to control the way the press covers your organization," says Braud. "Obviously, you don't have control over the final edit or the final rewrite, but you have control of everything leading up to that." You don't have to guess what the media will do; you have the ability to find out ahead of time.

How? By asking lots of tough questions. Before agreeing to give the media access to your company and your management, conduct extensive interviews with the producer or the reporter to find out where the story is going. When you get your questions answered, you begin to discover what the reporter wants to do. Nine times out of 10, you will be able to isolate specific topics and explain them. The result: the reporter will have to start discarding information and speculation that would otherwise have gone into the story.

True, some members of the media will resist. After all, if they tell you everything they believe and you show them where their assumptions are incorrect, they will see their story start to evaporate right before their eyes. They don't want to see that happen. To encourage them to talk to you, lay down some ground rules. "When you tell a reporter or a producer that you are willing to cooperate and be completely open – add that you expect the same from them," Braud suggests. "Tell them that you will share information with them and in return you want them to share information with you. They usually agree."

Still, many communicators balk at asking a long list of questions. They know reporters and producers don't want to answer them all. They may also feel that their inquiries are intrusive, even rude, and that their persistence will anger the media. But their determination to get what they need will demonstrate their strength and intelligence, leading the media to be more careful checking their facts. "The media needs to know that you are going to hold them to such a high standard that there will be hell to pay if they don't live up to it or get the facts wrong," says Braud.

You will also be able to evaluate the situation. Why wait until after the fact to discover that the story angle was motivated by personal wants or needs? Braud remembers one network magazine producer who wanted to do a report on sexual dysfunction in females. Her hook was "Is there a female version of Viagra?" "My client was a sex therapist at a major teaching medical center and her research had to do with unlocking mental blocks to having good sex," says Braud. "The producer kept trying to steer the story and get the therapist to discuss issues outside of her cutting-edge research."

In preliminary conversations with the producer, Braud concluded that the producer suffered from the sexual dysfunction she was exploring in the story,

that she was embarrassed about seeking help, and that she wanted to “force” the story so she could obtain information for herself. After meeting with the producer herself, the therapist agreed. In the end, she decided not to participate because her research did not fit the story angle. The last thing she wanted was to have her work misrepresented.

“Communicators must level the playing field,” says Braud. “You need to know that you have both the right and the responsibility to probe deeply into reporters’ psyches. Give yourself the license to flush out the media’s motives. If you don’t, your organization and its stakeholders will suffer for it.”

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