

Transitions

- That's an interesting question, it reminds me of . . .
- Before I forget, I wanted to mention . . .
- Let me put it in perspective . . .
- What's important to remember, however . . .
- What I really want to talk to you about is . . .
- What's most important is . . .
- And don't forget . . .
- Before we get off that subject/topic, let me add . . .
- That's not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is . . .
- That's a good point, but I think you'd be interested in knowing that . . .
- What I'm really here to talk to you about is . . .
- Let me just add . . .
- That reminds me . . .
- Let me answer you by saying that . . .
- Let me give you some background information . . .
- Let's take a closer look at . . .
- That's an important point because . . .
- What that means is . . .
- Another thing to remember is . . .
- Now that you've covered _____, let's move on to _____ . . .
- You may be asking why _____ is true . . .
- While _____ is certainly important, don't forget that _____ . . .
- As I said . . .

Flags

Flag your messages by calling attention:

- The key thing is...
- The best part about...
- What you really need to know is...
- There are three points we need to remember...

Turning Negatives to Positives

- Yes, that's been said, but let's not forget that...
- I agree with you about _____, and I think it illustrates an interesting point...
- What we do know is...
- The real question here is...
- As I said before...

Appearing Your Best On-Camera

Television is our most pervasive medium, and a few simple tips can greatly improve your on-camera appearance...

- Never wear white (recognizing that sometimes there is no time to change)
- Look at the reporter, not the camera, unless you are in a “Nightline” studio setting
- Keep your chin up (cuts years and pounds off your image!)
- Keep jewelry minimal
- Remove name badges
- Don’t wear sunglasses
- Tilt of the head while listening to a question shows interest
- Express sympathy, compassion, concern for those impacted by a situation, victims, etc.
- Stand up straight
- Use live-eye interviews to your advantage
- Straighten tie, scarf, jacket (men should wear a jacket if wearing a tie)
- Suggest an interesting background
- Don’t point to a particular location or incident scene
- Speak in terms that the general public can understand
- Don’t rely on hand gestures – camera may only be on head and shoulders
- Keep still – no rocking back and forth
- Use makeup if it is offered to you – you’ll look better on camera, which makes the agency look better too
- Smile if appropriate, keep somber image if appropriate, never look at a reporter in disgust, disdain, or anger
- Know that your three minutes of great interview responses will wind up as ten seconds or less on the air
- Call someone you know to record the interview – it’s great training for next time

The Art of Anticipation: Developing Effective Q-and-As

**Public Relations *Tactics*
Walton, Susan Balcom, 12/2006**

The news release has been sent. The employees have been informed. Your company's big announcement appears to be going as planned. And then, right in the middle of an interview, a reporter tosses out a question you and your executives aren't expecting. Instead of scoring a direct hit with a key message, you suddenly find yourself stumbling over your words.

How do you avoid this scenario? With complete preparation, including a good Q-and-A.

The Q-and-A is a fundamental part of any important announcement your company or client is developing. More than any other PR tool, a Q-and-A helps you target your communication to your audience's informational needs. It also enables you to transition back to your core messages without leaving the audience feeling that you haven't answered their questions.

Why a Q-and-A is essential

When an organization issues a major announcement, the news release should focus on the few most critical points. However, it's also wise to provide context and additional detail to ensure your story is understood and accurately reported. One approach is to provide a backgrounder, a collection of supplemental information distributed at the same time and to the same audiences as the news release. A Q-and-A, however, goes a step further — anticipating and providing answers for additional questions those audiences might ask.

A good Q-and-A frames questions the way that they might be posed by a stakeholder —and answers those questions as directly as possible. The act of thinking through a consistent set of responses is valuable preparation for any spokesperson, even if the questions you actually receive are worded differently from those in your Q-and-A document.

Steps to producing an effective Q-and-A

1. Brainstorm stakeholder questions.

Gather a group of people from your organization which represents the viewpoints of each stakeholder audience. The departments represented could include human resources (for employees), government or community relations (for government leaders and community organizations), sales and marketing (for customers), supply chain/purchasing (for suppliers), and investor relations (for the investment community). A face-to-face discussion is best, but if time deadlines or distance prevent it, a conference call will do.

In this brainstorming session, review the announcement and related key messages, and then generate the questions each stakeholder audience is likely to ask. Encourage the group to draw on their past experiences. Think broadly and consider all possibilities.

2. Tailor your answers.

Be aware that the answers to a given question may vary based on the needs of each stakeholder audience. For example, if you are announcing the closure of a manufacturing facility, you can expect a question about the impact of that closure. The answer you develop for employees would

address any potential job losses, but the answer for customers would focus on whether the closure might disrupt product supply.

3. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself.

Information from Q-and-As is most often used as needed as the appropriate question arises, rather than in unbroken linear form. Repeating the same concepts in different answers isn't redundant; in fact, it can help increase the chances that your key messages will be stated and heard.

For example, if your company is announcing a new product, you could be asked about how you succeeded in bringing this product to market. Your response might be that "Innovation has been a top priority of our company for many years, and we've focused our resources on new product development." The same concepts —innovation is a top priority and focused resources — might also be a part of the answer to other questions, such as "What differentiates you from your competitors?" or "What are your company's business goals?" In each case, you can use innovation as the link back to your key product messages and go on to describe other innovations that make this product best in class.

4. Tackle the tough ones.

After you've struggled to come up with a good answer to a difficult or sensitive question, it's tempting to simply remove the question from your Q-and-A. Don't. Remember that eliminating a tough question is no guarantee that it won't get asked. Make an effort to answer every single tough question on your list as honestly and openly as possible, even if the only thing you can say is, "We don't have all the information right now, but we'll get back to you as soon as we do."

5. Keep it concise.

Each answer should be concise enough that the person using the Q-and-A can read through it a few times and pick up the thread of the discussion. Complex, multiple paragraph answers are not helpful to either spokespeople or audiences. A good Q-and-A response is no more than three to four standard sentences long. It's also a good idea to limit the number of Q-and-As in your final document to those that the brainstorming group believes are most likely to come up.

6. Decide whether to broadly publish your Q-and-A.

Once a Q-and-A has been completed, you'll need to decide whether to publish it (on a company Web site or in a newsletter, for example) or simply provide the Q-and-A to spokespeople who will share the information verbally.

Publishing your Q-and-A is usually a good idea if:

- The information is straightforward and easy to understand. Highly technical or complex information may need to be explained by a subject expert rather than left up to individual interpretation.
- It doesn't matter who shares the information. Since published Q-and-As may ultimately be distributed through many channels, they should not depend on a specific spokesperson to achieve their impact. In some cases, however, a Q-and-A should be linked to a specific source or spokesperson. A company Q-and-A about the construction of a new facility, for instance, might best be communicated verbally by the CEO rather than published so that audiences know the project has top management support.
- The information is not sensitive and applies to general audiences. Broad distribution is usually best if the information is intended for broad audiences. However, some

information is sensitive or audience-specific and should not be shared widely. For example, your organization might be advised not to discuss an ongoing lawsuit, even if you are asked questions about it. Sensitive issues such as layoffs might be best discussed individually with affected employees rather than published.

- The Q-and-A contains information that audiences need to act on. Q-and-As about special programs, promotions, recalls, etc. may contain information such as consumer hotline numbers that audiences need to know. Such Q-and-As should be distributed in print or electronic version to key audiences as quickly as possible.

Watch, learn and improve

When your Q-and-A is complete and the moment of truth arrives, pay attention to which questions get asked — and which stakeholders ask them. Track audience response to the content and detail of your answers. Ask yourself: Did the Q-and-A meet my audiences' needs and reflect my organization's messages? By acting on what you learn, you can continue to refine and update your Q-and-A. Better yet, you'll be able to anticipate and produce a superior one next time around.

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Why Good Companies Say Dumb Things

By Maurice E. Healy

PR&Marketing Network News

Being quoted in a news story often is viewed as a high-wire act by many business executives. Part of this anxiety comes from occasionally seeing embarrassing or simply daft comments in the press attributed to seemingly intelligent business people. At the same time, most businesses have a responsibility (and an enlightened self-interest) to create a dialogue with the media and to respond to press questions. The majority of U.S. companies now recognize that talking to the press is part of doing business. Increasingly rare is the situation expressed by Tom Cooper, former president of Bank of America, who noted, "Business people complain like hell about what's in the newspaper, then they turn around and refuse to talk to reporters."

Nonetheless, misunderstanding and distrust still mark the general business approach to the press, and interviews are put in the category of necessary but distasteful. How can business executives fulfill their responsibility to answer press questions, yet have confidence that the comments attributed to them and their companies will not be embarrassing? As a first step, they might see if their own organizations' shortcomings are reflected in the following list of ten major reasons why good companies say dumb things:

Shooting from the Hip - Talking before thinking is an error that cuts across all levels of an organization. It can arise from the unrestrained exuberance of management, exaggerations by line personnel or the release of unverified information by staff people. Intelligent comments in the press most often are the result of accurate and up-to-date information combined with forethought and preparation.

Reporting Relationship - Generally, the greater the distance between the CEO and communications staff, the greater an organization's propensity for saying dumb things. In some companies, communications is placed under the marketing or legal function and broad corporate goals may be, quite naturally, subsumed to the more narrow objectives of the operating or staff units. Under marketing, corporate comments may trend toward the promotional, while the lawyer's natural urge to protect against liability by saying little, can result in corporate comments that seem obtuse or unresponsive.

Organizational Hurdles - Some companies have such a complex and cumbersome organizational structure that a timely response to media inquiries is nearly impossible. In these instances, a newspaper could go to press with a story leveling charges against a company, noting that the company response was "No comment."

Attempting to Control Information - Some organizations seek to control information, particularly bad news, with the goal of limiting negative reaction. But attempting to hide the facts of a story only puts a company in a position of covering up, severely damaging its reputation. The tendency to stonewall reaches absurdity when managements face problems and say, "Don't tell the communications people, they may have to talk to the media."

Failure to Anticipate, Plan and Prepare - In crisis situations, a company's communication ability is severely tested, often bringing a higher incidence of potentially damaging comments. Through effective crisis communications planning, a company can anticipate and better manage its comments in stressful situations.

"Why Should We Talk to the Press?" -- An enlightened approach to the media is not universal. Some managements do not accept the legitimate right of the media to ask questions of public companies or large private entities. This attitude often is combined with a lack of appreciation for the power of the media to influence, for good or bad, the perception of the company. Talking to the media can help an organization build a reservoir of understanding and goodwill with constituencies and the public.

Who Talks to the Press? - Some managements still fall into the trap of saying, "Have the PR people talk to the media, that's what we pay them for." Reporters are quite willing to talk with knowledgeable sources, but they also want access to the people who are managing and operating the company. There are issues and concerns which management must be open to discuss with the media. Otherwise, the organization looks foolish or appears to have a siege mentality. Management can help reporters write from an informed position, and more readily assure accurate, fair and balanced coverage.

Inadequate Briefing - Some embarrassing comments in the press are the result of inadequate preparation. Any dialogue with the media should be taken seriously, and briefings by media relations professionals can help executives tell their company's story more effectively and focus their comments on the interests of the reporter.

Unauthorized, Unprepared, Undaunted - A survey conducted for a major company found that individuals who were the very least qualified to talk to the media had the greatest confidence in their ability to answer press questions; while more knowledgeable and experienced individuals expressed caution. Having unauthorized or unprepared people talking to the press without fear can be a communications nightmare. While reporters may bridle at an organization's desire to funnel inquiries through a company's PR staff, this practice helps a company provide qualified spokespersons.

Communications People Not Involved - Most CEOs would not consider a financial issue without input from the chief financial officer nor make a legal decision without the general counsel's advice. However, many managements make policy and operating decisions with vast communications implications, with little or no involvement by the company's public relations professionals. One company, for example, made a quick personnel decision to have employees sign a silence agreement as part of their severance package. The furor rapidly escalated to a nationwide story based on the company's alleged attempt to stifle first amendment rights. The story above also is an example of an organization inescapably saying dumb things in the press because it has, in fact, taken dumb actions. Here, there is no remedy but to substitute good actions for bad actions, admit error and apologize.

Contrary to popular culture, the core of media relations and press communications is not the "spin doctoring" of messages. Communication that best helps an organization achieve its goals is based on a foundation of accuracy, honesty, completeness and candor. Certainly, the press is not perfect and errors inevitably will arise in stories. However, an efficient organizational structure, effective communications staff, and appropriate policies and practices can decrease dramatically the instances of good companies saying dumb things in the media.

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