

One of the continuing problems facing a top executive or spokesman of any organization in times of stress or major change is how to tell his story to the press, radio or the television reporter. The dilemma is that the official is fearful of putting his foot in his mouth by saying the wrong thing.

"The difference between the right word and the almost right word," Mark Twain once observed, "is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Since Mark Twain's day, a plague of fireflies have proliferated the press arena. The wrong words have been uttered by politicians, governmental spokesmen, and corporate executives and have set a small swarm of lightning bugs flickering to the media.

The trouble is that spokesmen know that they are at a disadvantage in talking with a reporter who is skilled at asking provocative questions in order to get provocative, interesting and controversial answers. But the advantage need not be so one-sided. There are certain guidelines that any executive or spokesman can learn and remember which will enable him to meet the press without any postmortems necessary.

So, with your pencils ready and your recorders recording, this paper will attempt to outline the rules of the reporter's game in order that you can communicate your story effectively.

Our first inquiry centers on why the business spokesman, the politician or interviewee cannot find a way to tell his story through the news media. Is the press really dominated by hostile, anti-establishment reporters? Many corporate spokesmen are convinced that today's news media, or at least their young reporters, are imbued with a fundamental bias against them. However, that assessment is not shared by NBC Commentator, David Brinkley, who reminds us, "When a reporter asks questions, he is not working for the person

*For instance,*

^ \*Time Magazine recently reported that only about 30% of the people have confidence in business leadership.

If indeed the working press, reporters, and correspondents bear an anti-business animosity, opinion polls tell us that such attitudes are quite representative of public opinion generally in the United States today.\* Rather than dismissing newsmen as hostile, these may be the very ones <sup>with</sup> whom business ought to increase its communication, because they typify the attitudes of millions of Americans.

Frequently, the corporate spokesman finds his life and circle of friends and contacts circumscribed within the territory of his management team, his luncheon club and country club/ <sup>while</sup> the working reporter's duties bring him into daily contact with broad strata of the population, ranging from politicians to factory workers and activist leaders. He cannot be dismissed lightly. Nor should he be written off.

It would seem essential for the spokesman to learn how to tell their stories effectively to the press, radio, and television reporters. But there is more to it than that. Unless one knows how to tell what CBS commentator, Eric Sevareid calls "the simple truth," one may fail to communicate. Certainly the spokesmen would be as intelligent as members of the working press, but they usually are unskilled in the art of effective communication. Businessmen are often so frightened or wary of the reporters that they come across looking suspicious. And there's no reason to be. They should put their best foot forward, speak out candidly, assuming they have nothing to hide.

It should be remembered that the skills of managements and other endeavors are not the same as those required to deal with the news media. Reporters are trained in the skills of interviewing. They excel in their ability to talk with someone and unearth a newsworthy story, one that will stimulate their interest on readers. That is why they were selected; that is their



This presentation could be filled with examples of boners, indiscretions and insensitive statements voiced by various spokesmen to news reporters. My brief excursion into this field convinces me that there is no more mysterious reason for the spokesman's failure to communicate effectively with the news media than it simply does not know how. For instance the businessman, rarely fearful of meeting their stockholders or their bankers, will tremble before the newsman for fear he will accidentally or deliberately misquote them or pull their words out of context.

This can indeed happen and it occasionally does. But every reporter knows that if he sins or errs more than once or twice, his job will be endangered. Newspapers do not like to print corrections of their errors—only a few do—including the Kentucky New Era and the Courier Journal, BUT EDITORS LIKE EVEN LESS TO SEE ERRORS BREAK into print or be broadcast on radio or television.

But a recorded interview is hell for the executive who says the wrong things. If he puts his foot in his mouth, his words will be quotable, and, most likely, quoted. No longer will he be able to blame the reporter for misquotation.

Business managers, governmental spokesmen and politicians know from experience that newsmen will not hesitate to cover a story that may be damaging to the company, bureaucrat or elected official. From this perception, it is easy to conclude that reporters are basically hostile to business or government. However, both often fail to understand that the reporter's first responsibility is to produce a newsworthy story that will interest his audience. Frankly, the reporter does not care whether that "public interest story" will help or hinder the company, the elected official or the city or county government. The reporter will select, from his bag of techniques, whatever method he believes will produce an interesting and informative story.

Indeed, the average general assignment reporter is looking for his big story in order that he can graduate from his small-town beat into

So the lesson is clear: if one has something to say, he must present it to the reporter in an interesting way. A skilled reporter, hot on the trail of a newsworthy story, uses standard techniques to get it. One should know what these techniques are, and to decide that it is worth the effort to learn to cope with them. Kerryn King, Texaco's senior vice-president, put it sharply and well when he told a recent public relations conference:

" Industry, and especially the petroleum industry, has an urgent need to dispel its reputation for secrecy and its reputation for indifference to public opinion that this supposed secrecy implies. I believe that when you once lay the full facts before a journalist, he is less likely to be taken in by critics who know less about your business than he does.

" The more information you can get out, the more light you can shed, especially on misunderstood economic matters, the better your standing with the public, in my opinion."

A principal reason that people become frightened during a crisis is misinformation or non-information. Rather than abandon the field to misinformation, it is better to learn the rules of critics, journalistic or otherwise. These guidelines are simple and they can be learned. There are two general criteria and ten specific guidelines to learn and remember. The balance of this paper shall be devoted to these.

First, it is necessary to have a sound attitude. That attitude is not one of arrogance or false humility. Rather, it is an attitude in which the spokesman respects his own competence and greater knowledge of his own subject, but realistically recognizes that the reporter or critic is skilled in the art of asking provocative questions, hopefully to elicit provocative, interesting and perhaps

press interview. Never should one walk into a meeting with the press, planning to "play it by ear" meaning, of course, to improvise. Preparation is essential.\* The best preparation consists of anticipating the most likely questions, attempting to research the facts, and structuring effective answers to be held ready for use. Probably it is unwise to carry such notes into the interview. It would be better instead to have the answers well in mind, although not literally memorized.

Let us now turn to the specific rules of effective communication.

1. Talk from the viewpoint of the public interest

This important rule is usually difficult for the corporate executive. This is understandable because when you have spent years struggling to manage the company, it is difficult to step back and look at your problem from a different perspective. For example, often during negotiations for a new union contract, the corporate spokesman will tell the press, "we can't afford the increase the union is asking." That may be true, but why should the public be concerned with the company's financial problems? Also the employees often respond with resentment. It would be much better to say, "We'd like to give our employees the increase they seek. But if our costs go up too much, our customers won't buy. That will hurt us, and in the end, it will endanger our employees' jobs."

Sometimes, in their efforts to present their story from the public viewpoint, companies seem to assume the pose of philanthropic institutions. They claim to be acting in the public interest, but to the public, such talk falls on unhearing ears. The public knows, or believes, that a company acts primarily in its own interest. When this self-interest is not frankly admitted, credibility is endangered. The beverage company who launches a campaign for collecting and recycling its containers can frankly admit that it does not want to irritate the public by having its beer cans stewn across the landscape. Because this is the truth, the public



will find the entire story of the company's environmental efforts more credible.

2. SPEAK IN PERSONAL TERMS WHENEVER POSSIBLE

Most activities involve many people in decision making and most spokesmen learn early in their careers to say "we" rather than "I". Yet frequently, the word "we" only reinforces the public's image of companies and government as impersonal monoliths in which no one retains his individuality or has individual responsibility. One who can speak in terms of his personal experience will create a favorable impression.

3. IF YOU DO NOT WANT SOME STATEMENT QUOTED, DO NOT MAKE IT.

Mike Herndon of the Kentucky New Era tells me that he never wants anyone to give him an "off the record" statement. Even though the information is readily available elsewhere, if published, the spokesman assumes that a breach of trust has occurred and that the groundrules have been broken. Therefore, "off the record" statements should be avoided. Really, there is no such thing as "off the record" remarks anyway. If the mayor tells something to a reporter off the record, it may not be used with his name attached. But it will turn up in the same published article, minus his name, and with the qualifying phrase added, "Meanwhile, it has been learned from other sources that..." The damage is done. An experienced spokesman quickly learns that if he does not want something published or used, he should not divulge it to the reporter on any basis.

"Be prepared to see anything you say in print, regardless of the circumstances or groundrules," the Press Secretary to the President has advised me. One sometimes assumes that an invisible line divides informal conversation from the beginning of the formal interview, but not such line exists in the reporter's mind. Remember too, that what is said may be used as a basis for further probing elsewhere.

4. STATE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACT AT THE BEGINNING

The spokesman usually lists the facts that lead to his final conclusion and recommendation. There are psychological and technical reasons why the most important fact should be stated at the beginning. People tend to remember most clearly the first thing that is said, not the last. Technical considerations

be available for its publication. So, he has been trained to put the most important fact at the beginning, using the following paragraphs to report the items of declining importance. If the most important fact is buried at the bottom of the story, it may simply be chopped off in the composing room to fit the available space.

On television, time limitations and deadlines often make it impossible to screen all filmed material for selection of best footage; frequently program producers are compelled to select segments from the beginning of a film. The initial statement will usually survive, even though the full explanation may be cut.

5. DO NOT ARGUE WITH THE REPORTER OR LOSE YOUR COOL

Understand that the newsman seeks an interesting story and will use whatever techniques he needs to obtain it. One cannot win an argument with the reporter in whose power the published story lies. Since the spokesman has allowed himself to be interviewed, he should use the interview as an opportunity to answer questions in a way that will present his story fairly and adequately. If the reporter interrupts the speaker, it is not rudeness; it is a deliberate technique that means he is not satisfied with the response he is getting. The solution is to respond more directly and more clearly .

One should never ask questions of the reporter out of his own anger and frustration. I remember the following example. During the City of Hopkinsville, Policewoman litigation, a reporter for a certain upstate metropolitan newspaper asked a certain downstate City attorney "How many black women do you have on the Hopkinsville Police Department?"  
City Attorney - " How many black women editors do you have on your newspaper?"  
Reporter - "I'm here to ask you the questions."

One may occasionally win the battle with that sort of tactic with the Fourth Estate.

the reporter's own hostility.

6. IF A QUESTION CONTAINS OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE OR SIMPLY WORDS YOU DO NOT LIKE, DO NOT REPEAT THEM, EVEN TO DENY THEM.

Reporters often use the gambit of putting words into the subject's mouth. It is easy. Politicians do it too. The technique works like this: the reporter uses colorful language in his question. For example, Mr. Jones, wouldn't you describe your oil company's profits this year as a bonanza? " Mr. Jones bites, and responds, "No, our profits are not a bonanza." The headline will read , "Oil profits no Bonanza, Executive Says."

Most spokesmen have never noticed, but the reporter knows well that his questions will never be quoted in his article; only the interviewee's answers will be. It is not important that the reporter's question is hostile or loaded with inaccurate language; the important thing is how the question is answered. As long as the executive or person being interviewed, does not repeat the offensive language, even to deny it, it will not appear in the published report.

On some occasions, overzealous reporters have been known with dubious ethics, to ask a spokesman to comment on a so-called "fact," which may be an outright untruth. Usually, the quoted Several years ago, after an unexplained fish kill in Little River, a fact has the ring of plausibility. certain Hopkinsville Plant manager was asked by a reporter if he would care to comment on the statement in Ecology Magazine that his plant was one of the worst polluters in this State. The manager immediately became defensive and insisted that his plant did not really pollute too badly considering all the other sources of pollution in Little River. The manager did not know that no magazine called Ecology exists. Of course, the false "quotation" was never published.

So be wary of a trap, particularly a question based on a "fact." If you are unsure, you might say, "I'm not familiar with that quotation," and then proceed to answer the question in your own positive way.



7. IF THE REPORTER ASKS A DIRECT QUESTION, HE IS ENTITLED TO AN EQUALLY DIRECT ANSWER

Sometimes executives who are interviewed complain afterward that they answered all the questions the reporter asked, but that they never got a chance to make their points in a positive way and they blame the reporter. They have played a ping-pong game. The reporter asks a question; they answer it. He asks another, they answer it. Back and forth the ball bounces but the spokesman does not know how to squeeze in what he regards as his important points. However, a simple "yes" or "no" answer is not interesting to the reporter. Usually he will respond by trying to provoke the spokesman into making a more informative and colorfully expressed response.

8. IF A SPOKESMAN DOES NOT KNOW THE ANSWER TO A QUESTION, HE SHOULD SIMPLY SAY, I DON'T KNOW, BUT I'LL FIND OUT FOR YOU.

This response does not make the spokesman look ignorant. Nor is his lack of knowledge newsworthy. Even in an interview filmed for television, such an answer will find itself on the cutting room floor. However, if the person states that "I don't know," it might appear to the reporter or the viewer that he is being evasive. Of course if the spokesman agrees to put the reporter in touch with someone who can supply the information, the interviewee assumes the responsibility of following through to ensure that the requested information is provided.

9. TELL THE TRUTH, EVEN IF IT HURTS  
post- Watergate

In this/era of skepticism, hostility and challenge, the fact remains that the most difficult task of all sometimes is simply to tell the truth. This rule can be embarrassing sometimes for us all. No one likes to be embarrassed; therefore spokesmen sometimes tell the press and public half truths (which are, of course, half lies.) Telling the public that the company "goofed" is difficult but

credibility later when the reporter confirms it from another source.

Countless examples can be found in government and business where attempts have been made to conceal or to grudgingly admit only portions of the truth which is unfavorable. It is true that the public and the press do not like to hear bad news and will judge both adversely because of it, but fair minded people will understand the difficulties and will understand that no one is perfect; that each makes errors despite one's best judgments and best efforts. What the public will not understand or tolerate, however, is dishonesty. Concealment and lying will be neither forgotten nor forgiven by the press and public alike.

An example can be found in the aviation industry. In earlier years, whenever a commercial airliner crashed, certain airlines had standing policies to rush work crews to the site and paint out the company name and emblems on the wrecked aircraft before photographs were permitted. Today that has changed and most carriers cooperate fully with the media and furnish all available information. The theory is that the crash will be reported anyway and it is better to cooperate with the press and get the story covered and forgotten as quickly as possible.

#### 10. RETAIN A SENSE OF HUMOR

As with so many facets of life, in meeting the media, we take ourselves too seriously. Placed in a proper perspective, a clever and humorous remark will charm the press corp and the listener alike. Probably John F. Kennedy possessed <sup>this</sup> characteristic more than any other President in our time. Telling your story to an apathetic or hostile audience is not easy, but it worth doing and it can be done successfully.

Now that you know the reporter's game, you can play the game too and look upon meeting the press as an opportunity, rather than a cause of fear.

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February 20, 1976

Mr. Ron Neesen  
Presidential Press Secretary  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20004

Dear Mr. Neesen:

I am preparing a paper for presentation to a local literary society entitled, "How to Meet the Press."

We know that reporters ask provocative questions in order to obtain interesting and newsworthy responses. Yet frequently, the politician, governmental spokesman or corporate executive puts his foot in his mouth by saying the wrong things.

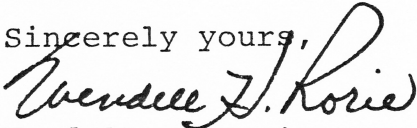
Interesting examples of boners, indiscretions, and insensitive statements which you have encountered as a newsman would be appreciated.

Your suggestions to spokesmen as to how to tell their stories effectively to the press would be helpful. Others have suggested the following points:

1. Tell the truth, even if it hurts
2. Do not exaggerate the facts
3. Talk from the viewpoint of the public interest
4. Speak in personal terms whenever possible
5. If you do not want some statement quoted, don't make it
6. Do not argue with the reporter
7. If the reporter asks a direct question, give a direct answer

Your additions to this list or any comments based on your extensive experience would aid me materially.

I thank you for your courtesy and best wishes for your continued success.

Sincerely yours,  
  
Wendell H. Rorie

WR:mj



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 16, 1976

Dear Mr. Rorie:

Thank you for your recent letter concerning the paper you are preparing for presentation to a local literary society entitled, "How to Meet the Press."

The several points you have listed are excellent and cover the most important areas. Others that come to mind include:

- Think before you speak;
- Be sure of your facts and do not guess or speculate;
- Speak on-the-record whenever possible and be sure the groundrules are fully understood if you go off-the-record;
- Be prepared to see anything you say in print, regardless of the circumstances or groundrules;
- Retain a sense of humor.

I would be most interested in seeing a copy of your paper should you wish to share it with me.

With appreciation for your good wishes and best regards,

Sincerely,



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to the President

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