

Winning Strategies for Handling Negative Issues & Hostile Reporters

by Brian N. Regrut, APR

In his first job out of college Brian Regrut was tapped to face both the New York and national media to explain huge S.E.C. fines being levied on the firm for which he worked.

After leaving Wall Street he continued handling difficult situations for three Bell System companies during a twenty-year career. There, he had to deal with the media during customer protests, rate cases, natural disasters, and strikes.

But, it has been as a protest leader and media trainer for activists in social causes that this former reporter honed his skills in dealing with an adversarial news media.

These skills came in handy when Brian had to help a national fast-food firm recover from bad publicity surrounding a murder, robbery and firing of a hero. They also helped when a badly handled customer service issue escalated into a crisis for a leading telecommunications firm.

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In the HOT SEAT

◆ Your company is planning to close offices in twenty cities and the top brass asks **you** to explain to the news media how the closings will improve customer service.

◆ The manager of one of your plants calls and tells you that a mob, including civil rights leaders and the news media, are in front of his facility demanding an explanation for the company's alleged mistreatment of its only two non-white employees, and **you** need to talk to them.

◆ Your company filed its second major rate increase in as many years on a Friday afternoon, and **you** are the only one in the office to field inquiries from the news media.

◆ The boss of your non-profit organization is earning more than some Fortune 500 CEOs and **you** have been tapped to tell the media why.

◆ A network news crew is in the parking lot and wants **you** to explain why your company is polluting the river behind your plant.

Thankfully, these are not everyday occurrences. But, if you are a spokesperson for an organization, sooner or later you will find yourself defending unpopular policies, facing adversarial news media personnel or trying to explain your side of the story in a difficult situation.

Sometimes the reporters will swarm on you like locusts, other times they may try to catch you off guard with an innocent-sounding telephone call. Either way, if you are not prepared you may say or do the wrong thing.

These tips are designed to help you respond when you find yourself "In the Hot Seat."

1. Know who you are talking to.

You have a right to know who is asking you questions, and why. Find out and write down the name and phone number of the reporter. Correctly identify the media outlet he or she represents and find out to whom he will submit his story.

➔ When reporters know that you know the name of their editors or producers, they will likely be more careful in how they use your remarks.

2. Know how your words will be used—and when.

Ask the reporter: Is this a news story? If so, what angle are you taking? Who else are you talking to? What is your position on this issue? What is the general thrust of the article? Is it assigned, or are you going to try to sell it. When and where will it appear? May I see it before you submit it for publication or airing?

➔ You probably won't get many of these questions answered, but just by asking them, you have taken control of the interview.

3. Decide in advance what you want to say.

Don't wait until a reporter asks a question to try to formulate a response. Anticipate questions and

decide what you will say and what you won't say, and stick to your guidelines.

➔ The words you wish you could take back are probably the ones that will end up in print.

4. Don't respond immediately.

When you must answer questions take time to formulate good responses. Don't let a pushy reporter, or a rolling tape force you into weak or stupid answers.

➔ See Number 3

5. Reframe questions.

Before answering, reframe questions so you can give the answers you want. This is especially true of TV where only 15 to 30 seconds of what you say may actually be used. Make sure the new people air what you want them to air by only giving them the responses you want viewers to hear.

➔ When you control the question, you control the answer.

6. Take control of the interview environment.

If a TV reporter asks you to stand or sit in a certain place or in a certain way, ask why. Keep in mind that the use of a tight face shot filmed from below appears menacing. Filmed from too high makes you look weak.

If you are tall, ask to sit down, or at the very least ask that the cameraman not use a tight shot.

If you are tall and the reporter is short, squat or drop to one knee to talk to the reporter eye to eye. If you are sitting, invite the reporter and the cameraman to come down to your level.

If you are on a TV panel with an opponent try to sit between the interviewer and the opponent so you can use your body to block the opponent from conversation.

➔ You may not have all your wishes granted, but many reporters, even hostile ones, will accommodate you if you treat them as peers.

7. Take control of the interview content.

Don't become enamored with media personalities. Keep in mind that the ones you encounter know far less about your organization than you do. Some, especially feature writers, will do their homework before talking with you, but the day-to-day general news reporter, will just be covering another story and needs you to give them the content.

➔ You are helping reporters when you give them the questions and the answers.

8. Find something you agree on.

If you have "warm-up" time with a reporter, try to find something you have in common, something you agree on, even if it is only that the day is hot or that you both like to read novels.

➔ If you can neutralize an adversarial reporter by personalizing the relationship you can win twice— first, with the current story and second, with the ones that come in the future

9. Ask questions.

If you don't understand a question or statement by a reporter, or if the question seems out of line with the rest of the interview, ask questions of your own. You don't have to answer every question or respond to every statement. When you get into difficult areas, ask questions, particularly rhetorical questions, that you can then answer on your terms.

➔ Reporters don't mind if you ask questions, particularly if the question help to clarify issues.

10. Don't attack people; attack actions and philosophies.

Reporters love controversy. That's what sells newspapers and gets viewer's tuning in. Avoid controversy when you can. If activists or government officials or competitors are attacking your company, resist the desire to go after individuals. If necessary—and only if you do not

have a sufficiently compelling counter argument—attack their actions and philosophies. If you do attack, use comparable force. Don't try to overwhelm a small attack, or casual comment with mountains of data and don't try to fight mountains of data with flippant remarks.

➔ If you refrain from attacking adversaries, you remove one element of potential conflict that the reporter may be counting on to make sure your troubles land on the front page.

11. Use easy to understand illustrations that support facts!

Photos, graphs, charts, along with parables and word pictures can be effective tools for communicating ideas. For instance, instead of describing a chemical manufacturing process in terms of vats and boilers and compressors and pumps and extruders, use an illustration of baking a cake. Explain how mixing various ingredients, transporting them from the mixing bowl to the cake pan and then to the oven where they are transformed into a finished product is like what goes on at the plant. The process now sounds much less threatening.

➔ Reporters like good illustrations that help them understand and tell your side of a story.

12. Don't acknowledge arguments of your opposition.

If there is a chance that you will be quoted out of context (and there usually is) don't acknowledge your opposition. Keep your arguments strong by focusing on your position. The exception is in an interview for a feature story, or a lengthy news article. There you have the ability to explore an issue in depth and pick apart arguments of your opposition.

13. Memorize your sound bite.

If you expect to be quoted for TV or radio, decide in advance what you want viewers or listeners to hear, and make sure that is what they

hear. Memorize the 15 to 25 second sound bite you want on the air, and give it in response to every question.

➔ If you are quoted at all, viewers will hear what you want them to hear. See box below.

14. For print media, give key points first and last.

Get your message out quickly, giving your key points first regardless of the questions asked by the reporter. At the conclusion of the interview, review your key points. Don't wait for the reporter to end the conversation. If she closes her pad and says "thanks" stop her and restate your first point...and ask her to write it down.

➔ You are helping the reporter when you emphasize the key points you want to communicate at the end of the conversation, because that's when the reporter is writing the story in her mind.

15. Don't let a reporter lead you where you don't want to go.

A good reporter may try to lead you away from your central point. Refuse to allow the conversation to go where you don't want it to go. He will be looking for a fault in your reasoning, or will try to get you to side with the opposition. Worse yet, he may back you into a corner where you will be tempted to say something you shouldn't or didn't

intend to say. You will find it hard to get back on track unless you're disciplined about restating your central theme and forcing the discussion back to it.

➔ Before you answer a question, ask yourself what the next question might be. If it is likely to take you off on a tangent, conclude your current answer with a restatement of your central theme or premise.

16. Frame answers as questions.

Questions get readers and viewers to think. Where appropriate answer a question with a question. For example, in response to the question: "Don't you think the salary of your CEO is excessive and obscene?" you could reply: "How important is it to have as the CEO of your station, a person who can manage the operation so that there's plenty of money for your news operation?"

➔ If you can stimulate the reporter to think about your question, you have begun to breakdown the barriers between you and her.

17. Know your facts.

Don't bluff. If you don't know an answer, tell the reporter you don't know but you will find the answer. Then make sure you get back to the reporter in a timely manner.

➔ Reporters are usually working against a deadline. To the extent that you can help them meet that deadline you will improve your relationship with them and improve the chances that negative coverage will be minimized.

18. Become familiar with the news media.

If you expect to be a spokesman on an on-going basis, become familiar with your local news media. Know who covers what, who hands out the assignments, and what slant they generally put on the news. In addition, try to meet reporters before problems crop up to discuss your philosophy and explain your role as spokesman with your organization. Go to the newsrooms and meet the

How to control what ends up on tonight's news

Yes, you can control some of the news—your sound bite. Many guests on the network and cable news shows do this very well, lots of people, particularly on local newscasts don't. Here's how it's done:

Reporter: Five of your female employees have filed a suit accusing you of unfairly promoting men ahead of women. Can you tell me how long this type of discrimination has been going on?

You: You are asking about personnel policies, and I am pleased to point out that we have an excellent record of hiring and promoting people of all races, colors and gender based on their qualifications to do a job.

Reporter: But, the suit charges that you have denied these employees promotions because of their sex.

You: As I mentioned, we have an excellent record of hiring and promoting people of all races, colors and gender based on their qualifications to do a job and we respect their right to disagree.

Reporter: You're ducking the issue. Isn't true that you have promoted less qualified men ahead of women?

You: Perhaps you would like to review our excellent record of hiring and promoting people of all races, colors and gender based on their qualifications to do a job.

Reporter: Why are only 30% of the supervisory jobs at your company filled by women when half of your employees are females?

You: I'm glad you recognize that half our work force and one out of three supervisors are women. We are proud of our record of hiring and promoting people of all races, colors and gender based on their qualifications to do a job.

The TV reporter is not likely to use more than 10 seconds of what you say, so anything you say beyond your controlled bite is likely to get you in trouble. Lawyers might caution you to say: "we can't comment on pending litigation." But a sound bite puts a positive face on an otherwise negative story.

people with whom you will need to interact. Also, keep a list of media contacts and call now and again just to see how they are doing.

In the case of the electronic media, keep track of the assignment editors. They don't seem stay in one job for very long.

When you assemble your media list, send to each your full contact information. Give them after-hours phone numbers and alternate contacts if they can't reach you. Also give them names of people in your organization who can serve as experts on topics that may come up in the future..

➔ You will find yourself in fewer hot seats if you get to know the news media and handle your routine contacts in a professional manner.

19. You can't change minds.

You can only give people new information on which to make new decisions. Don't try to convert hos-

tile reporters. Try to build bridges of understanding so that your point of view can be successfully delivered.

20. Remember, reporters are people too.

Like you, they are doing a job, sometimes a thankless job. They have built-in biases just as you do and they have feelings as well. Remember, too, that reporters, for the most part, are paid less than their counterparts in public relations jobs, and much less than the corporate executives they may be writing about. They work for bylines and air time. Keep that in mind when you are talking about money issues. What may seem like an "average" management salary to you may look like a king's ransom to a reporter who is working for peanuts.

➔ To the extent that you can tap into the person behind the pad or the microphone, you will be successful in stressful news situations.

The best way to handle the hot seat, is to do everything possible to keep you and your organization out of the seat in the first place. But once a situation develops, or hard feeling are engendered, take control of the situation.

Communicating through the news media can be a difficult and sometimes frustrating experience, especially when handling negative issues. Sometimes the best response is no response.

But, if you end up in the hot seat, you can improve a difficult situation by being diligent and thoughtful in your approach to the men and women of the news media.

Staying OUT of the

HOT SEAT

A True Story

When a group of elderly women sat down and blocked the entrance to an Air Force base to protest the presence of nuclear arms, reporters, cameramen and photographers—some who were openly hostile to the military—stood by waiting for the confrontation.

The base commander wanted the women forcibly removed, which is precisely what the organizers of the protest expected and wanted. But the information officer, not desiring to have his base deprecated in the national media offered an alternative to confrontation. The base commander very reluctantly agreed to the plan.

The call went out for all of the available female military police officers to assemble at the main gate. After removing their firearms, the women served tea and cookies to the protestors, and then sat down with them in the road. Out of earshot of the reporters, and while the elderly women were beginning to enjoy their tea party, the policewomen quietly explained to the protestors that they would be arrested, fingerprinted and taken to jail for their actions.

One by one the elderly women thanked the policewomen for the tea and the information, got up and walked away. The expected confrontation never materialized, and America never learned of the nuclear protest that was defeated by a pot of tea, a box of cookies and a creative information officer who didn't want to end up in the hot seat.

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recognition, earn respect
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