

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.

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.

