

The "Four Fatal Fiascos" of Dealing with the Media

There are many things that can go wrong when you deal with the media, especially in the aftermath of an incident that has placed your company in a negative light. How would you handle an interview if news has just broken that:

- An employee has been injured or killed on your site
- You were the subject of a hostile takeover
- An employee is accusing a manager of sexual harassment or racial discrimination
- You were served with a big regulatory fine
- A spill of hazardous materials is threatening the environment
- Neighbors are fed up with noise, dust, or traffic from your facility

Almost everyone who has been interviewed in such a situation can tell a horror story. They were ambushed, misquoted, misinterpreted, or taken out of context. There are a lot of things that you **SHOULD** do and say in times of crises. Here let's concentrate on the four things you should avoid doing at all costs.

Fatal Fiasco #1: Saying "No Comment"

The initial impulse of many people is to blurt out these two words. They think that the reporter will just give up and go away. In fact, reporters tell me they translate "No comment" into "Guilty as charged." It simply convinces them there is something that needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

Does this mean you must always answer a reporter's questions? No. There are a number of good reasons why you should not do so:

- matters in litigation
- causes of accidents when the investigation is not complete (which amounts to speculating)
- matters outside your areas of expertise and knowledge

What you should do is say, "I'm sorry, but I simply cannot answer that question because _____" and give the reason. Then go on to tell the reporter something you can share that will give them information they can use for a story (preferably one of your positive key messages).

Fatal Fiasco #2: Lying

All decent media relationships are based on mutual trust and respect. If you are ever tempted to lie to a reporter, **stop** and consider the consequences. The temporary avoidance of immediate pain is not worth losing your most important asset, your credibility. If you lie even one time, you will never be considered trustworthy. The negative impression will affect not only the current story, but all future encounters. Remember, too, that reporters talk among themselves.

Fatal Fiasco #3: Losing Your Temper

If you yell, "Get off my property!" or take a swing at the cameraman, that video segment may be the only view of your company the public ever gets to see - not a good way to promote your corporate reputation. Sometimes a reporter is intentionally rude or hostile, attempting to get you to lose your cool and go beyond the agreed upon company statement. Media people thrive on drama. If they make you lose your temper, you've given it to them. They'll be happy, but you - and your organization - will lose.

Call on every bit of self-control you can muster, and remain professional. The reporters - and your ultimate audience of readers or viewers - will respect you. This is much more valuable in the long run than allowing yourself the short-lived satisfaction of venting your anger.

Fatal Fiasco #4: Losing Eye Contact

What have we all learned it means when a person cannot look us in the eye? Without a doubt, we are sure he is untrustworthy - either holding something back or outright lying. Reporters will observe you closely, judging whether you can be believed. Their assessment may make a big difference in how they write the story. When answering questions, look the reporter in the eye with a steady, but not unfriendly, gaze.

This is especially important during TV interviews. In my media training workshops, most participants tell me that their mothers had taught them it was rude to stare at people. Then I tell them, "Forget what your mother told you!" In a TV interview, when thinking of an answer to a tough question, you don't dare drop your eyes to the floor or roll them to the ceiling. As soon as you lose eye contact with the reporter, your audience gets a subliminal but powerful message that you are not being honest. Steady gazing at a person like this is not an easy thing to do. It is a skill that only comes with practice.

Much more goes into giving a good media interview. I highly recommend that, **before** a crisis hits, you obtain some competent media training. This training should include videotaping as you work through real-life crises scenarios. In this way, you will be better able to deal with a crisis effectively from the earliest moments when you still have time to positively influence the story. However, if you have to deal with potentially negative media coverage before you've had time to get such training, you can avoid some of the most damaging effects by refusing to fall into the traps of these "four fatal fiascos."

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