

Communicating your IPO effectively

by: Merna Skinner, Exec/Comm

Getting ready to announce an initial public offering is a stressful undertaking. Newly formed companies are typically so distracted with all the financial and legal details of "finishing the deal." that they often do not spend enough time properly planning their communication strategy for the crucial first press conference.

The event can take many forms—a face-to-face briefing, a series of "road shows" in various cities or a teleconference. Typically, your audience will be analysts and reporters. Your job is to serve both: Analysts ask technical, financial questions—some usually inviting speculation on future fiscal performance; reporters look for unique story angles, asking provocative questions. Your job is to stay confident with your info, flexible to edit "along the way" and prepare for "loaded" questions.

You'll never know for sure how your audience will react, but here are specific tips to help you communicate with intelligence and clarity:

- **Clarify your message:** Company spokespeople need to have consistent, preplanned "talking points." Spokespeople should craft their key message in 10 words or less. The language you use should be identical—be it a public statement, a press release or a Web site.
- **Predetermine what can and cannot be discussed:** Make sure you know the limits of what you will discuss. Many analysts typically press spokespeople to discuss revenues or projected future earnings. Politely stating that such

information is proprietary is the best way to respond to such questions.

- **Choose facts or examples to illustrate key points.** These audiences typically respond well to analogies to convey difficult information. Graphics help show numeric trends or changes. Use past trends or growth patterns to answer questions about the future—a tack that lets questioners draw their own conclusions.

- **Practice question-and-answer techniques.** Develop "bridging" techniques to help you respond to complicated questions and move to "known quantities." An example of this might be: "That is a great question you asked about our revenue...as you know, we aren't now commenting on such proprietary information, but what I can tell you is that our product will be unique in the marketplace."

- **Coordinate your speaking team.** Plan ahead who will be the main speaker and who will be available to field specific questions. Many companies have technical spokespeople as well as public relations executives ready to support the central spokesperson.

Merna Skinner serves as a partner with Exec/Comm, a NY-based firm that teaches effective communication skills for executives. Her work includes clients such as Bristol-Myers Squibb, Calvin Klein Cosmetics and Nickelodeon. She's also written on the topic for Working Mother, Investor's Business Daily and other publications.