



by Jerry Walker

How to get your way with reporters

Getting more mileage out of an interview

"Dealing with the press is like a chess game" said Merna Skinner of Exec/Comm, a New York-based communications training and consulting firm. "The reporter has one set of needs and you have another, and when those needs are both fulfilled there is success," she added.

Often, PR people are so focused on "getting their plug" that they neglect to really listen to the interviewer's questions or give them the information they really need to get their job done.



Merna Skinner

She offers the following ways to get the most mileage out a press interview:

1. Understand the reporter's angle. Good preparation starts with knowing what the writer is looking for in terms of information and points of view.

2. Know the publication. The more you relate comments to the reader's needs and experiences, the more credible and engaging you will be.

3. Allow adequate rehearsal time. Allow enough time to practice what you want to say.

It is helpful to have associates pose mock questions to test your ability to respond succinctly and clearly to a reporter's queries.

4. Select and craft a single, consistent and memorable corporate message. In 10 words or less, you should be able to summarize what your company is all about.

Companies should have a general corporate message and one for a specific event or product introduction, as well as one for crisis situations.

Spokespeople make the mistake of fitting too many messages in one interview. The result is a confusing public image and undesirable quotes.

5. Repeat the message at least three times in the interview:

Research shows that it takes this many repetitions for the message to be heard and quoted.

A skillful spokesperson will 'weave' the message into the conversation so it does not appear stilted or overtly scripted.

6. Support your message with anecdotes or examples. Provide specific facts that support claims you are making.

Giving "legs" to your message is crucial to gaining credibility.

7. Don't only answer the reporter's question. Use every response as a chance not only to respond to needed information but also to offer additional information about your company's expertise. Resist making this an openly self-promoting sales pitch.

8. Recount specific stories for impact. A specific story makes excellent copy.

Reporters love case histories that give real world examples to support general statements." ■