

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS

August 2010

Mastering the Martial Art of the Media Interview

There's an old English proverb that says "There's many a slip twixt (between) the cup and the lip."

Roughly translated, this means that even when the outcome of an event seems a foregone conclusion, things can still go wrong.

Take former U.K. Labor Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for example. On what appeared to be another typically grueling day on the 'hustings' (campaign speeches and canvassing for votes) in the run-up to the 2010 elections, he relaxed back in the luxurious leather seats of his chauffeur driven Jaguar and vexed his angst at what he described as the 'bigoted' woman he had just met.

The lady in question was pensioner Gillian Duffy, who happened to be a life-long supporter of the Labor Party, but who had audaciously questioned Mr. Brown on issues including crime and immigration. Unfortunately, for the now former prime minister, he was still wearing a broadcast microphone from an earlier interview and was recorded making his disparaging remarks, only for the comments to be broadcast around the world.

Trigger-Shy

Many public figures and high-profile executives surround themselves with top public relations talent and have been media-trained to the point where they could recite their three key bullet points in their sleep. But the power of the media is such that it only takes one slip to break a storied career or disrupt a business.

It's been speculated that concern about unrelenting media scrutiny drove Hewlett-Packard's board of directors to quickly demand the resignation of former CEO Mark Hurd. Hurd was ousted for one offense—allegedly falsifying expense reports—following recommendations by the firm's PR counsel that the chief's immediate dismissal would pre-empt a possibly lengthy and embarrassing spectacle arising

from another charge against him for alleged sexual harassment.

Some have called the move a "knee jerk" reaction by the HP board, which remains under close watch for a previous scandal involving board spies who attempted to suppress leaks to the media. "The fact is that you could understand that the board would be trigger-shy about public controversy," Scott Stern, a business professor at the Sloan School of Management at M.I.T., told the *New York Times*.

No Gentleman's Club

Many professional communicators can recount their own horror stories of watching a boss flounder during a media interrogation with the camera still rolling, because the interview and questioning became too hot to handle.

BP's former CEO Tony Hayward, prior to stepping down, was dubbed by critics the most hated and clueless man in America after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig blew up and began spewing oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Among the gaffes he is reported to have said are: "I want my life back," and, "I think the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to have been very, very modest."

Media training may have been conducted, but was it rigorous enough? Too frequently, executives might intimidate others to limit challenging points of view – especially when it comes to their own media performance.

It can be very uncomfortable for senior communicators to tell the boss



he needs practice and polishing. But without that pushback, things can get ugly.

While large corporations often enthusiastically embrace the importance of media training and push their senior executives through the media mill, they frequently dictate the rules of engagement for the media trainers. "No matter what you do, don't embarrass the boss. Keep it light and easy. Let them feel like they have won." In other words, they really don't want real-world scenarios, what they want is to make their executives feel good.

Too bad -- the real world doesn't work this way. The only obligation of the media is to get the story. If your senior executives are not skilled enough to find their way through the minefields, sooner or later, things will explode.

Training for Self Discipline

"The true science of martial arts means practicing them in such a way that they will be useful at any time, and to teach them in such a way that they will be useful in all things," wrote Miyamoto Musashi, a legendary 16th century Japanese swordsman and author of 'Gorin no Sho' (The Book of Five Rings), a book still used today as a source of reference and discussion on business strategy.

Martial arts comprise tough, rough and tumble sports, but ones which are also governed by clearly defined rules and strict etiquette. There are many teachers willing to lead self-defense classes. But to be a truly effective instructor, one has to be willing to teach students to understand the psychology and physiology of the situation they are encountering.

When you are attacked, the immediate human reaction is to angrily retaliate, or avoid a confrontation, similar to curling up in a ball like a hedgehog, in a 'fight or flight'

response. If you do not teach people to swiftly assess a situation, reflexes will take over and they will often simply freeze or take a hostile stance when faced with a threat.

Battle Simulation

In business, as in the martial arts, we need to train executives for the situations they are likely to encounter. Here are ways to preserve the integrity of communications training:


Insist on making the situation as real as possible. Executives need to know what impact the interview will have on their emotions and physiological being and how to deal with it. For instance, you'll have to help them gain an awareness of triggering factors such as being constantly interrupted, or ambushed with an unrelated, hot-button issue by the interviewer.

Adjust the heat as necessary. Training someone to promote a product launch at a trade show versus preparing a plant manager to deal with a major layoff requires an entirely different level of focus, skill and intensity. We must structure a media training program to test our executives' reactions in the heat of battle. Being the spokesperson tasked with addressing a major or volatile issue is not for the faint of heart, or kings and queens of ego. Successfully managing pressure cooker situations requires finesse, discipline, quick thinking, and often, the ability to show compassion and humility.

Encourage executives to hone their skills through practice, self-reflection and recurrent training. A battle-scarred veteran of media interviews, former statesman Henry Kissinger is famously reputed to have opened a press briefing by asking, "Does anyone have any questions for my answers?" Executives need to keep them-

selves crisp, sharp and prepared, because the higher they rise in the company, the more they need to be ready for hand-to-hand combat.

It's never fun to tell the boss he needs training that will take him way out of his comfort zone. However, we are duty-bound as senior communications counselors to protect our organization's reputation, especially as represented by its chief ambassador.

It takes a lot of hard work, effort, 'smarts', sacrifice and good fortune to make it to the top. And it can quickly end with only a few seconds of a careless warrior's mishandling of the most powerful weapon of all – words. 

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