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What should you do when the press comes knocking

By Rob Kay

The scenario plays out like this: A reporter from a newspaper calls to tell you he's doing a piece on the post-9/11 economy and wants to write about "downsizing" at your company.

He's been told by a reliable source that your revenues are way down. He also heard gossip floating around the Plaza Club about a financial scandal that culminated in the firing of your controller and her entire staff. Then, of course, there are the personal questions he'd never ask, but is dying to know -- about the CEO's impending divorce and his affair with that TV anchor. Oh, and by the way, this reporter would like to speak to your boss this afternoon.

Welcome to the world of PR, where on any given day the daggers can be unsheathed at a moment's notice. Belying Hawaii's Pacific climate, this can be a tough, adversarial place that pits the media's insatiable thirst for headlines against businesses' needs to project a good image, or at least keep a lid on bad news.

In the example above (which was altered to protect the "innocent"), the reporter had interpreted rumor mixed with a few grains of truth in the worst possible light.

What's a public relations person to do? Refuse to answer the phone? Concoct a phony press release that evades the issues? Call the newspaper publisher and threaten to pull advertising?

If you hope to positively shape the story's outcome, your only alternative is to play it straight. However, even before you speak to the media, the first thing you'll need to do is convince your client to speak candidly with the press.

"Spin" aside, the best you can expect is that the reporter will hear your side of the story, listen to your opinion and correct any dis- or mis-information.

If you're going to get the most out of your interaction with media, it's essential to appreciate the psychology of a journalist. They are trained to be simultaneously skeptical and open-minded. Like rich folks, they are perennially paranoid about being

"used" and unless they know a source very well, they always take what is said with a grain of salt.

While journalists generally go into a story with an idea of how it might turn out, good reporters realize they may not have all the data or might be interpreting what information they have incorrectly. The good news is that if the facts are on your side, and you can bring them to light, you may be in the position to change the entire tenor of the article.

The bad news is that there are no guarantees that the truth will set you free. A slack reporter with a looming deadline may just shoehorn the facts to fit his or her preconceived notions. Or worse, a reporter with an ax to grind may have a bias that no facts will mitigate. Fortunately, this is the exception to the rule.

Even if a good reporter gets the facts straight, there's no guarantee you won't get whacked. Reporters are trained to seek "balance," which means your side of the story will be counterweighted by comments from industry analysts, your competitors and other "expert" commentators who love to get their name in print but may not have your company's best interests at heart. Inevitably, these balancing opinions will be colorful, but they also will be critical.

And then, there's that iconoclastic streak that many in the media have. As Finley Peter Dunne, a great journalist of his day, said a century ago, the job of a reporter is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." It's hackneyed, but there's truth to this old saw. Think of all those negative "trouble in paradise" pieces that have appeared over the years in the mainland press about Hawaii or the recent local and national stories on inflated executive compensation.

If your company is in a PR fix, here are a few other lessons to consider:

>> Play it straight. Reporters don't like being lied to, and once you get caught prevaricating, your word will be forever worthless. On the other hand, if reporters ask questions that are none of their business, it's OK to tell them they are out of line.

>> Don't give a reporter an unwarranted reason to take you down a few notches because of bad behavior. Egregious arrogance is a recipe for disaster. Be friendly and reasonable, never phony or condescending.

>> Timeliness is everything. PR people are valued by the media not so much as great sources of news or founts of wisdom, but as people that can help them get their work done expeditiously. That means responding rapidly to a member of the press is critical. When reporters want information, they want it now. I can vividly recall a mild-mannered Honolulu editor becoming apoplectic as he recounted the saga of a former state agency director who almost never bothered to

return phone calls. That individual made the journalist's job a lot more difficult and, in return, earned his eternal enmity.

>> The final PR lesson is that even the best "flack," as PR professionals are known in the industry, cannot always steer you away from bad press if your organization has really earned it. Getting back to the example in the first paragraph, the client I referred to got hammered on that post-9/11 story, but given the circumstances it was to be expected.

Fortunately, the reporter was evenhanded in his assessment of the situation and management, although unhappy with the coverage, was relieved that the most embarrassing details were not divulged. The story quickly died and everyone lived happily ever after.

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Poor communications can turn you into a fish out of water

By Irwin Rubin

What do the following situations have in common?

- >> While moving your child's backpack, a bag of marijuana falls out.
- >> Your boss has told you she's counting on you to wow the board with your presentation.
- >> A familiar conflict is about to erupt, yet again, between you and your spouse.
- >> You have to schedule another counseling session with a good employee who seems unable to straighten out.

These all require that we use our skills in verbal communication to sell a proposal, to resolve a conflict, to salvage a good employee, to save a child. Try for just a moment to imagine how your life would be if, like some people, you had no ability to

communicate verbally. Something like a fish out of water, perhaps?

While fish may be hard-wired to swim from the instant they are born in order to survive, human beings have to learn these influence communication skills. Influence is underscored because we are not referring to just talking, or "talking story." We're talking about talking with a purpose.

Given the vital nature of this requirement for human beings, and the constant need for us to use it in life, it's remarkable how little if any formal training people get in how to communicate effectively across the broad spectrum of life's many challenging situations; and how well many people seem to do without any such education.

Experience is assuredly a powerful teacher, but it also has significant limitations. You can't study beforehand because each "test" of your communication skills is spontaneous and unpredictable. Consequently, the "answer" -- the learning gleaned from an experience -- will only be as valuable as the degree of match between the next situation and the last.

I don't mean to imply that there aren't any communication-related courses available. Indeed, it would be a great surprise if you didn't see fliers coming across your desk on a weekly basis offering courses in conflict management, dealing with difficult employees, or assertiveness training, to name just a few.

Each of these courses endeavors to teach you how to communicate more effectively within a certain set of circumstances. Forward-thinking organizations strive to do just that with their own training and development programs. However, two inadvertent but predictable problems typically arise. The first is that the communications model underlying an assertiveness training session, for example, will bear no resemblance to the model underlying a conflict resolution session. This leaves learners with the task of trying to integrate the two models for themselves. Secondly, there is an unwritten caveat that assumes "all things being equal" associated with such programs: as long as the circumstances remain constant, the skills are likely to be applicable. For example, the learner may be able to apply assertiveness techniques when she discusses the issue of drugs with her child, but her training is unlikely to have also given her the skills to communicate with compassion and understanding, qualities that are equally important to address in this situation.

Imagine, by contrast, having an intimate familiarity with and confidence in applying a generic set of communication influence behaviors, behaviors that have been carefully researched and proven to be the tools needed to fashion win-win relationships, irrespective of context. I refer to these tools as "The ABCs of Win-Win Relationships." Such a set of communication tools would allow you a) to figure out what you need to say in any given situation that contributes to a positive outcome; and b) then have the skill and confidence to know how to implement these tools. In other words, the same tools would speak to the two questions that underlie any and every one of the myriad communications challenges we face virtually moment to moment, every day of our lives: "What to say?" and "How to say it?"

Lao-tse put this communications training challenge to us centuries ago in these words:
"Give a man a fish, and he eats for today. Teach him to fish, and he eats for a
lifetime."

Irwin Rubin is a Honolulu-based author and president of Temenos Inc., which specializes
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