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FOLLOW THE “KILLER BE’S” FOR GREAT MEDIA RELATIONS

Top executives know that good publicity can do a world of good for their organizations with customers, employees and shareholders. By the same token, they fear negative media coverage for its potential to wreak havoc on them. But how many invest the time and effort to develop a really strong media relations program that can yield positive results over the long term?

Unfortunately, many executives want to cherry pick their interactions with the media, turning the information flow on and off to suit their whims. The media relations world simply doesn't work that way.

I often tell clients that media relations is much like your involvement with teachers back in your school days. Once you raise your hand to be called upon, you can expect the teacher to call on you again and again. So it works with the media. My advice: don't raise your hand unless you are prepared to open up the communications channel for the long haul.

We all know that the media are a fickle bunch: today's hero is easily tomorrow's goat, and vice versa. So you have to be prepared to take the good with the bad, and recognize that some stories simply will not reflect your point of view to your satisfaction.

However, there are steps you can take to build your credibility with the news media and position your organization as positively as possible. I like to call these steps “the killer be's” because they provide a clear guide to good media relations.

First, *be available*. If you want to have a good relationship with the news media, you have to make yourself available to them for interviews and you must return their calls, even if it is to decline the opportunity for an interview.

When being interviewed, *be responsive*. Make a sincere effort to answer the reporter's questions and to provide solid information whenever possible. Always use the interview as your opportunity to get the message out to your key audiences.

Be clear. Use everyday English. Consider the reader, listener or viewer who will follow the story. Avoid any temptation to lapse into industry jargon, acronyms or verbose language. By doing so, you will lessen the possibility of a misunderstanding or misquote.

At the same time, *be concise*. Your time and the media's time are valuable. Don't waste it by bloviating. Get to your point and make it.

Always *be responsible*. It's up to you to keep the level of discussion on a professional, dignified plane. If a reporter tries to elicit inflammatory comment or provoke you into responding to volatile comments about you or your organization, steer the discussion to a higher level.

Be concerned. Demonstrate an interest in the topic under discussion. Show that you are listening, that you are well-informed and that you care.

It's critical to *be consistent.* Don't fall into the trap of giving different messages to different media. For maximum positive effect, all interviews on the same subject should be based on consistent information, delivered as completely as possible.

Be committed. Stand for something positive. Show your dedication to your organization and your industry or profession. Talk about positive actions you are taking whenever possible and avoid complaining about events or circumstances you cannot control.

Make it your job to ***be informative.*** You should use valuable interview time to reach your key audiences with enlightening and interesting information. Let the media provide you a forum to get your message across.

In all cases, *be careful.* Don't assume that journalists subscribe to written or even unwritten journalistic ethics. Remember everything you say is on the record, regardless of what the reporter says. If you don't like the direction in which the interview heads, find a positive way to change the direction or end the interview politely.

Be yourself. Reporters and people in general can spot a phony. Relax and try to let your best qualities show through. Above all, be sincere.

Finally, *be smart.* There are times, given legitimate legal and business considerations, when it is appropriate to politely decline comment. Exercise this right sparingly, however, and avoid the temptation to decline unless practical considerations demand doing so.

By following these "killer be's," you can create an effective media relations program and position you and your organization favorably with the media. Remember, the 24/7 news cycle requires a lot of work on the media's part to fill it with stories.

If the media views you as a reliable, credible, responsive source, you will get more than your fair share of positive coverage over the long haul.

Need help in shaping an effective media relations program? Contact John Hawkins today at jch@jchawkinsassociates.com or (904) 342-8260. Visit our Web site at www.jchawkinsassociates.com.

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