

# ***Media Mistakes that Matter***

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Like any game, being successful with the news media depends somewhat on luck. But also like a game, the tactical choices you make ultimately determine victory or defeat. During my 15 years as a reporter and 15 years as a media trainer, I've seen some moves that almost guarantee failure.

## **Not Understanding or Meeting Media Deadlines**

Public relations practitioners work hard to get positive media publicity, knowing how much more credibility it carries than advertising. But if they can't respond quickly, or don't have the support of others in the organization who make media calls a priority, they can't perform effectively.

Many reporters play "dialing for dollars." Whoever responds fastest wins—by getting in the story. Let's say a local or national celebrity has been seriously injured in a car accident. A TV station wants to cover the story by talking to a specialist about the kind of injuries the celebrity sustained and the chances for recovery. The reporter calls hospital #1 and is told everyone is in a meeting but someone could call back tomorrow. The reporter keeps dialing. Hospital #2 says no one is available until after lunch. The reporter dials again. Bingo! Hospital #3 says they can get someone to do the interview within the hour. That's the hospital that gets coverage and also the one likely to get called back the next time the reporter needs help with a story.

The trade press plays the same game. A reporter is doing a cover story on trends in the semiconductor business. She starts dialing for comments from companies which make or buy product. The PR people at the various companies all scramble, trying to get in touch with their subject matter experts. Whoever makes the return phone calls the fastest is more likely to get quoted. They also have a better chance to influence the reporter's overall thinking on the subject.

## **Saying "No Comment"**

It's a given that when you have a chance at some positive publicity, refusing to comment is crazy. But saying "no comment" during a crisis or in response to a negative story is equally suicidal. The story rarely goes away. Instead, it gets done without your point of view. The

“victims” and their families will talk. So will the neighbors across the street or the person you fired last week. Meanwhile you look guilty or negligent because you’re perceived as hiding.

You can almost always say *something*. Saying something is better than saying “no comment.” At minimum, you can find a nicer way of saying “no comment” by explaining why you can’t or don’t want to say more.

### **Not Preparing**

Yes, you want to respond to reporters as quickly as possible to get quoted in their story or to avoid a “no comment,” but it’s equally important that you respond on your terms when you’re ready. Buy yourself some time to think about your key messages and potential pitfalls before you begin answering reporters’ questions.

### **Getting Angry**

Everyone knows they shouldn’t, but they sometimes let their emotions get away from them. They begin thinking things like “How dare this reporter ask me those questions” or “Who is he to challenge my ethics” or “I’ll show him he can’t push me around like that.” Losing your temper or getting defensive with reporters just doesn’t pay off. If you find it beginning to happen, take a break from the interview. To avoid it in the first place, think of the reporter as your best, most important customer or prospect. Avoid taking his comments or questions personally.

### **Using Jargon**

When I was a reporter, this was one of my biggest complaints about interviewees. Over the last 10 years it seems to have gotten worse instead of better. As we become more technologically advanced and more specialized, everyone is talking a different, unintelligible language. Effective communication—with reporters and the public—depends on being easily understood. The simpler, clearer and more concise you make your message, the more likely you are to be quoted accurately and in context. It’s not always easy to boil down complicated concepts, but doing it will help you get a story you can live with.

Media Expert Kathy Kerchner’s depth of experience includes 15 years as an award-winning news anchor and reporter and more than 15 years as a media advisor to international corporations, associations, government agencies, banking institutions, and other organizations. She has coached CEOs of Fortune 500 companies to perform better during analyst calls and media interviews, has helped executives win new business using masterful presentations, and has trained managers at global companies to talk to their employees about sensitive issues.

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