

Reputation management interview tips

Famous Reputation Management and Crisis PR Quotes



“It takes 20 years to build a reputation
and five minutes to ruin it”

- Warren Buffet

“Your brand name is only as
good as your reputation”

- Richard Branson



“There can't be a crisis next week.
My schedule is already full.”

- Henry Kissinger

“In time of crisis people want to
know that you care, more than
they care what you know”

- Will Rogers (American comedian)



What you will learn in this eBook

Knowing how to handle tough media questions is one of the most important skills you can learn, especially if you've been called upon to represent your company in the wake of a media crisis.

While every crisis is different there are a number of principles that can be applied to most situations and in this eBook we have pulled together our top ten tips taken directly from our Crisis PR and Reputation Management Media Training package. <http://tinyurl.com/nlttdcj>

Clearly, if you find yourself facing a media storm you will, ideally, already have a crisis communications plan in place allowing you to pull together a team, media spokesperson, full brief, statements and key messages in a short space of time – in a crisis timing is everything.

Tip: for more information on this visit PR Agency Insights

While there are wider issues that should also be considered in this eBook our main focus is providing you with the tools you need to tackle tough interview questions. We will cover topics such as:

- Choosing a media spokesperson
- Researching the show/presenter
- Knowing your key messages
- How to prepare for the unexpected
- How to keep your cool

One of the key messages we want to impart is that, if you are about to face a potentially damaging interview you should address every potential question that could come up and practice your answers (if possible with trainer, if not then with your colleagues).

Above all we strongly recommend complete honesty with your media advisor. You should make them aware of all the facts leaving nothing out. The more they know the more they can help you.



As our Chairman, Phil specialises in reputation management and when called for, crisis management, advising high profile businesses and personalities on how to best engage with the media including increasingly the online community. He is well known for his success in both protecting and enhancing reputations. As former editor of Britain's biggest selling newspaper, former editor-in-chief of the world's most well known celebrity magazine and editorial director of development for Trinity Mirror, Europe's largest newspaper publishing group, Phil has a reputation as a thought leader in the Communications sector and regularly features as a media commentator for major news outlets.



Tip 1

Choose your media spokesperson wisely



Tony Haywood... arguably the world's worst media spokesperson ever!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTdKageWNFw>

Choosing the right media spokesperson is the most crucial step when preparing for a media interview. It doesn't matter how well thought out your communications strategy is, if you've got the wrong person going into battle for you it can derail everything.

The above example of Tony Haywood is a classic example of this. Described as a "lightning rod" for criticism with quotes such as "I want my life back" and "what did we do to deserve this", Haywood provides a Crisis PR 101 lesson on how not to be a spokesperson.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember here is that just because you are your company's Chairman or CEO, that does not mean you are the best person to represent your company in the public domain. You may be an excellent orator, fantastic at giving speeches, but if you can't get your messages across under the glaring heat of the media spotlight then now is the time to be honest with yourself.

For instance ask yourself, "Am I a naturally nervous or timid person?", "Do I have a tendency to put my foot in my mouth?", "Do some people think I come across as arrogant or suspicious?" If the answer to any of these questions is yes then you should be prepared to identify another spokesperson.

But if not you then who? When identifying a media spokesperson you should ask the following questions:

- Do they have a good understanding of your business and the key facts?
- Do they know your key messages inside out?
- Do they have a good understanding of the media and how to convey those messages?
- Are they confident, likable and authentic?
- Are they persuasive and sincere?

Tip 2

Do your research: know the show

There are many different types of media interview and you should do your research – or at the very least make sure your PR agency provide you with a full brief so you know what to expect.

When preparing for an interview you should think about the following questions.

- What type of show is it?
- Who is the presenter/journalist?
- What audience does the show/publication appeal to?
- If it's a panel show will there be other guests?
- If so are they likely to be confrontational?
- How long is the interview?
- If it's a print interview any examples of previous articles?
- Are there any recorded examples of previous shows?
- Is it a live or pre-recorded interview?

Examples of types of journalist



The Sofa Presenter
Friendly, warm, charming, generally lets you get your point across.



The Breakfast Presenter
Early morning news can mean tough questions, but not always. Politicians and CEOs of debt-ridden companies usually get the toughest rides.



Radio Rambles
Radio interview/podcasts can be much longer. This is great from the point of view that you will have the time to fully outline your position – however, make sure you know your key messages.



Your Best Mate
Some journalists will pretend to be your best mate to get a quote from you. Remember nothing is off the record.





Tip 3

Know your key messages

“Does anybody have any questions for my answers?”

- Henry Kissinger

Henry Kissinger's famous saying probably isn't the best way to start an interview... unless you are very brave! It does, however, raise an important point about knowing your key messages in the event of media crisis.

The best communicators don't just wing it. Taking the time to develop your key messages should be a central component of your crisis communications plan.

When developing your key messages you should consider the following points:

1) Don't have too many messages

In a broadcast interview you may only have a few minutes to get your point across and as a general rule it's best to stick to one to three key messages. This tactic will also help you prioritise what you want to say.

2) Keep your messages concise, punchy and memorable

The best key messages are lively, engaging and memorable. They will avoid being jargon filled and will be backed up with strong and memorable examples.

3) Use sound bites

Although they have a bad reputation due to overuse in the political world, a good sound bite can be a very effective way of getting your message across. The key is to make them as memorable as possible. Of course if you get it wrong it could end up doing you more harm than good... so be careful.

See the next page for some of our favourite media sound bites of all time

Six Famous Sound Bites... Good and Bad

"A day like today is not a day for sound bites, really. But I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders"

- Tony Blair on the subject of the peace talks in Belfast

"Financial weapons of mass destruction"

- Warren Buffet, a master of the sound-bite, didn't just say financial derivatives were dangerous

"I made my mistakes, but in all of my years of public life, I have never profited, never profited from public service — I earned every cent."

- Nixon on denying his involvement in the scandal that would eventually result in his impeachment

"My chances of being PM are about as good as the chances of finding Elvis on Mars, or my being reincarnated as an olive."

- Boris Johnson on his chances of leading the country

"Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we."

- President George W. Bush, August 5th, 2004

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman"

- Bill Clinton, 22 Dec 1998. If you are going to use a strong sound-bite make sure it's true!

Tip 4

Know your facts – do not wing it!

One of the biggest mistakes you can make in a media interview is not knowing the full facts about a particular subject and then attempting to wing it.

Nothing is more dangerous to your brand's reputation than presenting misleading or false information. If you get it wrong it will come back to haunt you and could result in a negative story turning into a media storm.

To avoid such instances you should:

Prepare yourself as much as possible for any questions that might come up.

As part of this process you should ask your crisis comms team to develop a Q and A and make sure you are aware of the official line on a range of subjects.

Know the basics.

During a crisis the tendency is to think about the big picture. However, while no journalist would expect you to have an encyclopedic knowledge of all subjects under the sun, they will expect you to know basic information about your company or be able to back things up you've previously said in the press.

Reputation management example

Sarah Palin has provided some classic media training 'how not to do it' examples over the years. In the below CBS interview example she highlights what can happen if you don't know the basics. In this case she can't think of the name of a single newspaper or magazine that informs her worldview.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggo38MgZ4w8>





Tip 5

Be prepared for the unexpected

Being prepared for the unexpected should be a key part of your preparation.

Generally speaking though there are two types of questions that journalists ask that might put you off balance:

Questions you genuinely don't know the answer to

If like Palin you genuinely can't name a single newspaper or magazine you may want to reconsider your position as media spokesperson. However, of course, you may be asked a question that completely stumps you. For example, you could be asked about a new report or recent figures that have been released.

Speculative questions

You may be asked to speculate on a particular issue or give an opinion on what you believe the likely outcome is of a particular news story.

Depending on your position, organization and stakeholders who may want to be very careful about rising to the bait and giving a view.

So how do you handle these sorts of questions?

If you genuinely can't answer the question you should either acknowledge it and steer back to your key messages (see tip 9) or, when talking to a trusted print journalist, say you would like to look into the matter and come back to them.

Reputation management example: David Cameron loses it

The following example shows what can happen if you are completely caught out. In the interview David Cameron loses the plot and is reduced to shaking his head and asking if he can start the interview again.

The interview (which was conducted by Martin Popplewell) made national news in 2010 and was seen as a blow to the image of the Conservatives being seen as a modern party.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBIDfp85gP8>

Tip 6

Be careful of pre-recorded interviews

Pre recorded interviews are fairly commonplace in both radio and TV. While they may seem like the easy option (when compared to the pressurised environment of a live broadcast interview) from a crisis PR perspective they should be treated with caution.

The main reason for this is editing. In a live interview you will have the opportunity to fully express your point of view whereas in a pre record your interview will be clipped and edited at the producers discretion – which may put you on the back foot.

Reputation management example

The below interview with Peter Ward, the Chief Executive of the British Dental Association, illustrates that just because it's a pre recorded you shouldn't assume what you say won't be broadcast.

In the interview Ward gets frustrated over questions about the danger of mercury poisoning and proceeds to wave his arms around in an effort to get the interview back on track, presumably assuming clip wouldn't be used. Of course it was this segment that became the story resulting in Ward issuing the following statement:

"I must offer my full and unmitigated apologies for my performance. The scenes that were broadcast represent a small fraction of the interview that did not follow the sequence I expected and caught me by surprise."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fq8E84PgP3g>





Tip 7

Never say no comment

As we have seen there may be situations where you are asked questions you don't know the answer to or are presented with facts you are not aware of.

In these situations the three things you DON'T want to do is a) lie b) wing it and c) say "no comment"...

Saying "no comment" is probably one of the worse mistakes you can make – especially following a media crisis. The statement immediately implies guilt and makes you look like you are hiding something or are contemptuous of the media. It also deprives you of your right to represent yourself and balance the story.

Five things you can say instead of No Comment

Sometimes the nature of a story can make it very difficult to comment, however, there are still alternatives to "no comment"...

Say what you can and promise you will look into the matter and answer the questions when it's feasible.

If the story is completely untrue and, therefore, damaging you should be upfront especially if you have facts to back up your position.

If you can't comment for legal reasons at the very least you should repeat the facts of the case and state you are not allowed to add anything else. Alternatively issue a prepared statement. If the story is potentially true you should say something non committal and state you are looking into the matter.

Depending on the reporter you may want to offer an exclusive interview in return for a delay in publication so you have the opportunity to get all the facts.

Reputation management example: Rail Track decline an interview

The refusal of Rail Track's chief executive to attend a Newsnight interview because he was "too tired" is a classic example of how not to handle a crisis.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_tluRqUZqA

Tip 8

Keep your cool and win the battle

Losing your cool during a media interview is never a good idea – especially if it is being broadcast to millions. Remember if you get flustered and react to something angrily then you will look like you have lost the argument.

Sometimes interviewers will try to provoke this type of reaction and there are a number of techniques they will employ. For example, they may...

- Use a confrontational tone
- Take the point of view of the audience i.e "what most people want to know is..."
- Put allegations/facts to you that you might not be aware of

As a recipient of these sorts of questions the most important lesson you can learn is do not be provoked into a reaction. Instead you should listen to the question and not get distracted by the way it is asked.

Remember your audience isn't the interviewer – your audience is the viewer/listener. If you've genuinely answered a question to the best of your ability their sympathies will be with you, not with the presenter.

Reputation management example

In this live CNN interview former Republican Party candidate Christine O'Donnell walked off mid interview when Piers Morgan pressed her on her views on gay marriage.

O'Donnell says "you are borderline being a little bit rude". Morgan later tweeted "Christine O'Donnell is the first author in the history of publishing to walk out of a TV interview because the host apparently read her book."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOYhkXrRAdc>





Tip 9

Answer the question, but keep to your message



"Move on, there's a good fellow."

- Ukip MEP Godfrey Bloom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD4NgHxylFo>

If you don't know the answer to a question, and don't even attempt to engage with it you will antagonise the journalist and lose the respect of the viewing public.

While key messages are important you can't blindly stick to your script and ignore what is being asked of you... if you are up against a Paxman-like journalist they simply won't let you get away with it.

Nevertheless, should a question completely throw you then the best way to deal with it is to follow these steps:

- Step 1: Acknowledge the question and answer it as best you can
- Step 2: Link/bridge back to the topic you want to talk about
- Step 3: Bring the interview back to your key messages

For example:

Interviewer: "So what can you tell us about these statistics?"

Interviewee: "These statistics are new and we will look at them properly. What I can tell is that over the past five years XXXXXX"

Be prepared, not all Journalists will move on

Journalists represent a public interest in getting to the truth and if they feel you are purposefully evading the question then they will challenge you. This is why it's so important to have anticipated the tough questions and have good answers. If you don't go through this process a good journalist will catch you out.

Reputation management examples: Top three Jeremy Paxman interviews

No guide would be complete without reference to Jeremy Paxman's skewering interview style. The following interviews illustrate that if you are going to be interviewed by Paxman you had better be very prepared.



Paxman vs Howard

Perhaps Paxman's most infamous interview was with Michael Howard (the former Home Secretary). In this interview the presenter asks "did you threaten to overrule him" 12 times.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KHMO14KuJk>



Paxman vs Smith

Following George Osborne's U Turn and decision to delay the planned 3p rise in fuel duty he sent his junior Treasury minister (30 year old Chloe Smith) to explain the situation... unfortunately she couldn't.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqiFrouppVk>



Paxman vs Hague

When challenged on the subject of party funding and the residency of Lord Ashcroft, William Hague finds he is unable to answer the question.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty4tXyCmpek - t=30>



Tip 10

There is no such thing as "off the record"

While the term "off the record" may be widely used in the media circles, it's important to remember it is not legally binding and, in reality, doesn't really exist.

Journalists tend to refer to "off the record" when they are fact finding or researching a story and it is intended to put the interviewee at ease. A typical scenario where the phrase might be used is when you are cold called by a journalist trying to find out "off the record" if a particular rumour they've heard is true.

You should be very wary of talking "off the record", as the reality is whatever you say could be published. As a rule of thumb if you do not want something to be published then don't say it and assume whatever you say will be "on the record".

How to handle out of the blue phone calls

If you receive an out of the blue phone call and are wary about commenting (even if the journalist says it's "off the record") we would advise taking the following steps:

- Step 1: Be polite to the journalist on the phone and ask "How can I help you?"
- Step 2: Ask "What do you want to talk to me about?"
- Step 3: Listen and take the details, but do not comment.
- Step 4: End the call either by saying you will send them a statement or put them in direct contact with your PR agency.

Note: Remember you may be taped

Reputation management examples

Norman Pearlstine's book *Off The Record* (US) is an interesting source for media guidelines.

The book makes an interesting distinction between the terms 'Off The Record' and 'For Guidance', where a journalist may source information to prompt further reporting.

Note: The vast majority of journalists are ethical and are really concerned with getting to the truth of a story. That said the above points are all worth being aware of.

Extra Tip: Practice, practice, practice

The most effective way to improve your media skills and get your message across is to practice, practice, practice.

Practicing being interviewed is no different from rehearsing for a job interview or presentation – the more you do it the more confident, concise and authoritative you will become.

Media training is certainly one way you can prepare for an interview as it will give you valuable experience of being grilled by a real journalist. However, it's not the only way and at the very least you should ask colleagues to interview you on a range of subjects that might come up. Ideally you should film these interviews and play them back for analysis.

If you have prepared properly you should be able to walk into that interview feeling prepared and confident.

Steps to preparing for a media interview

Step 1

- Prepare a Q and A of every likely/possible media question that could come up, or ask your media advisor to do it.

Step 2

- Ask a friend, colleague or media professional to run through each of the questions with you. You should also encourage them to ask any questions you may not have thought of.

Step 3

- Try to rehearse the interview along the lines of the programme you are going to be interviewed on. This will help you prepare for the format.

Step 4

- Record the interview (ideally on a camera) and play it back.

Step 5

- Ask someone to critique you and tell you what they liked and how you could improve.

Take away tips

We hope you've found these tips useful. We thought we'd leave you with a selection of some of our favourite examples of media interviews that went wrong.

If you take nothing else from this guide we implore you not to do the following things:



Don't walk off

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4lEnvCjHuU>

What happened?

Acting BBC Director General Tim Davie Walks Out of Sky Interview



Think before you speak

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OJYxTCrqag>

What happened?

Charlize Theron claims press Intrusion 'Like Rape', resulting in a media storm



Make sure you can back up your point

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge_SWfc7KRc

What happened?

Daewoo launched a PR stunt, but had no prepared answers or facts to back it up



Switch your phone off

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msfhJtJd1KA>

What happened?

The world's worst media interview. Phones, gum and a mini scuffle!

Thank you for downloading this eBook

For more information about Crisis
PR and Reputation Management

Subscribe to PR Agency Insights

If you have a specific issue
you would like advice on you
can contact us directly on:

0207 0251 350

Or

info@thephagroup.com