

HOW TO DELIVER COMPELLING MESSAGES

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Successful communications are no coincidence, nor are they an art. Spokespersons — and PR practitioners who provide behind-the-scenes counsel and support — know that communications skills are honed by media training and practice. The most effective spokespersons are strategic and follow a simple five-step process that drives agenda setting, key message development and interview preparation.

1. Set an Agenda

Leadership guru and author Stephen Covey instructs disciples to begin with the end in mind. The same principle applies to agenda setting. Before conducting an interview or launching a media relations campaign, identify your business objective(s) to clarify whom you need to reach and what you want to say.

Productive communication is customized; one size does not fit all. Determine who comprises the primary target audience, what they value and how members are predisposed toward the topic, you and your organization.

Further, play a wishing game and ask yourself, “If I could write the headline or story lead, what would I want it to say? If interviewed, what quotes would I want attributed to me or my company?”

The answers to questions about business objectives, target audience members and desired outcomes should be reflected in development of media relations tools, including key messages, supporting information, Q&A responses and a preplanned closing statement.

2. Craft Key Messages

With repeated use, key messages ensure dissemination of clear, consistent and compelling information. Spokespersons using this critical tactic stay focused and have a way to evaluate their performance. They cut through information clutter and obtain measurable results.

Develop three key messages to serve as the foundation for all communications and to weave into each interview. Key messages should be two or three sentences in length or 15 to 30 seconds when spoken. In fact, they should fit on one page. These statements provide spokespersons with direction, as well as help prioritize information and put things into perspective.

Key messages need to be more strategic than simply the “three most important things.” To support your agenda, as well as meet the needs of reporters and consumers of news, craft key messages that:

- Describe and differentiate core products, services or a point of view;
- Provide a strategic message showcasing leadership and main point(s) of differentiation;
- Focus on the benefits to the target audience, clearly stating what’s in it for them.

This is best accomplished by focusing on benefits before features; selling versus telling.

3. Prove Your Points

Trained spokespersons understand their goal is to introduce and reinforce key messages throughout an interview. Supporting information can sustain a conversation, while offering proof and adding credibility. During proactive and responsive comments, be prepared to back up and expand upon key messages with:

- **Facts:** Use simple and descriptive statements;
 - **Statistics or figures:** Put information into easy-to-understand or quantifiable terms;
 - **Authorities or experts:** Quote unrelated third-party experts such as those representing industry analysts, trade associations, academic institutions or government authorities; and
 - **Stories:** Share a story, case study, personal experience, anecdote or analogy to make an interview more relevant, colorful and memorable.
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4. Ready for Q&A

In advance, speculate about potential interview questions. Go beyond the obvious (who, what, where, when, how and why) to include inquiries being fielded by executives, as well as PR and sales associates. Consider what is topical in the news or in your industry. Dare to ask what you are afraid of answering.

After producing an exhaustive list of at least 20 to 25 potential queries, spokespersons can arm themselves with key message-laden responses. By going through this valuable exercise, spokespersons also become aware of challenging topics and can research supplemental data, as well as seek public relations, investor relations or legal counsel well in advance of an interview.

5. Make a Lasting Impression

As an interview winds down, most spokespersons are busy mumbling thank you, offering further assistance and missing a great opportunity. Because people often remember what they hear first and last, it is worthwhile to pre-plan a meaningful closing statement. Use your final comment to reinforce your benefit statement, as it will resonate with your target audience and drive a desired response.

Comprehensive media training often focuses on delivery techniques, offers ways to enhance a spokesperson's presence and engages participants in mock interviews. Yet what a spokesperson says — and articulates in compelling key messages — is of greatest importance. It won't matter that your shoes are shined if your foot is in your mouth! **PRN**

Backed by 25 years of experience, Debbie Wetherhead executes client media relations programs and coaches executives preparing for media interviews and presentations. Leading Wetherhead Communications, a full-service PR agency established in 1995, she manages programs for industry leaders including Beazer Homes, The Coca-Cola Company and Theragenics Corporation, as well as innovators such as Inviro Medical Devices.

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