

CECIL DEWAR'S VIEWS ON MEDIA RELATIONS - WHAT TYPE OF SPOKESPERSON WORKS BEST? -

Does personality-profiling benefit? Are Superstar CEOs necessary for companies?

In Cecil's opinion the answer lies in establishing effective media relations. It is imperative to enjoy the support of media as not only do they form a key target audience, but also more importantly help shape the opinions of the other stakeholders. You cannot wage a successful campaign without media relations; it is the one essential element in any serious public relations programme.

To be able to effectively leverage the media, it is necessary to be armed with every little information on one's company, even the rumours emanating from the competitors, vendor pricing, bankers' biases etc.

70 per cent of this information can be found in newspapers, television channels and web. However, the balance 30 per cent ear to the ground information is derived from the management trainee's in one's company.

There are two types of CEOs:

1. Egocentric – insist that they be the only person to speak to media
2. Media Shy – engage with media only when there is no option.

How does one handle Egocentric CEOs?

Such CEOs need to be guided on audiences and the need to tailor messages accordingly. A corporate needs a delicate balance of firmness and diplomacy to impress upon the CEO that it is the company being projected via the CEO and, not the CEO as an individual. While such CEOs can make formal PR and other supporting activities very difficult to implement, they can be a potent weapon if they have the talent and will listen to, and accept advice. They can give the organisation a personality and a profile.

In an age of media hype, it helps to have an iconic CEO at the helm...

How does one handle Media Shy CEOs?

By providing expert media training and persistent coaxing one can help overcome the individual's reticence. Also, one would need to highlight the merit of media interactions in the larger interest of the company because in today's environment an organisation needs its CEO to engage. While the problem can be circumvented (to an extent) by having a company spokesman and a supporting PR programme, but without the CEO's participation the messages are diluted.

Spokespersons help facilitate and improve contact with the media...

Organisations find it logical to appoint someone to take the responsibility for 'handling the media'. But just appointing someone to the role doesn't automatically mean the organisation will be seen in a better light. Company executives need to understand that they are misguided if they think their appointed spokesperson can handle the media on their own. The media's impression of, and coverage on, the

organisation will gradually diminish if the spokesperson is the only contact. The company needs to establish clear authorities for the spokesperson about what they can say, the use of their name, etc; and there has to be swift approval processes. Without these, the spokesperson's role will not work.

Media interactions are handled differently by people from different job functions

- Marketing Head will speak with enthusiasm and confidence
- HR chief will come across with body language that is convincing
- Finance Head will communicate to the viewer that the company is far superior than the world actually knows (Superior Truth)

While, not sharing proprietary information is fine, one must remember that if a journalist is shrewd he/she will ferret it out especially if the company representative is not used to such interactions. However, if the individual interfacing with the journalist is trained and adept at handling such situations, the journalist is unlikely to be successful in his/her attempt.

Although the public has a right to public information, there are limits. Some information is confidential, and some information cannot be disclosed because of individual privacy. At the same time, we all need to remember that 'nothing is a secret in today's world' as information avenues are plenty and it is easy to get information if one knows what one is looking for. So the only control one has over company information is in the manner in which one shares it.

Too many organisations feel they are handling their media relations well just because they prepare and release media statements when the organisation is doing something they think may be of interest. However, that's only a starting point. Good media relations practice is about planning and implementing a series of activities, always with the ultimate aim of ensuring your organisation gets the coverage it deserves.

Dog biting man is not news but man biting dog is news...

For Cecil, media relations is a sizeable part of his daily schedule. Out of 16 hours a day he is with media for 8-10 hours and this includes Sunday afternoons too. In fact, Sunday is the best day to share news with the media as it is a low news day and most journalists struggle to find copy for Monday's newspaper. In his experience there is such a paucity of news on Sundays that many a times his news has been published unedited!

When do media trust you?

- When you are a source of Information
- When you are outside the competition
- When you can share stories on other companies

Therefore, media appreciates tips from PR people, even those that concern other organisations. The best way to establish a relationship with a journalist is to become a trusted "source," good for pointing the journalist in the right direction, even when you, yourself, have no vested interest in the story.

The cornerstone of media relations depends on credibility...it cements lasting relationships...

One needs to know where to place one's story and then accordingly share or leak the news. However, do keep in mind that news has to be credible. Just as in any other function of public relations work, becoming effective in getting a person, company or issue mentioned in media demands building a "relationship" with journalists; and that means establishing "trust". A PR source who becomes a "go to person" for the journalist can wield tremendous leverage. Stated another way, your own "credibility" as a public relations professional can be aided greatly by the number of trusting relationships you have established with particular reporters.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Expats may not be trained to handle media due to poor knowledge of the spoken language. What is the solution?

In Cecil's opinion the solution lies in using an interpreter for media interactions. Even though the spokesperson knows and understands the written language it is best advised to use an interpreter. This way the speaker has time to understand the question and also gain time to answer.

Since most business journalists prefer to substantiate their stories with figures, one can prepare a fact sheet in advance and share the same at the time of interaction. These way facts will not get misrepresented.

No matter how much one tries, one's body language gives away one's vulnerability and therefore the media is best controlled by trained PR and media relations executives or professionals.

Another option is to ask for written questions and therefore have complete control over the answers.

How does one handle the pitfalls when company employees speak to media unaware of the repercussions?

Cecil said that unauthorised spokespersons should be warned against talking to the media. They should be told that strict action would be taken against them and that they might even lose their job otherwise.

It is important therefore to have effective media relations so that in such situations one can call upon the media and request them not to quote these people.

As a respondent what genre does PR belong to? A poacher, a devil sometimes or a devil always?

Cecil opined that no journalist is PR's enemy. It is a mutually beneficial relationship. He quoted his own example of how he enjoys great friendship with over two hundred journalists. He did concede that media is the only vehicle that can sing praises and also ruin us.

How do you handle overenthusiastic

Cecil said that the speaker needs to evade the question or better still pass the question to the individual who is better equipped to answer it.

journalists

How does one handle CEOs who want to interact with media all the time?

In Cecil's experience it helps to block the media interaction and monitor the interactions over a period of time. Should a media interaction go wrong, it will be blamed on corporate communications, it is therefore important to strategise and chart a timetable for CEOs to talk to media periodically.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Cecil Dewars, Vice President Communications, TVS Motor Company, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)