
MEDIA RELATIONS: WHAT TYPE OF SPOKESPERSON WORKS BEST?

For large organisations such as public companies, multinationals and Government departments and agencies, who speaks on behalf of the organisation is a key consideration in public relations strategy.

In many cases it can unduly dominate perceptions of a company. Certainly media often judge an organisation on the demeanour and personality of the spokesperson - simply because it's their only exposure to the organisation.

Here are four characterisations of the types of internal spokespersons found in organisations.

The Egotist CEO

Makes it a personal mission to present the organisation by insisting that he/she must be the only person to speak to media.

- Plus:
- If he/she does it well it really can give the organisation a personality and a profile
 - Can give the organisation a greater share of media
 - Media love it - and he/she can build some good relations with key media
 - If he/she has the talent and will listen to, and accept advice, can be a potent weapon
- Minus:
- Media coverage - and therefore the profile of the organisation - can be personality driven
 - Can make formal PR and other supporting activities very difficult to implement
- Overall:
- Tend to be entrepreneurs and owners or significant stakeholders. Can be great for the organisation's profile. But often there's no structure or depth to the PR

The Recluse CEO

Refuses to engage with media, or does it under duress only when there is no option.

- Plus:
- Very little - in today's environment an organisation needs its CEO to engage
 - Can be circumvented (to an extent) by having a company spokesman and a supporting PR programme. But without a participating CEO it is diluted
- Minus:
- Really makes it difficult for the organisation to fill modern day requirements
 - Often ensures less media coverage (especially when competitor CEO's speak)
 - Can have a bad impact on staff morale and make meaningful PR and stakeholder engagement difficult
- Overall:
- Often have a finance background or multi-nationals on assignment. If he/she is respected in their own right and have a good corporate PR operation behind them (or a good spokesperson with strong media links) any weaknesses can be overcome
 - Or alternatively, find another senior spokesperson (eg: in a multinational company, a local manager who will be with the company)

for more than three years)

The Career Company Spokesperson

Is typically a career company manager who is given public affairs/public relations as a pre-retirement role or because they present or speak well or have worked in a diversity of roles and know the company very well.

- Plus:
 - Is usually very knowledgeable about the company and has the confidence of those internally and knows how to play the politics of the organisation
 - Often runs a competent PR/public affairs unit which is administratively sound and does what the company expects
 - Is very good at protecting the company from controversy
 - Can be absolutely relied upon by the company to never embarrass it
- Minus:
 - Tends, because of company history and lack of knowledge of media, to see his/her prime role to be defensive ie keep the organisation out of the media
 - Often not mindful of media deadlines etc so can frustrate media
 - Because of lack of media knowledge, is inherently distrustful of media and so doesn't build relations with, or earn the confidence of, media
 - Media often avoid him/her because they know they will seldom get 'news'
- Overall:
 - Works well in organisations that are inherently conservative and want to be 'low key'. By the organisation's standards he/she often does a great job because is seen to be protecting the company from media scrutiny. Often benefits from having an external agency with a strong media bias to complement so that the 'good news' also gets out

The Specialist Media Spokesperson

Is often a journalist or media personality who is recruited to be the 'mouth' of the organisation. Usually is part of the public relations team under the control of the PR or Corporate Affairs Director.

- Plus:
 - Brings media expertise, knowledge and contacts to organisations that are constantly in the public eye with obligations to be media accessible and friendly all the time
 - Knows how to deal with media, deliver messages and for radio can present a good 'voice'
 - Favoured by daily reporters who need to file a story with comments
 - Is an efficient way to handle daily 'low level' announcements
- Minus:
 - Usually are truly only a 'spokesperson' - he/she will have little idea of wider PR or the company
 - Often only capable of handling routine media enquires or comment on today's media release
 - At the end of the day their roots are in media, so if the chips are down they may not defend the organisation to the extent that senior management might like. In fact they could leave over an 'issue of principle'
- Overall:
 - Essentially, they are simply a mercenary - hired from the media to deal with the media. They are the voice of the organisation and behind them there needs to be a comprehensive PR structure that does the strategy, planning and wider stakeholder communication

Of course, all of these are generalisations - and there are variations on each of the above characterisations. And there is no right or wrong.

What works for one organisation may not for another. The challenge is to find a balance - that works.

In a large organisation the players normally include:

- The CEO and/or senior management
- The PR or Corporate Affairs Director
- The company spokesperson
- The PR Department
- The PR agency

This article is about realising the strengths and weaknesses of the spokesperson approach your organisation takes. And then recognising the need to complement this so that the overall PR/communication for the organisation is effectively delivering the messages you want.

COMPANY SPOKESPERSON – FACILITATOR OR BUFFER?

There's a growing tendency for organisations to rely on communications executives to front for them when dealing with the media.

It's hard to generalise about spokespersons. They come in many guises and - apart from the largest organisations which have professional spokespersons who do nothing else - for most of them, it is just part of their general communications responsibilities.

This raises a number of questions, including:

- Does a spokesperson help the media do its job better?
- Does it portray the organisation in a better light?
- What implications does it have for those in the role?

Here are some perspectives about spokespersons.

The Media Perspective

- Media, in general, don't like dealing with spokespersons. They prefer to deal direct with management and get opinions and explanations 'from the horses mouth'.
- Too often a company spokesperson is seen as a 'filter', and someone who makes it harder to get a story and get answers rather than facilitating it. And often they can slow the process down with their internal approval processes.
- Journalists are taught that the essence of good reporting is to quote a source by name. When a company spokesperson won't let their name be used in a story, it often further devalues the story in the eyes of the media and indicates to their readers/viewers/listeners that they couldn't actually access the decision-maker.
- On the other hand, a company spokesperson who is a genuine source of information, is free to be quoted, and actively acts as a conduit for the media to access relevant executives when necessary, can be highly valued.

The Organisation's Position

- 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.

- The question is whether companies are doing this to genuinely help facilitate and improve contact with the media, or whether it is a form of protection or a shield to protect senior management. Regrettably, too often it is the latter.
- 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.
- Executives have to appreciate that the best company spokesperson will take the routine of media contact away but present them with the opportunities that are important.

Spokespersons

- Publicly fronting an organisation is a huge responsibility in these days of class actions, litigation and corporate watchdogs. Any spokesperson would be well advised to ensure they have adequate insurance and protection.
- It's important that the spokesperson understands the ethos of the organisation. If it is open and transparent and the job is one of facilitation it can be a rewarding task. If the PR is simply being used as a buffer then it can be thankless and the spokesperson's credibility can be under pressure both with the media and internally.
- Where possible, the approved spokesperson of an organisation should be able to be quoted by name by the media. This gives the spokesperson and the company more credibility - some say "that only to be sourced as a 'spokesperson' looks cowardly and as though the company has something to hide".
- A spokesperson's role is helped by being able to access senior management when the occasion demands; not to have this ability makes the task of representing the organisation, and presenting it in its best light, very demanding.
- The spokesperson must have the right credentials - they must have a strong working knowledge of the organisation, regularly do refresher media training and have the right personality to handle the media.
- Good spokespersons need to deliver consistent, credible messages about their organisations. Unfortunately not many Indian companies are good at this so spokespeople are put on stage without all the tools they need to fulfill the role properly.

Not surprisingly the status and effectiveness of spokespersons is often tied to the exposure to the media. An organisation that only gets one call a month from media is likely to have a very different structure and policy to handling media than one which gets a call a day.

However, in the Indian context, we are not yet ready to follow the US practice where spokespersons are much more accepted. The public and media here expect people in senior positions to front up and be accountable.

Organisations that appoint spokespersons, and those that fill these roles, need to tread very carefully.

MEDIA RATE COMPANIES AND THEIR SPOKESPERSONS

Being a company spokesperson is a challenge. On the one hand how effective you can be depends on your organisation's policy on dealing with the media - and often the spokesperson doesn't have control over this. On the other hand it takes a great deal of personal skill to handle media, especially for an organisation in the media spotlight. A recent (May 2004) survey of 321 Canadian journalists, undertaken by Porter Novelli Canada and Canada Newswire, is worthwhile reading for anyone in a spokesperson role. While practices in Canada may be different to India, and the statistics may not be strictly comparable, many of the attributed comments - and gripes - from Canadian journalists could have come straight from the mouths of Indian media.

In the survey, companies did get an acknowledgement for their media policies and practices in several areas, for e.g.:

- Over half believe that Canadian businesses have a satisfactory or good understanding of the media and way reporters work.
- Over half believe that companies provide good access to executives for interviews or comment.
- Nearly two-thirds believe that the corporate information provided is satisfactory or very good.

But there's also a disturbingly strong minority of media - around about a third of those who responded - who appear to have 'a gripe' with how companies and their spokespeople perform:

- They are unhappy with the access being provided to executives.
- They are unhappy with the honesty being displayed by company representatives to the media.
- They rate the quality of media releases they receive as being unsatisfactory.
- They say that businesses don't respect their deadlines.

And here are 10 quotes from the journalists who responded to the survey that demonstrate that there's still a gulf between business and media:

1. "They make the assumption that we are obligated to write about them, cover their event, if they tell us about it."
2. "They don't understand time constraints, in regards to how timely they need to respond to journalist phone calls, as well as how much time their viewpoints will be allotted in a television newscast."
3. "(They) will not answer any questions outside of their well-prepared, agenda-based response. They fail to understand we're not there to write stories that purely promote their businesses. It's our job to cover both sides of the story, not write advertorials."
4. "(They fail) to provide access to senior executives who could actually aid in getting a company's story out there. Instead of training executives to deal with the press, they allow or encourage senior management to hide behind their corporate spokespeople."
5. "Press releases sent out often focus on what a company thinks is important rather than what the viewer thinks is important, and therefore gets ignored. Officials and representatives from companies aren't as appealing to television producers as personal angles."
6. 'Plain English, please . . . ditch the marketing pitch - nobody takes it seriously anyway. I don't care if you're 'an emerging leader' or 'leveraging competitive advantage.' And please find another word for 'solution.' "

7. "The biggest mistake spokespeople make is not understanding the urgency of deadlines. They assume deadlines can be extended, without understanding the urgency of press deadlines."
8. "It often takes days to get fairly simple questions answered, and weeks, not days, to get a chance for an interview with the right person within the company."
9. "It can be tiresome and a waste of time talking with spokespeople who unfailingly say 'I don't know' to questions on the story of the day but who also will not or cannot direct me to someone who does know those answers."
10. "[Spokespeople] assume we are hostile and ignorant. We are neither. We're only trying to ask the questions we think any person interested in that company or business would want to ask."

Dealing with media is a complicated thing

Make sure your spokespersons don't make these common mistakes during interviews:

1. The myopic executive spokesperson – Your CEO goes into a media interview assuming she is owed and deserves editorial coverage. Because the subject matter is near and dear, she automatically assumes it will also be newsworthy to the reporter and publication. This is a dangerous leap that should not be made. Work with your executives to help them understand how reporters might interpret your news in a different way. Anticipate hard questions in advance and be prepared. And train your spokesperson to understand the reality of how and why interviews turn into actual ink. Great coverage is earned, not owed.
2. Mr. Gobbledygook strikes again – Your CTO spokesperson is a deeply knowledgeable emissary for your company, but he quickly loses most reporters in a river of tech talk. You have two courses of action to offset this kind of spokesperson: (A) make sure you only line him up with reporters who can walk the tech walk and follow along or (B) you can proactively arm your technical spokesperson with a message path that starts simply at a high level and then gradually gets more complicated if – and only if – the reporter has the ability and interest to follow along.
3. Ms. Self-Important - Your CEO doesn't think she should invest her valuable time talking with reporters who aren't at the highest levels at a publication. Talk to a staff reporter? No way! Only Managing Editors or Senior Editors will do for this busy executive. While this attitude may have merit for certain types of companies and stories, it can also be a formula for missed media opportunities. Your CEO needs to understand that today's staff reporter is tomorrow's Editor-in-Chief. The time she invests with a reporter-on-the-rise may pay dividends short term with a great story inclusion and long term when the reporter moves to another publication or assumes more responsibility.
4. Mr. "I've got all day" - Your VP Marketing forgets that reporters are busy people facing an endless parade of vendors eager to spin their stories and promote their wares. During interviews, he doesn't inquire about the amount of time available for the interview; he just acts like the reporter has all day. Make sure your spokesperson asks – up front – how much time the reporter has before beginning. The reporter will really appreciate this sensitivity and your

spokesperson will have the foresight to zero-in on the most important points if time is short.

5. Ms. Drone On - Some spokespersons just can't take a breath. They talk and talk and talk and assume the reporter is following along and is still interested. Big mistake! Train her to be sensitive to reading the reporter's interest levels throughout media interviews. If the pen goes down, the reporter has mentally checked out. Look for the obvious signs! Train your spokesperson to pepper his or her dialogue with "does this make sense?" and "is this what you're looking for?" type comments to keep interviews on track.
6. Mr. Roboto - Your CFO is all business. He launches into the media interview without any attempt at small talk or social interaction with the reporter. Coach your spokesperson the value of the personal touch. A little bit of up front dialogue about the weather or a story by the reporter, can pay dividends in helping the reporter become genuinely engaged in the interview. After all this is an interview, not an interrogation.
7. Ms. Clueless - Your company founder goes into an interview without advance familiarity with the publication or reporter. She asks questions or makes comments that make it obvious she doesn't read the magazine. This is not a good way to engage with the press! Make certain they read recent stories written by the reporter. Then train your spokesperson to bring up recent stories during interviews to make a point or draw analogies. This is Dale Carnegie 101: convey interest in what other people do and they become more receptive to you.
8. Accurate & brief, but boring - Some spokespersons know their subject matter and can talk concisely, but they're still boring. Solution? Arm this type of spokesperson with sound bites that convert "regular talk" to "memorable talk." Work with your spokesperson to create clever ways of saying the same thing. Leverage analogies and metaphors. Convert tepid language to colourful "I get it" examples. And pay very careful attention to word choice.
9. I am a rock; I am an island - Your spokesperson only talks about her company, her products, her services and her customers. Reporters don't think that way! They are trained to cover entire categories and all the products and companies within those categories. Their perspective is always big picture. Make certain your spokesperson can frame her message within a competitive context.
10. Mr. Dangerous Name Dropper - Reporters will always ask your spokesperson for customers they can contact to validate your story. Some executives throw up customer names to make their point, but mess up in one very critical way: the names they've thrown up to the reporter aren't customers who will talk to the media. This approach will backfire. Identify customers in advance who will be able to play ball with reporters. Then give your executive the pertinent contact information for each "active customer reference" including email addresses and phone numbers.

WEB PAGE AS SPOKESPERSON

In this day of tech savvy communications, the web page is also known to act as spokesperson. Two well-known personalities in the US have used this option.

Michael Jackson unveiled a web site to issue official statements regarding his case. The media circus following him made this an easy choice over holding press conferences.

This one-way communication approach is a step above no-comment and silence strategies—but a barely discernable step. The website had no e-mail link and no method of contact listed for fans to show their support. Jackson's absence of contact information connotes guilt and that he does not care what his fans think. This was a critical error. This eliminated Jackson's ability to promote the support he might have received.

On the other hand, look at Martha Stewart's (the well-known Multi-Media Lifestyle Entrepreneur, who has had more influence on how Americans, eat, entertain, and decorate their homes and gardens than any one person in our history) Web page as spokesperson strategy. In less than six months Martha's website has received 15 million hits and nearly 70,000 e-mails from supportive fans at the height of her insider trading trial.

The Martha Stewart Crisis

Authors: Eric Dezenhall and Al Ries

Whether you consider Martha Stewart a criminal, hero or victim, her sentencing signals the end of a long, punishing crisis. This analysis will focus on what Stewart did right and wrong from a public relations perspective; and how the scandal was shaped by the media and corporate reform.

Every Meal Starts with a Salad

The media feeding frenzy around Stewart's fall from grace began after her now infamous appearance on CBS' The Early Show. During her then weekly cooking segment, she was asked about the ImClone issue.

Stewart tried to dodge the question and noted she wanted to focus on her salad. Media training executives around the globe quickly added the footage to their training tapes of how not to handle direct questions.

"This interview took place too soon after the ImClone story broke," says Dezenhall. "She was too flip and hadn't endured the crucible long enough to show human depth. When you live by personality you can die by personality. There are acute limits to what you can do with someone with Martha's personality.

"The same doggedness that served her well on the way up, served her poorly on the way down. Avoiding the CBS salad interview would have been a good place to start. But you can't tell divas that diva behaviour is wrong. After all, until now it was effective."

Silence isn't Golden, it's Guilty

Stewart's first public appearance during the scandal was the most damaging of all. We could note this snafu proves the importance of media training, but let's consider the bigger issue of brand strategy. Crisis communications' and media training's role in a brand strategy is to preserve and reinforce the brand—when used proactively. Far too often, they're used reactively with mixed results.

Stewart fell silent after the CBS spot turned bad into worse, cancelling public appearances. She hired professionals to handle damage control and help create a crisis strategy.

She should have engaged a crisis team the day the scandal broke. Especially during a crisis, silence isn't golden, it's guilty. Until 'Martha Talks' (her webpage spokesperson) was unveiled, the media had no comment from Stewart and they were left to assume, and assign, guilt.

Web Page As Spokesperson

Martha Talks proved the effectiveness of the Web in crisis communications. And as we've discussed, a blog could also support crisis communications.

Martha Talks tells Stewart's side of the story. It generates support and presents her as a normal person—not the uber-perfect home heroine her shows and the media make her out to be. The site is humble, subtle and presented in a way that communicates, while Stewart maintains her innocence, that she realises the serious nature of her legal issues.

Timely trial updates, statements from Stewart's legal team and a library of different op/eds written on her behalf populate the site. It's become a news source, getting Stewart's point across without her having to field interviews. Of course, she did conduct strategically timed interviews with Larry King and Barbara Walters.

Traffic Shows Support

Stewart also translated traffic statistics into a show of support. At the time of writing this article in July 2004, the site has received more than 34 million hits and more than 170,000 supportive emails since it was launched in June 2003. This information is brought to your attention on first view.

"Stewart's Internet campaign was quite good," says Dezenhall. "It allowed her to mobilise and to communicate with supporters. In the end, it didn't turn the jury, but it was a good move to establish the Web site."

Brand Personification

Can the brand survive without Martha Stewart? Wharton School offers up an interesting article on this entitled: "When the CEO is the Brand, But Falls from Grace, What's Next?" (login now required – sorry!)

The article explores brand personification—when the brand is tied to an individual. The main point is to strike a balance when you rely on the CEO as your brand.

"Strike a balance, where the company benefits from an appealing public personality like Martha Stewart and Donald Trump or Ralph Lauren and Michael Dell, while it builds a strong identity that doesn't rely on the individual.

"Like Stewart, Trump places his name on everything he gets involved in. He is a visible, vocal brand voice. Lauren and Dell, however, have cleverly created a separate, institutional identity that doesn't make them so vulnerable if they have a personal problem."

Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO) is moving in that direction with products and projects that do not bear Martha's name.

CEOs & Corporate Reform

Personally, I think Stewart is a victim of much needed corporate reform.

Keep in mind, she's not being convicted of insider trading, rather lying during the insider trading investigation. Her worth has plummeted from billions to millions and she lost the helm of a diverse company she built all by herself.

So why the need to incarcerate her? Well, I'll argue it's because most folks cannot match these executives: Rigas, Ebbers, Kozlowski, Fastow, Nacchio to their respective companies Enron, Tyco, WorldCom, Qwest, Adelphia.

The Justice Department has charged more than 700 people in the two years since the Corporate Fraud Task Force was formed. But Stewart is the celebrity CEO everyone recognises. This sentence sends a message to corporate America.

Dezenhall notes, "Legally, Martha isn't a victim because she was convicted of breaking the law. Her career and her business certainly have been victimised. There is a witch-hunt component to this on top of the legal violations. Her celebrity and her success played a role in the intensity of the scrutiny and the harshness of the punishment.

"We are living in a Marie Antoinette period right now. The savaging of success is considered universally good. Americans enjoy playing a role in building someone up, but once they rise out of our reach, they must be torn down. How it's done; in a court, in the media, is academic."

COMPANIES SCORING WITH SUPERSTAR CEOs

Earlier in June this year, Silicon Valley was hit by a mild earthquake, an event that was quickly overshadowed by the reverberations of the Microsoft announcement. For competitors, it was a moment to be savoured and celebrated. For analysts and stock markets, it was a time to monitor, scrutinise and ask questions.

Bill Gates, 50, the man who turned an idea and a start-up into one of the most powerful and successful companies in the world, announced that he was stepping down. He was the man who became the public face of an IT behemoth, a monopoly, and for some, an "evil empire" that ruthlessly crushed competition whenever and wherever it cropped up.

For the \$40-billion IT giant, always targeted and under scrutiny from regulators, questions and uncertainty have multiplied since. Microsoft's scrip slipped marginally. His successors are under microscope. "The most important title that Bill Gates held was not that he was chief software architect, but that he was Bill Gates. And that title is not transferable," said a US-based Microsoft watcher.

That "earthquake" in the US is reverberating closer home. Infosys chairman N R Naryana Murthy is stepping down this August. Murthy, who co-founded Infosys in 1981 with Rs 10,000, has seen it grow to \$2.15 billion in 2005-06. For the media and masses, he is Infosys personified - representing its ethos in flesh and blood. Already, corporate watchers have begun to ask if things would be the same at Infosys after

him. Love them or hate them, but it is true that in an age of media hype and constant investor scrutiny, it helps to have an iconic CEO at the helm. For companies, they help to attract the attention they need. For the world, they become the company's chief messenger, their prime brand ambassadors.

What they do and how they do it have a significant bearing on a company's perception outside. Be it Murthy's integrity, Azim Premji's modesty, Gates' philanthropy or the Ambanis' aggressiveness, for most of these iconic CEOs their personal and professional roles often fuse. For companies, these icons have two roles - a designated one and an acquired one. It's this acquired designation, which goes much beyond their official status, that gets them the unusual attention and status. It is understandable then that most big and successful companies across the world have had iconic CEOs at some point of their growth path. Gates at Microsoft, Jack Welch at GE, Scott McNealy at Sun Microsystems - the list is long. Look around, India isn't very different. From Sunil Mittal at Bharti to Premji at Wipro, the Ambanis at Reliance, Ratan Tata at Tatas - most big business houses in India have a larger-than-life CEO at the helm.

Is having such a CEO necessary for a company to be successful? Perhaps not. Look at Yahoo. But if you take the world's top 10 companies, you will find that all have had an iconic CEO at some stage of their growth.

In an age where teams, not individuals, run companies (look at Google), where business is so complex and change so overwhelming, staking the company's image on one individual may sound too risky for comfort. But it may not be. Unlike the past, many corporations today are in idea-led intangible businesses. Look at Google, Microsoft. The investment community too likes them. They bring stability, credibility, superior execution and a leadership that's critical. Often, their larger-than-life image helps them garner support and become better executioners and leaders.

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)