

Hello and welcome to my February 2007 Newsletter

Jeff Ansell News & Views

Always keep in mind that everything you're exposed to in media is just someone else's interpretation of issues and events, so view it with an open mind. Skillful communication with media, and in presentations can make all the difference in how your messages are reported and received. It's a complicated mix of delivery and interpretation and a skill few truly master, yet it is something anyone can learn or improve upon.

Here is a list of issues covered in this newsletter . . . enjoy

FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS NOT A LITERAL TERM

THE ART OF THE GRACEFUL RETRACTION

COVER YOUR BACK

Please feel free to forward this newsletter to friends and colleagues.

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FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS NOT A LITERAL TERM

You might think it, and you might be right, but if you say it, it could be the beginning of the end of your career. Freedom of speech is part of the constitution in many countries, but in no country can it be taken literally.

Freedom of speech in North America even allows a person to make racial slurs without legal repercussion, and some politicians and executives push it to the edge. But if you happen to step over the line, even accidentally, you might find yourself shunned and in a world of news media pain you never knew existed.

2006 and early 2007 were a whirlwind of activity in this regard and examples ran the gamut from B-grade celebrities to presidential hopefuls. Mel Gibson, while in a drunken stupor, got the ball rolling with his anti-Semitic remarks, while Michael Richards of Seinfeld fame lost his cool onstage in a nightclub and dug his grave by spewing racist remarks against African-Americans. More recently Isaiah Washington from "Grey's Anatomy" used homophobic language on the set to "out" his gay co-star, T.R. Knight. Washington made the situation even worse by later denying he said it at the Golden Globe Awards, which as you can imagine, was like pouring gasoline on a smoldering ember.

Sometimes you just have to know when to zip it.

Psychologists feel it is very difficult to change beliefs that have been ingrained since childhood, but they do agree it is possible to change behavior. In part, that is what media training does. It helps you manage and control your thought process.

Why you might ask, when this is a business newsletter, and the people above are entertainment celebrities, am I bringing attention to this string of media train wrecks? Well, I want to demonstrate that even people whom you would expect to possess highly developed communication skills, still get themselves in trouble when they don't put enough thought into what they say. If "these guys" can hit the wall when they are stressed, where do you fit into the equation? Granted, you're probably not a drunken bigot with a career on the skids, but the point here is that anyone can lose control when they are under pressure. And is your pressure any less intense than their pressure? When jobs and careers are at stake it is hard to think rationally when the screws are tightened and a TV camera is stuck in your face.

Let's consider U.S. Presidential hopefuls for a moment. Recently, U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr. described Senator Barack Obama, a fellow Democratic candidate, as "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy."

Bigotry aside, Senator Biden should have known to stay clear of anything even remotely ethnic, or that refers to a person's clothing or hairstyle. Commenting on a woman's or even a man's garment is never acceptable, no matter how flattering it is intended to be. It's Sensitivity Training 101.

If you do make a gaffe, you should at least have enough media sense to know how to get out of it gracefully. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" has been used before and the public is now immune to such trite responses. It appears Senator Biden missed a day or two of media training classes, because instead of simply admitting his error in judgment and apologizing, he claimed he was taken out of context. It was the sentiment as much as the actual choice of words that sparked the angst against him, and it was all that news media needed to give the story legs. Once again, it was like throwing fuel on a fire. It also didn't help that he made a similar statement last year when he said, "You cannot go into a 7-11 or a Dunkin Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent."

Media have now painted Biden as "His Own Worst Enemy." And when you see your name associated with the word "gaffe" more than twice, it's a sign you need professional media communication help. Go ahead and try it yourself. Go to Google and type "biden gaffe" (use the quotation marks) and see how many returns you get. I got 830 on February 9, and 540 on February 21, 2007. Time seems to be a healer, but can you afford even one second of grief?

You throw a newspaper away at the end of the day, and turn off TV news at midnight, but stuff like this lives online forever.

It's a new era, and media training is more important today than it was yesterday.

Biden Obama quote on YouTube.com
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj7RPxykFP8>

Biden's 7-11 Indian gaffe on YouTube.com
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIT3jUrNTX0>

Google "biden gaffe" – <http://www.Google.com>

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26 MILLION AMERICANS GO ONLINE IN 1 DAY FOR POLITICAL NEWS

According to PEW Research:

26 million Americans logged onto the Internet on an average day in August of 2006 searching for political news. It broke a record.

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/187/report_display.asp

Americans want control over their political news, so they go online.

http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/202/report_display.asp

Who is Online? 70% of the adult population.

http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_1.11.07.htm

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MICHAEL MOORE UPDATE

Just a quick follow up to the Michael Moore piece I had in my last two newsletters. In February of 2006, Moore asked Americans to send him stories about their experiences with the health care system. In July of 2006, according to his website, he was overwhelmed with responses.

Although Moore isn't confirming anything at this time, look for his new movie "Sicko" to be released June 2007. He knows silence gets people talking so he has chosen to stay quiet, which for him must be a challenge.

You can learn more about the upcoming film here . . .

<http://www.jeffansell.com/B1MMoore02142007.htm>

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JEFF'S CALENDAR UPDATE advertisement

DEALING WITH AN ANGRY PUBLIC – HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

The next Dealing With An Angry Public Harvard Law School conference is slated for May 3 & 4, 2007, and the one following is scheduled November 15 & 16, 2007. The conferences in Cambridge, Massachusetts provide strategies for resolving conflicts and disputes with dissatisfied customers, potential litigants and concerned interest groups.

As a faculty member of the Public Disputes Program, part of my agenda explores how to get messages out effectively when dealing with the media and interest groups in controversial situations. Hope to see you there . . .

Click here for more info . . .
<http://www.jeffansell.com/dealing-with-an-angry-public.html>

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MediaStrategies Phone Tune-Up – advertisement

Mastering media communications requires the building of muscle memory. The practice of answering questions from reporters requires a careful balance of skill, confidence and most of all, expertise to think on your feet.

Conducting media interviews is unlike everyday conversation, and as such, practice does indeed make perfect. Unless spokespeople have opportunities to further hone their media response abilities, it is too easy for the message to be lost.

We are excited to offer the MediaStrategies Phone Tune-Up, designed for graduates of our full and half-day MediaStrategies program. The Phone Tune-Up is a quick and effective way to rehearse upcoming interviews and keep media skills fresh in between coaching sessions and actual media encounters. The MediaStrategies Tune-Up helps you test new messages and practice delivering them with ease and clarity. See your words in print, as our trainer-reporters write your company's story and/or prepare radio reports, complete with a clip of your voice.

For information on fees and availability, please contact;
Jeff Ansell & Associates at 416 413 9660 -- or email;

Ariella Heskin at:Ariella@JeffAnsell.com

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THE ART OF THE GRACEFUL RETRACTION

Managing media in a crisis situation is like playing a musical instrument, the more you practice, the better you get.

French President Jacques Chirac made a "gaffe" in late January, but quickly recovered by admitting that he made a mistake, and he retracted many of the things he originally told news media during an interview in Paris a day before.

He originally made comments to reporters from the International Herald Tribune, The NY Times, and Le Nouvel Observateur, regarding Iran and nuclear weapons. When he realized that the comments he made to these newspapers and magazine contradicted France's policy, and also what he had consistently stated in the past, he quickly called the same news companies back, and the next day admitted his error.

He said that he had spoken "casually," and "too quickly" the previous day, and claimed he thought he was "speaking off the record." He frankly admitted that he had made a mistake, and clarified his, and his country's position regarding Iran and nuclear arms.

As quoted in the International Herald Tribune, he said, "It is I who was wrong and I do not want to contest it. I should have paid better attention to what I was saying and understood perhaps that I was on the record."

This second interview was embargoed, which means that the reporters in attendance agreed not to publish the retraction until the following Thursday when the magazine, Le Nouvel Observateur normally published.

According to the International Herald Tribune, they were unclear as to whether Chirac had misspoken, or that he believed what he said the first time, and realized that it would negatively impact his office if he did not retract the original statements.

Regardless of the interpretation, what could have turned into a highly volatile situation was defused, and the only thing suffered was a slightly bruised ego and reputation. The outcome was much better than if Chirac would have stubbornly refused to concede he made a mistake. He quite literally made it very difficult for news media to run with it.

The rule of thumb here is, admit you made a mistake, and then provide a plausible solution. It is textbook, but I have to wonder how a politician as experienced as Jacques Chirac could ever think he was speaking off the record, especially to international journalists who may not be as familiar with his idiosyncrasies or sense of humor.

Would you relax with your head in a lion's mouth, let alone a strange lion?

The second lesson to be learned is that "the microphone is always on, and anything you say, at any time, to anyone, can be entered into the public domain." If a reporter can verify that you said it, he or she can, and probably will use it. It's their job. In fact, in this era of blogs and independent online news agencies, anyone who is witness to your words or actions can send them careening around the world in a heartbeat. It reminds me of the words of Mark Twain, who said, "A lie can travel halfway around the world, while the truth is still putting on its shoes."

YouTube.com, like CBS, is only a mouse click away.

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COVER YOUR BACK

For some newsmakers, sometimes it doesn't matter what they say or do, they believe they will be misquoted or taken out of context. All smart executives and politicians know they cannot control everything, including how media and the public interpret their words and actions. Fortunately, in this era of "new media," a "new" solution exists.

In the old days (2004) executives and politicians often used small micro cassette recorders during interviews to "cover their back." Well, maybe "they" didn't, but their PR people did.

Today, the new tool of choice is a small technological device that also still literally fits in the palm of your hand, but it packs a punch that can be felt around the world in less time than it takes you to jog around the block.

The new tool is a combination phone/camera/video recorder/ PDA style little marvel that almost all of us have, but few maximize, although recently many more are starting to figure out a good line of defense is sitting in their breast pocket. It is extremely powerful because you can stream and network your message through companies like YouTube, or Google Video, or Yahoo. If a picture is worth a thousand words, just imagine the impact of a video that contains a thousand pictures as well as sound?

A micro-video recorder isn't a replacement for well-honed media skills. You must still always know the agenda of the reporter interviewing you. It is why you should always ask beforehand what the premise of their story is, and it is why formal media training is even more important today than it was last year. Practice makes perfect. Ask journalists politely "before" you begin the interview what they are trying to achieve. Also, unless you can avoid it, never agree to an interview when they call you cold. Ask what their premise is and call them back, even if it is in ten minutes. A professional media person will usually tell you the premise, but usually only if you ask. Very rarely will they deceive you unless you are doing something that they feel is underhanded. Pros will also give you time to compose yourself before you start. If they don't, their motives are highly suspect and you should be even more wary than normal.

Having a back up that you control is a good defense when you are under unwarranted pressure, or when you are misquoted or taken out of context.

More and more every day sharp business executives and politicians go immediately to your website or blog to see your version of the truth. Their next step is to run a Google Video or YouTube search to see what other people are saying about you. Consequently, the most progressive players are also uploading their version of the story on public video services. Everyone has an agenda, and every agenda is different.

Mainstream news media have lost their exclusivity, and their punch. Smart executives and politicians, and now even J.Q. Public know they have options, and these options are only a click away. You don't even have to be at a desktop computer to see what people are saying about you. All you have to do is sit down in your favorite coffee shop and it is likely they will provide you with a free wireless feed to cruise the new media frontier via your laptop or PDA. The stranger sitting beside you could be reading about, or watching "you."

Nowhere is business communication video streaming more valuable than when you or your company's perspective goes against the grain of "current" public opinion. Quite literally, as startling as the image might be, you hold in your hand the capacity to become a "Mini-Michael Moore."

Sometimes you and your company are simply more progressive or forward looking than the masses, and in some cases mainstream news media often have incentive to undermine your opinion, especially when it contradicts a political or economic agenda their news media company supports. A good example of this is in Olympic regions when communities are torn apart by news media companies, governments, and private

companies, all who have different versions of what is good or bad for the community. Media tools like this are opening new doors and literally giving communities and companies more control over the messages they want dispersed. Mainstream news media are getting lost in the crowd and they don't know what to do except react through brute force. Today, we live in an era where finesse has more impact. No one wants to be bullied.

However, don't think for even a nanosecond that having a video back up means you can ignore good media skills. In fact, the exact opposite is true. You still can't walk into a situation unprepared and shoot wildly from the hip and then patch things together later. In the music industry it's referred to as "fix-it-in-the-mix" and it is not even a remote option for you. Newspapers and TV still have a sizeable audience, and if you know how to give them what they want in a manner that works for you too, you are further ahead than having to defend yourself later. A back up is exactly that, and not a first line tool.

Today, you need even better media skills, because now, if you want to use your video to defend or promote your position, your performance must be clear, concise, and professional. If not, other than speaking improperly from the outset, the next worst thing you can do is create and unleash a video that will help someone else make you look foolish.

The tools are there, but you have to use them effectively.

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TAKE 5 – HUMOROUS GAFFES

No one wants to be the butt of a joke, and making gaffes that live on in news media makes you an easy target to make the "Dumbest Quotes" lists assembled at the end of every year by anyone who can henpeck a blog. Take 5 and have a little chuckle at the following;

"I have learned from mistakes I may or may not have made."
George W. Bush.

Laugh more here . . .
<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/stupidquotes/a/dumbquotes2006.htm>

That's it for this addition of News & Views.
I hope you found it informative and valuable.

Sincerely,
Jeff Ansell

Be well

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<http://www.jeffansell.com/>

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Jeff Ansell & Associates
69 Yorkville Avenue, Toronto, Ontario
CANADA M5R 1B8

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