

January 2011 Newsletter

Jeff Ansell News & Views

My new book "When the Headline Is YOU: An Insider's Guide to Handling the Media" was released late in 2010 and is already in its 3rd printing.

Thank you all so much for quickly making it such a success.

Topics for this newsletter:

- 1.) TWO FACED MEDIA - SOCIAL & MAINSTREAM
- 2.) ARE POLITICIANS "MORE" or "LESS" MEDIA ADEPT?
- 3.) THE VILLAGE IDIOT - DON'T LET IT BE YOU
- 4.) MARK YOUR CALENDAR
- 5.) TURNING A CRISIS INTO PR OPPORTUNITY
- 6.) SPOKESPERSON OR SCAPEGOAT?
- 7.) VALUE COMPASS - DO WHAT IS RIGHT
- 8.) LEGAL COUNSEL CRISIS CONUNDRUM
- 9.) ARE C-LEVEL EXECUTIVES EASY TARGETS?
- 10.) RELATIONSHIPS WITH JOURNALISTS ARE COMPLEX

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1.) TWO FACED MEDIA - SOCIAL & MAINSTREAM

Not so long ago the big challenge for spokespeople was primarily about dealing with mainstream news media. Today, everyone-and-his-brother (your competitors included) consider themselves part of the media network and have access to volumes of information and a wide audience.

PR companies are constantly on the prowl for information (whether it is accurate or not) that could potentially make their clients' competition look bad. They also have social networks beyond those of mainstream news media to easily disseminate this information. When released, contentious info can undermine share prices and negatively impact company morale. Once the toothpaste is out of the tube you can't put it back in.

On another level, mainstream reporters have their hands full trying to do more with less. Newsroom budgets are being radically chopped. Some news companies have even gone bankrupt.

To add insult to injury, citizen journalists, some who are very powerful, but many who are amateurs with little or no training, are reporting stories mainstream news media can no longer cover in a timely manner.

Participatory news is here to stay.

All of this pressure, which emanates from a wide variety of areas, makes it incredibly difficult to get the story straight. Truth is now more elusive than ever.

Amateurs and pros alike use tools like Kurrently.com, a search website that scours Facebook and Twitter, and feeds all types of reporters breaking events in real time. Test it yourself. Search for your city name and the word "accident" or "fire", and see how quickly information hits your screen. It pops up so fast if you react quickly you can be on the scene before police or fire departments and "official" journalists.

Citizen journalists, as well as mainstream journalists with extensive training and experience, can be there as your CEO stumbles out the back door of a smoke-filled building. The results could be catastrophic for your company if a reporter is standing by with a small video recorder capturing the first words from a spokesperson during a life and death situation, like a shooting or environmental disaster.

Most CEOs are not adequately prepared.

Kurrently.com isn't the only option either. Anyone can also scan Snapbird.org, Google Advanced, Advanced Twitter, Collecta.com, or Twubs.com. They all provide information about events occurring in real time, which means everyone is in the race to capture a quote that will live on in infamy.

Tony Hayward, infamous ex-BP CEO doesn't hold a monopoly on insensitivity or ignorance. Don't YOU become the next "Tony."

Here's a 2010 report from PEW Research about Participatory News
<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News.aspx?r=1>

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2.) ARE POLITICIANS "MORE" or "LESS" MEDIA ADEPT?

One would think in this media saturated era politicians and corporate leaders would be so experienced and prepared it would be impossible to catch them off guard. Amazingly, as you know, it isn't the case.

Almost every day we hear of an elected official or CEO embroiled in controversy who inevitably makes his or her situation worse.

They are smart enough to know "NO COMMENT" will only encourage a journalist to dig deeper, but it seems not smart enough to know "what to say" to keep themselves and their companies out of trouble.

Again, "BP Tony" is a perfect example.

He knew he had to say something, but what?

Some leaders think they can correct mistakes by using their influence and networks to backpedal. Some also naively believe journalists will generously give them another chance to explain.

It's not only naive to believe journalists will give you a second kick at the can, but also financially dangerous when you consider a company's share price is directly attached to its reputation.

The biggest mistake politicians, CEOs and business leaders make is to think they, and their companies, are infallible.

Can you imagine a surgeon who says, "I'm not going to learn how to use the new "retracting cardio-dissector thinga-ma-jiggy" until a patient is dying on my operating table?"

Or a politician who says, "I was elected by a landslide and my career is moving along smoothly, so how hard can it really be to deal with a bunch of nosy reporters? It's not like the crisis was my fault!"

Spokespeople have a moral, ethical, and many think even a legal obligation to shareholders, to prepare themselves responsibly.

I wrote a feature article about these challenges, and a few other issues. You can read it here . . . <http://tinyurl.com/29oyzyk>

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3.) THE VILLAGE IDIOT - DON'T LET IT BE YOU

Reporters use a wide cast of characters to tell their stories, and the most colorful character is the one I call the Village Idiot.

The Village Idiot can be anyone on the scene of a news event, whether a passerby, or an entry level employee, but unbelievably it is sometimes the official company spokesperson who makes a statement that is so "sound bite worthy" it becomes the centerpiece of the story. The quote sometimes even turns what might have been a non-event into a crisis with a shelf life of radium.

Reporters do back flips of glee when they pry juicy quotes from the lips of official spokespersons.

It's a reporter's job to not only FIND, but also SELL the news, and if a company spokesperson makes the job easier the reporter has huge incentive to capitalize on the opportunity. A great quote can make a reporter's career.

"I never had sex with that woman." Bill Clinton

"I would like my life back" Tony Hayward

(BTW, FORTUNE Magazine published an article called "Tony Hayward's GREATEST HITS" and listed in it ALL the juicy sound bites from the BP Gulf disaster - <http://tinyurl.com/3363wd8>)

Reporters know however that they need more than a Village Idiot to sell their story and give it substance.

They know they need a full cast of characters to set up the Village Idiot, so they carefully investigate to identify "a Victim, a Villain, and a Hero."

This trio is usually the easiest to identify and provides the perfect storm for a spokesperson who unsuspectingly wades into shark infested waters.

The Village Idiot is made to be the scapegoat, whether they deserve it or not.

They also provide memorable headlines. Don't let the idiot be YOU.

The big challenge for any company spokesperson is to relay information to a reporter that illustrates the sensitivity and concern the spokesperson and her company have regarding the news event, and to do it in a way that serves the best interests of the company.

It's not easy to do, but fortunately it is a learned skill.

I did an interview with the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and discussed in detail how a reporter assembles this cast of characters.

If you'd like to see how it all plays out click the podcast link below.

PRSA Podcast - <http://tinyurl.com/4ss6t4t>

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4.) MARK YOUR CALENDAR

February 3, I am guest speaker at the CEO Club in Boston
<http://www.ceoclubofboston.org/events.html>

February 16, I am guest speaker at the Granite Club in Toronto

The talks I'll be delivering will generally be as follows:

At a time of radical change in the way we consume news, every company is potentially one sentence from disaster. Reflecting on my extensive experience as an award-winning investigative reporter and media/crisis communications expert, I will share the formula to successfully enhance reputation and meaningfully connect with stakeholders when trust is on the line.

Both audiences will also learn:

:: The Key principles for building trust

:: What to do when bad news happens

:: How "I'm sorry," can save you millions of dollars

I'll also reveal inside secrets to help executives and business leaders deliver messages that influence the public and persuade skeptical stakeholders.

June 5-7, 2011 in Saint John, New Brunswick, I'm looking forward to being a guest speaker at the Canadian Public Relations Society 2011 Conference.

My talk, MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY WHEN THE HEADLINE IS YOU, will provide an effective alternative to the broken media training model. I'll offer a framework for addressing problematic issues in a responsive, forthright manner. <http://cprs.ca/saintjohn2011/>

June 12-15 is the IABC 2011 World Conference in San Diego, California. More than 1,400 communication professionals from around the world will gather for this annual event. My presentation is on June 14. The night before, I've also been asked to emcee the IABC Gold Quill Awards, which I am honored to do.

The Gold Quill Awards are the Academy Awards of the PR industry.

<http://www.iabc.com/wc/aboutsandiego.htm>

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5.) TURNING A CRISIS INTO PR OPPORTUNITY

News is what you make it.

As a politician, or a spokesperson you have an obligation to take even the most catastrophic event and manage it in a way that mitigates damage.

In most cases the best solution is to immediately demonstrate you;

- a) are sensitive to the impact the event has had on people,
- b) are truly sorry for the harm it caused, and
- c) that you will do everything in your power to fix the situation and ensure to the best of your ability it will never happen again.

You have to be genuine in your communication, and you have to do it quickly.

The longer you wait to make an "official" statement, the more people will suspect you are manufacturing disingenuous sentiment.

For example; "Yes, effluent generated by ACME Co. breached a levy during a spring storm, and ACME engineers reacted quickly to contain the spill.

ACME kept citizens apprised each step along the way and worked relentlessly to re-channel the sludge. We're currently re-engineering and rebuilding the network, and compensating landowners who were affected by the breach."

Though action speaks louder than words, first you need to demonstrate to people that you genuinely feel their pain.

It would be a stretch to think you could turn a disaster into a neighborhood party, but if you manage communication properly you can lessen the negative impact it has on your company and career. It's a step in the right direction.

Here's a video I produced to illustrate how it's done . . .

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xhwd6tly1ao&>

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6.) SPOKESPERSON OR SCAPEGOAT?

Executives and politicians often believe they can handle everything on the fly. Some of the more-experienced can, but most are woefully unprepared.

The world of communication is advancing at a phenomenal rate. The skills you brought into the position when you were hired have changed dramatically over the last few years. Like all professions, if you don't constantly improve your skills, you can't deliver.

How you manage communication day to day, and especially during a crisis, is directly tied to the long term success of your career. It is ethically responsible to ensure that the people who rely on you know not just your strengths, but also your limitations. If you don't tell them they will assume you are prepared.

If you simply sit back and wait for a crisis to occur thinking that miraculously you are going to breeze through it, you are not only misleading yourself, but also the people who rely on you to do and say the right thing.

Rest assured, a crisis will occur. Every company goes through at least one major catastrophe, and how well it survives is tied directly to the skill of the spokesperson at the helm.

It is a journalist's job to find the truth, but if a reporter can't clearly define why a crisis occurred or who is responsible, reporters have no hesitation pinning it on the first person who foolishly gives them the opportunity.

The question, for you and your company is, when the crisis does eventually occur, will you be the spokesperson or the scapegoat?

Here's a great article to help you learn more about the process . . .
<http://tinyurl.com/6g9nhvq>

You can also browse through a variety of articles on my websites to find a wealth of information in this regard.

My Book website: www.WhenTheHeadlinelsYOU.com

My BLOG: <http://JeffAnsell.com/wordpress/>

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7.) VALUE COMPASS - DO WHAT IS RIGHT

The Value Compass is a tool I developed that provides a road map to identifying and incorporating values brought to life through words and actions.

Basically, to ensure media messages match organizational values, you filter your messages through carefully chosen Value Compass words, such as;

Honesty - Is the message honest?

Anger - Does it acknowledge the general public's anger?

Needs - Is it responsive to stakeholders' needs?

Accountability - Does it reflect the organization's accountability?

It is poor planning to simply wait for a crisis and then expect to "wing it!"

You need a plan that will work quickly in all types of situations - something that is flexible whether the crisis is career, corporate, or political, and especially when it impacts society.

A Value Compass lets you focus on the specifics of the crisis so you don't have to worry about the foundation upon which your response must be built.

If you enter a bike race it would be handy to first know how to ride a bicycle.

A Value Compass provides a clear map of your route and the final destination.

If you're interested in more information about the Value Compass, you can find a reproducible template, a list of the most popular values-based words, and complete step-by-step directions in my new book, *When the Headline Is YOU: An Insider's Guide to Handling the Media*.

www.WhenTheHeadlineIsYOU.com

If you are a member of the IABC, International Association of Business Communications, you can also find an overview on their website, but you will need a member ID and password.

<http://tinyurl.com/4tfvham>

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8.) LEGAL COUNSEL CRISIS CONUNDRUM

A driver of one of your company's delivery vans had a heart attack and drove into a group of school children. Four kids and the driver died at the scene.

You, the CEO, and your entire company are devastated and heartbroken. You want to do the right thing - express your grief and offer an apology to the families and friends of the children, but your legal counsel yells "NO!"

Your lawyer is concerned that if you publicly acknowledge the situation people will assume you are guilty.

What do you do? The answer is simple.

Do what is right. But how?

Won't people, and especially a jury vilify you and impose a stiffer sentence or settlement if you volunteer the accident was your fault?

When you acknowledge responsibility and let people know you feel their pain, and you illustrate how you will work to prevent this type of tragedy from happening again, guess what? Most people will forgive you.

I'm not suggesting they will let you off the hook, especially if you were negligent, but we know from history that when you can genuinely connect with people on a base level they treat you with more respect.

Doing the right thing is such an important part of life that thirty-five states and four provinces have passed the "Apology Act," which means in these regions a corporation can express its sorrow without admitting guilt.

Granted, you can't go willy-nilly saying the first thing that springs to mind, but if you are prepared and know what the safe parameters are it is possible to react like a human and still keep your share prices intact in the face of tragedy.

Remember too, it's not just what you say, but how you say it.

There are five important things to do when challenged by a corporate lawyer who feels he or she is acting in the best interest of your company.

The first thing to do is ask important players in the room how they want the company to be perceived by customers, employees, and other stakeholders while dealing with the current crisis.

If you want to learn two more ways to "do the right thing" click the link and go to my BLOG - <http://jeffansell.com/wordpress/?p=274>

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9.) ARE C-LEVEL EXECUTIVES EASY TARGETS?

Of course you are. It's your job.

The responsibilities of a CEO, CIO, or COO are immense.

It's why you get paid the big bucks.

In the past, and as long as you had deep pockets, it was relatively easy to hire a top drawer PR firm and have them hold your hand through the tough spots.

Granted, it's still possible to do today, but with the advent of social media, and also the fact news rooms are buckling under economic restraints, it means relationships between PR and news media aren't as solid as they used to be.

Somewhere along the way, you, as a C-Level executive will have to stand on your own and shoot from the hip when a journalist fires off what is meant to be an embarrassing question in front of a slew of cameras and microphones.

NO COMMENT is not an option. It makes you look shifty and untrustworthy.

How you react on your feet will have serious implications regarding the reputation of your company, its share prices, and ultimately your career.

I stated you are an "easy" target, and I'm sticking to my guns, but just because you are "easy to spot" doesn't mean you have to take a broadside hit.

Instead of fretting over whether you are an "easy" or "hard" target, concentrate more on being the lightning rod that naturally encourages media to seek you out when they need answers. Train them to come to you.

Good executives and politicians do not hide in the face of action.

Instead, they prepare and feel so confident in their skills that they look forward to the scrum. When you have a strong foundation it is only then that you shine.

GOOGLE asked me to talk to its staff about how to effectively manage communication with news media. As you can imagine, GOOGLE attracts more than its fair share of prying journalists. And like all companies it is also concerned about not becoming prey and wants to learn to more effectively navigate the middle ground.

Here's a video of my presentation to GOOGLE on YouTube . . . http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SS_kc3Ds02M

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10.) RELATIONSHIPS WITH JOURNALISTS ARE COMPLEX

I've said it many times over many years that managing a relationship with a journalist is complex. Recently, a well respected journalist published an article supporting this view.

It's rare to see an influential reporter address the issue of relationships and ethics, but Daphne Bramham, a writer with The Vancouver Sun, recently made critical comments about one of her colleagues, Catherine Urquhart.

Bramham wrote, "Journalists are not your friends." She also went on to say, "When the coverage is good, media manipulators (as in PR people, company spokespeople, etc.) may credit their close friendship (with reporters). And of course that coverage enhances their own value to their bosses. But it bears repeating, these friendships are of the Facebook variety. Friend today. Unfriended tomorrow." end of quote

This quote carries considerable weight considering you're getting it straight from the horse's mouth, and especially from an investigative journalist who is so well respected by readers and peers alike.

You can read Bramham's full article here; <http://tinyurl.com/4lpxg95>

That's it for this edition of News & Views.

I hope you found it informative and valuable.

Sincerely,
Jeff Ansell

Be well . . .

P.S.

My new book, "When the Headline Is YOU" can be ordered at a variety of places online and from your favorite bookstores, including Amazon, Borders, Barnes & Noble, Chapters, Indigo, & directly from my publisher, Jossey-Bass.

It captures my decades of experience as a media coach and reporter, and is designed to help people understand and interact effectively with news media.

If you haven't purchased it yet and you're not even sure if YOU need my new book, check out our animated trailer to help you decide.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xhwd6tly1ao>

The excerpt below is from the introduction of my new book.

"Answering questions from reporters is risky business. Though a media interview may feel like a straightforward conversation, it actually represents a contrived and manipulative dynamic. Knowing how to talk to reporters is like learning a new language; a language that bears little, if any, resemblance to everyday conversation. It is a mistake for anyone to believe otherwise. It may seem as if speaking the truth should be enough to build credibility and trust, but that's rarely the case. Exposing oneself to media scrutiny requires more than simple candor and honesty. It requires knowledge, training, and a keen understanding of how reporters write the news." . . . end of excerpt

"When the Headline Is YOU" goes straight to the core of communicating with news media in our modern world. Communication has changed radically over the last few years, but there is still one constant humanistic dynamic; how a person or company delivers a message, and how others interpret it.

We are all subject to deeply ingrained behavioural traits, and no matter how much, or quickly technology grows or changes, the method of delivering a message, and how it impacts us is still the same. How we react is buried in our genes lurking at a reptilian level in our subconscious.

Contrary to what many people think, citizen journalism, blogs, and Twitter have not made it "easier" to be understood. New media has, in fact made it incredibly more complex and confusing, and that is exactly why clarity from the outset is so important. My book addresses clarity at a base level.

Now, more than ever, it is critically important how you sculpt your message, and how you interact with and deliver it to news media. It is a learned skill.

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My New BLOG - <http://jeffansell.com/wordpress/>

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<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=147796085245411&ref=ts>

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