

Five Sure-Fire Ways to Ruin Your Reputation Through the Media

By Jolaine Freitas Collins

"At every word a reputation dies." Alexander Pope

When it comes to building a successful career or company, there's nothing that can replace a good reputation. And perhaps nothing that can level it faster than unfavorable coverage in the media – especially coverage that is picked up by a national news network or one that becomes the basis for other, credibility-crunching stories.

We've seen it happen to politicians whose private lives have become public scandal, and to manufacturers that hesitate to stand behind their products, as well as non-profits whose leaders relied on poor judgment.

A common mistake that traps people and companies in reputation-damaging stories is that they fail to recognize the power of the press in their public portrayal. The news media have a pervasive and powerful influence on our beliefs and values.

And if you think a story in a local newspaper or magazine doesn't matter, think again. The impression you leave through the media affects the perception of the very people who impact the health and prosperity of your company: shareholders, employees, customers and opinion leaders.

The media are everywhere. In sheer numbers, print and broadcast news outlets have grown as fast as you can misplace your TV remote control. Today, there are literally tens of thousands of television and radio stations, cable systems, newspapers, wire services and online news services. And with their satellites, helicopters and web sites, local television news teams can quickly and easily tell your story as it unfolds. A business leader's presentation at tonight's city council

meeting will be broadcast several times on cable – and might become the lead story on the 10 o'clock news.

There's another mistake people often make when dealing with the media: failing to use common sense. If you're looking for examples, consider these five sure-fire ways to ruin your reputation with the media:



Jolaine Freitas Collins,
ABC, Principal of Collins
Communications in
Sacramento, California.

- **Lie to the media.**

There is no better way to lose the public's trust than to lie. The same thing goes for communicating with the media. Once you've told an untruth, you've lost the credibility you've worked so hard to build. If you or your company are faced with a problem – lowered earnings, a product defect

or an on-site accident – admit it, and then manage future coverage by focusing on your solution.

- **Make yourself unavailable.**

If you hold your comments or decline to clarify, there are plenty of outside sources who will tell your story for you. And if your responses are evasive, the media will only dig deeper to get their answer. Think about how many third parties are willing to substantiate rumors on the evening news. Remember: The paparazzi aren't the only ones seeking 15 minutes of fame.

- **Don't anticipate questions and controversy.**

There's an old adage that all spokespersons should heed: "If you dread it, you'll get it." Anticipate the worst questions you could possibly get. Then know what your response will be. Make sure you can prove your answer with facts, examples, or third parties who will support your statement. And don't ever "talk

off the record" – and then expect to be able to retract your information later.

- **Ignore your audience's concerns.**

Sure, your company has spent millions of dollars trying to correct a defect in the manufacturing process. But what's that mean to the consumers who have purchased your product? Be forthright in acknowledging the problem, and be swift in explaining how you'll compensate your customers and ensure the problem won't happen again.

- **Fail to define your agenda.**

Are you speaking to the media to feed their need for news or to satisfy your need to communicate your message? Make sure it's the latter. To tell your story you must identify a few key points you'd like to leave with your audience. Then make those points concise and provable. This requires preparation and a consistent delivery of your key points. Even the most experienced spokespersons take the time for media training before facing the red eye of the camera.

Maintain your good reputation by recognizing the pervasiveness and impact of the media, then make sure you know how to tell your story with a straightforward and well-defined approach.

Jolaine Freitas Collins is an accredited business communicator and Principal of Collins Communications in Sacramento, California. A former journalist, she has conducted media training for business people representing hundreds of organizations, all with absolutely stellar reputations. Reach her at Jolaine@CollinsCommPR.com or visit www.CollinsCommPR.com.