

THE CREDIBLE CORPORATE SPOKESPERSON: **AN OXYMORON?**



by **KATHY O'BRIEN**

When you hear expressions like cruel kindness, awfully good, genuine fake, do you smile as I do? I've been wondering lately, does the expression 'credible corporate spokesperson' fall into this group of expressions that simply do not make sense when you step back and ponder?

Who do you believe these days?

The leaders of the global financial system, who sold us worthless shares, non-existent investments, bankrupt banks? Corporate leaders have bankrupted their own companies with criminal behaviour, lying about assets on the books that never existed, betraying the trust of shareholders, regulators, employees - those who put them in those high places.

It's no surprise the latest Edelman trust survey shows that 62 percent of people do not trust CEOs.



We need only think of BP CEO Tony Hayward's classic soundbites. Nearly five million barrels of oil were spilled into the Gulf of Mexico, 60,000 barrels a day, and he says: 'The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume'.

It's a wonder, really, that there are still 38 percent of people who do find CEOs credible.

What does this mean for you as a PR practitioner? Your work has become harder on every level.

Firstly, you have to be second-guessing all the time. Is this senior executive telling me the truth, or using me to propagate his agenda – and what if it's a dishonourable agenda? You don't know if the balance sheet really balances; yet yours is probably the name on the earnings press release.

There's another way in which our jobs are harder. Credibility simply isn't a starting point anymore. Today people no longer make the assumption that a CEO is an honest, upstanding member of society.

Not only do our corporate leaders have to earn respect; they have to over-excel in the trustworthiness department to overcome the general assumption of guilt. Audiences now need a lot of impressive data to make them shift over from a starting position of total disbelief into the 'I can trust this guy' camp.

What can you do? A lot. The most important thing you can and must do is constantly interrogate and challenge the message and messenger. Ask yourself, if I were the average consumer of this message, would I buy it?

This of course is a lot easier to say than do. Few CEOs like to be challenged. The good news is you can change the pattern of 'CEO gives orders, you obey'. Learn persuasion techniques – there are excellent books and courses on the subject. Teach yourself to think like a CEO. Then you'll make your arguments in a way that commands your CEO's respect.

I'd like to offer three key principles for dealing with media. If these principles underpin your work with media, your corporate spokesperson stands a much higher chance than his peers of being perceived as entirely credible.

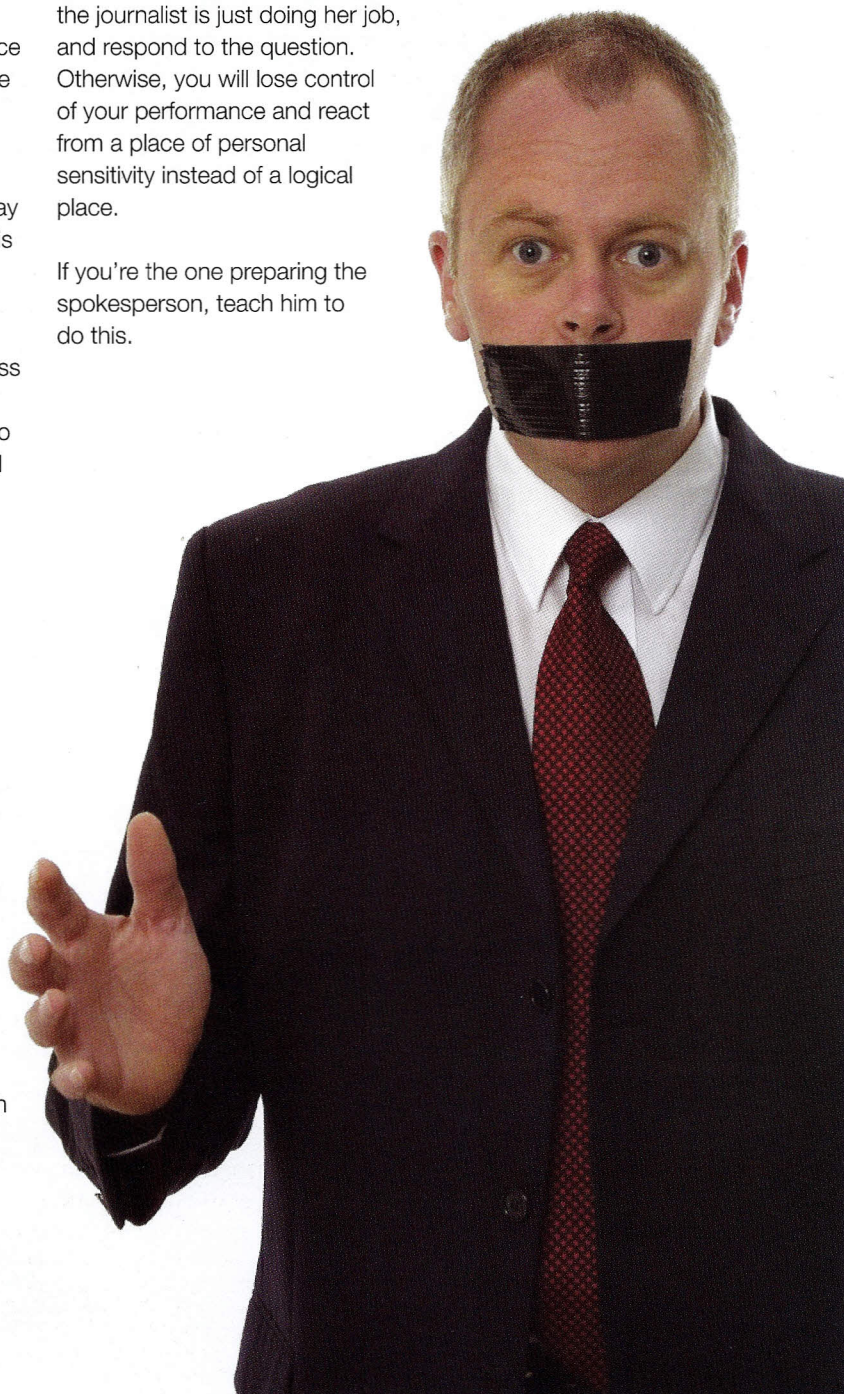
1. Media is NOT The Enemy

The journalist isn't out to get you, she's out to get a story. If your company doesn't have shenanigans going on under the surface, then you shouldn't have anything to hide.

So get out there and talk. Recognise that she has her job to do, and you have yours. Work earnestly on the messaging to ensure your spokesperson's word choice genuinely reflects the heart and soul of the company.

If the journalist asks an aggressive question that makes you feel affronted, step away from your personal feelings, acknowledge that the journalist is just doing her job, and respond to the question. Otherwise, you will lose control of your performance and react from a place of personal sensitivity instead of a logical place.

If you're the one preparing the spokesperson, teach him to do this.



2. No PR Guard-Dogs

This is the ugliest image of a PR person. Too many PR people function as the crusty outer layer of an organisation, fiercely fending off media and anyone else who might ask something unexpected.

An organisation I was speaking with a few weeks ago had some bad news, and it was already reported in the media. I asked how well equipped the senior person was to handle questions on this topic. The PR executive's reply was: 'I wouldn't let the journalists ask about that.'

She wouldn't let them? Most self-respecting journalists I know do not take orders from PR people – or from anyone except their editors. If you want an easy way to send a message that your CEO isn't credible, then try telling journalists what they can and can't ask.

Prepare your CEO to answer the tough questions. Rehearse with him or her. His or her appropriate, genuine handling of these tough questions will go a long way toward establishing your CEO's credibility.

3. Learn Your Message, but don't ONLY Learn Your Message

Business journalists I meet often say they hate interviewing trained spokespeople who never answer the question. My response is: these people may have been subjected to training, but they are certainly not skillful spokespersons.

A skillful spokesperson engages journalists naturally. He or she does not ignore the question and simply say what he or she wants to say.

There are good techniques your CEO can – and should – learn to help him or her stay on course. One example is verbal bridging. When done well, this technique provides a natural transition from the question to the speaker's message. I emphasise two words here: natural transition.

Yes, you are moving to your agenda. That's what human beings do in conversations all the time. The skill is in doing this naturally, so the listener is willing to go with you.

Does the journalist know what's happening here? Of course. Why, then, does he go along? Because you have acknowledged his question, paid some respect to him, yet offered something

even more interesting. And if your alternative material is interesting enough, then a good journalist is smart enough to seize it and work it for all it's worth. Everyone wins.

Follow these three simple rules– and, importantly, get your CEO on board – and the two of you will be well on your way to the Credibility Category.

I'd like to offer one last little tip – by all means, give your CEO a message. Then give him one very clear instruction: use this as a framework, but speak from the heart.

People are not persuaded by the speaker who is reading off a script. We all know authenticity when we see it.

I want to share with you the story of one remarkable CEO whose version of speaking from the heart really stood out. He is Hugh Martin, CEO of Pacific Biosciences. When Mr Martin found out he had cancer, he called a meeting of his entire staff and described the disease to all of them in what Fortune magazine called 'exquisite detail'.

His speech included this line: "All that the investors care about is that I have at least five years left so they can get their return, and I can guarantee you I am not dying in five years."

Why was Mr Martin so candid? To him, openness was the only way. He had always run his company on openness.

And on October 28, 2010, Pacific Biosciences raised US\$200 million in its IPO. The IPO came more than a year after Mr Martin's announcement... an announcement that sent a very solid message to Wall Street, to private investors, to employees, to the world, about the credibility of this CEO and this company.

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