



## What the media needs to know

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(Excerpt from Businessworld Magazine)

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An innocuous and perhaps unintended remark made on a fateful November day at the CNBC studios triggered a media avalanche the likes of which Corporate India has rarely witnessed.

At that point, it was a possible difference in a leading family with multiple business interests that led to speculation about 'who will get what'. A high-profile family scion suddenly saw himself play judge and jury, protecting the clan from acrimony and multiple splits. The mediators and well-wishers entered the fray, as did the power brokers whose services were desperately sought. To top it all, these disputes didn't stay confined within the family or the boardrooms. They were fired out, wreaking havoc among stakeholders who never expected this to happen: employees, shareholders, suppliers, banks and financial institutions, and customers too. All because it's now a 'Trial by the Media'.

But why credit the media with making or breaking a business group's reputation? It's because businesses see a trial by the media as an attempt at 'management by embarrassment'. And hence, the strategy of selective 'leaks'. The business community fails to understand that media is a business too, marketing a commodity called 'news'.

Further, it is amazing how creative and resourceful business can be when trying to 'control' the outcome of media interviews. The following is a partial list of tactics used by potential media manipulators:

- Demanding to know questions in advance.
- Setting restrictions on topics to be discussed.
- Stating the questions that must be avoided.
- Insisting that the written article be sent to them for approval before publication.
- Demanding the right to fax in answers, rather than a face-to-face or phone interview.
- Requesting that a friendly or sympathetic reporter be assigned to their story.
- Asking for the right to video/audio tape the interview.
- Setting a strict time limit on the interview.

These are some of the extreme and counterproductive measures to 'control' interviews.

Business must realise that you have zero control over reporters, so get over it. You have 100 per cent control over what comes out of your mouth. It is not the reporter's job to make you sound and look good; it's yours. When the group head of a multi-billion dollar business group speaks, every gesture and nuance gets amplified. Everything is being constantly interpreted for signals by the millions of stakeholders who live by the company's credo. It is why media training is necessary, focusing on what you need to say rather than react reflexively to everything that the media demands to know.

For instance, the tourism industry post 9/11 was in the pits. Yet revenues had to be generated. At Media Training Worldwide, we took live examples of a client being asked by the media about gloomy prospects for that fiscal. We found out that it had worked out alternate tourist destinations and packages, anticipating possible revenue losses. We used this angle as a hook or a news peg, and assisted participants to come up with answers based on facts and figures to substantiate that their earnings forecast would be on stream.

Take another example. A foreign player is often prey to the trap of the swadeshi-videshi angle. A client shared data on Indian consumers with us that helped it avoid being on the defensive. The sound bites that dominated this session were: patriotism does not sell buy products. In a market dominated by global products, the consumer looks at value for money.

The pre-media training work begins after the contract and non-disclosure agreements are signed, and is rigorous. There are proven methods of diagnosing print and video clips. The trainer meets participants to eliminate any surprises during the training. The post-training phase involves staying connected for at least three months. All in all, in every case, the client begins to anticipate what to watch out for.