



## **BUILD MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS FOR STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE**

**A**t its core, public relations is about building and maintaining positive relationships, and there's no place more critical than the media arena. A strategic approach to PR requires forging meaningful ongoing relationships with the reporters with whom you work. Accomplishing that entails choosing the best spokespeople within your organization, knowing how to give a great interview, and adding value in a myriad of other ways that result in mutually beneficial relationships for the media and your company.

### **CHOOSING YOUR SPOKESPEOPLE**

As with any interpersonal relationship, developing a good one with the media requires sincerity, accountability, and awareness of the other's needs. The place to start is to choose the right spokespeople for your company. How many individuals you select as spokespeople depends on the size of the company and the complexity of the information to be conveyed. In a small company, you may want your CEO to talk about the business direction, your CFO to discuss funding, and your CTO to explain the innovative technology you just developed and patented. In a larger company, you'll want to offer different spokespeople to serve as experts on the various products

and services you offer. There's no rule about the number of spokespeople you have. What's important, however, is that all spokespeople are properly trained to understand the workings of the media and stay up-to-date on your organization's messaging.

In most cases, you'll want one or more company executives to serve as spokespeople rather than assigning the role to a PR person. Reporters usually want to talk to the lead expert on the issue because they're the ones most familiar with the topic and can talk about it firsthand. They get frustrated when the PR specialist acts as the intermediary and isn't able to answer questions in a detailed manner. Here are eight questions to consider when choosing the best ambassadors to speak for your company:

- *Are they great communicators?* A great spokesperson understands your company's messages, can clearly articulate them, and can stay on message. Writes former presidential media adviser Robert Ailes in his book, *You Are the Message*, "Remember back to a moment when you know you were communicating effectively because you absolutely believed in what you were saying. Remember how you felt? Harness that power and you will be successful at communications."<sup>1</sup>
- *Are they passionate and enthusiastic about your organization's work?* A great spokesperson also realizes the way he acts exemplifies the message. "When you communicate with someone, it's not just the words you choose to send to the other person that make up the message," writes Ailes. "You're also sending signals about what kind of person *you* are—by your eyes, your facial expression, your body movement, your vocal pitch, tone, volume, and intensity, your commitment to your message, your sense of humor, and many other factors."<sup>2</sup> If you're committed to your message, if you can demonstrate energy and enthusiasm, it will be infectious and lead to better results.
- *Are they likeable?* In addition, a great spokesperson has excellent interpersonal skills. Often a technologist or engineer may step into the spokesperson role, but if he doesn't have strong interpersonal skills, it can present a challenge. It's best to choose someone who's gregarious and outgoing, who has a sense of humor, and who can work to meet the needs of the reporter with whom he's talking.

- *Do they have good listening skills?* Being a great spokesperson also involves listening intently to the reporter's question and then trying to answer it. Therefore, it's critical to choose someone who's a good listener in addition to a good talker.
- *Are they insightful enough to understand what's beyond the question?* Sometimes busy reporters walk into an interview without a detailed understanding of the topic they're planning to write about and so may not know the right questions to ask. A great spokesperson has the ability to say, "Oh, so what you're really trying to understand is X, Y, or Z." She has the capacity to understand what the reporter's underlying objective is when he asks a question and then make sure it's addressed.
- *Are they patient and willing to educate?* Some people get frustrated with reporters when they don't understand their business. They're not aware that reporters are required to write about a broad range of topics. If you're short or disrespectful, it can harm the long-term relationship. Conversely, exhibiting patience and being willing to educate forges a trusting, ongoing relationship.
- *Do they value the media and the role it plays?* Some executives don't understand the powerful role that journalists can have on the shape of their company and its products. As a consequence, they think that talking to the media isn't a valuable use of their time. A great spokesperson understands why talking to the media is important to their business and will commit the time needed to do a great job.
- *Are they comfortable and prepared?* Executives often fear the media. They're worried about saying something that will embarrass them or their company, or they fear they'll be misquoted. "In my experience with media training sessions, people are terrified of reporters," says media, business, and executive coach Elaine Long. "They're really focused on themselves, and not saying something that will make them sound stupid or that they'll get in trouble for. They don't understand that reporters aren't out to get them. They're just like anybody who has a job to do." Great spokespeople are comfortable speaking to reporters and talk openly. They also approach encounters with the media well-prepared and walk into the interview knowing what the reporter wants to write about as well as the messages they want to convey.



## Developing a Great Relationship with Reporters

*Want to develop a great relationship with the media? Here's some advice from business executives and PR practitioners from a wide range of organizations:*

"I always try to approach a media story from the angle of what a reporter would be interested in versus what it is we want to get across. Find out what they're interested in first, and then figure out how your story plays into that. Also, try to separate yourself and not make it personal or emotional in any way. They've got a job to do, and they're just trying to do it. The more you can understand that, the more you can maintain a positive working relationship."

—**Brad Stevens**, former vice president of U.S. marketing, Starbucks

"Number one, don't waste their time with something that isn't newsworthy. Number two, when you have something newsworthy, make sure you're taking it to the right media outlet. You'd better know who you're going to, what that person has written about, and what their audience is interested in. When you really know your media outlets and your reporters, you can say, 'Yes, this story would work for them; I think they would find interest in it,' and then you go to them."

—**Keith Lindenburg**, director, national public relations, Deloitte Services LP

"Relationships require trust, they're two-way, and they're mutually beneficial. They take time, and they take track records. When I was at Nike, we really tried to value those relationships. We had a rule that everybody had to be available 24/7 by phone, we beefed up our Web site to make it easier for the media to reach us, and we had a policy of returning calls the day they were received. We also tried to get to the media and check in with them so they weren't always coming to us."

—**Lee Weinstein**, former director of global corporate communications, Nike

"You want to be fair to all of the media outlets. Not having a bias is pretty important. I try to have a lot of expertise in the area I'm working in and provide more information in the interview than what we included in the press release so they feel they're getting more information by talking to us. The other thing that's important is making myself available to comment on the things that are going on in the market, being willing to be a source they can go to. Finally, I often thank them for writing such a good article so that I continue to build the relationship. All of these things are pretty important."

—**Steve Brodie**, chief products and marketing officer, Skytap

"My personal opinion is that you need to be respectful of reporters and their time. That's pretty obvious, but I think a lot of people try to get the media on the phone just because they want to talk. You're wasting their time if you're doing that. You should set up calls only if you have something to talk about, something that would be truly valuable to the media. It really has to be a mutually beneficial relationship. It can't be all about the company."

—**Andrea Mocherman**, manager of marketing communications, SNAPin Software

"I think it's important to take a long-term perspective and to recognize that your relationship with the media is a game of averages, and you're not always going to bat 1,000. Ultimately, approaching the relationship from the perspective of your long-term batting average is going to be more important than one-off damage control. Maybe I can win on this story, but if it's going to harm my long-term credibility with that reporter, it's just not worth it. Ask yourself if there's something you can do today to nurture the long-term perception of yourself and your organization. And if there is, that's more important than short-term gain."

—**Caroline Boren**, managing director of corporate and strategic communications, Alaska Airlines

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

A successful media interview is all about preparation. When spokespeople take the interview seriously and make the time to prepare, they tend to do a great job. It's only when they think, "I've done this a million times. I can wing it" that the trouble happens.

If you're new to media relations, consider taking a media training class or ask your PR specialist to coach you. It's one thing to read about the right techniques and another thing entirely to practice them. When we provide media training sessions, we offer executives the opportunity to be videotaped, which can be a very powerful educational tool.

To prepare for the interview, you'll want to gather background information about the reporter and the publication. What is the focus of the publication? What beat does the reporter cover? What other stories has she written about your category, and what slant did she take? How knowledgeable is she about your business? If you're a company executive, ask your PR specialist to gather this information. If you're the PR specialist, proactively gather this information and provide it to the company spokesperson to help him prepare for the call.

You also need to gather some specifics about what the story is about and how it arose. Is the reporter contacting you because she's working on a feature for the summer issue? Does she want your organization's perspective on a news



event? How is she planning to frame the story, and who else is she planning to interview?

A savvy PR specialist will also obtain a list of questions in advance. One way to go about this is to say, "You know, I want to make sure we're well prepared and are using your time wisely. Would it be possible to share some of your questions with me in advance of the call? That way I can make sure that Joe Smith is ready to answer them." Be aware that some reporters will refuse to do this while others will always say yes. Even if the reporter doesn't stick to the questions she sends you, it's still helpful because it provides insight into the reporter's general direction.

You may also want to suggest some questions the reporter should ask. One way to approach this is to say, "We think your readers may be interested in issue X. These are some of the questions you might want to ask to get insight into this issue." Many reporters cover a broad range of topics and don't have a deep level of insight into the specific issues facing your company. They will often appreciate the extra insight you can provide because it can result in a better story.

In addition to obtaining questions from the reporter, you'll want to anticipate the hard questions. You can expect reporters' questions to vary according to where your company is in its life cycle. If you work for a start-up company, for example, reporters are likely to ask about the benefits of your product or service, the viability of your business model, and how you differ from the competition. If you're a category leader, you may get some tough questions about antitrust issues or your plans for meeting the next round of revenue goals. On the other hand, it's doubtful you'll get questions about the viability of your business model since it's already been proven to work over time.

After you've drafted a set of questions that you anticipate being asked, prepare some solid answers. Memorize the messages you're planning to communicate and practice delivering them. Prepare statistics and solid examples to back up any claims and bring your messages to life. Keep in mind that reporters always love a great quote, and develop short sound bites that they'll be tempted to use. We had a client who was a master at this. He'd always think through the messages he wanted to convey in advance, and he'd challenge us as his PR team to come up with punchy sound bites that illustrated the point. They were always clever; some were double entendres. Our client incorporated these sound bites into his interviews and was quoted widely.

## MANAGING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Reporters often get on the phone with a company spokesperson only to find that he's not prepared, can't talk about the topic in an understandable way, or is the wrong person to speak to entirely. This can be a frustrating experience for the reporter and the spokesperson. A knowledgeable spokesperson who can

tell a captivating story goes a long way in the development of a great rapport with reporters. Here are eleven best practices you can develop to help ensure successful interviews:

1. *Get the interview off to the right start.* When you get on the phone with a reporter, don't use your mobile phone, multitask, or allow yourself to be distracted. Separate yourself from what you had been doing and give the reporter your full attention. To make sure you and the reporter are on the same page, you'll want to establish several ground rules right at the beginning of the interview. First, restate the purpose of the call so you have a clear understanding of the story the reporter wants to write. Second, ask the reporter how much time she has for the call so you can plan a reasonable level of detail for your answers. With many media interviews, we've gotten into the practice of recording the conversation and then developing a transcript to give to the reporter and the spokesperson. This helps the reporter accurately quote your company spokesperson. It's also helpful for the spokesperson because it allows him to review his messages verbatim and train other spokespeople within the company. If you want to record the conversation, make sure you obtain the reporter's agreement at the beginning of the call.
2. *Include your PR specialist in the interview.* Company executives don't often think it is necessary to invite their PR person to join the interview, yet failing to do so is a missed opportunity. PR representatives provide a second set of ears during the conversation. Because their job is to listen to make sure the executive is delivering the right messages in a way the reporter understands, they can provide feedback after the call. They can also step in during the call to add a point that hasn't been made, frame the information in a way that's positive, or check in with the reporter to make sure she's grasping the information the executive is trying to convey.
3. *Captivate interest.* You've prepared for the interview. Now's your chance to convey the information in a way that's going to resonate with readers. Stay on message and be succinct. Use the sound bites you've developed. Make your story easy to understand, and tell it with enthusiasm. Back up your claims with substantive examples and proof points. Don't just say your software is the best—tell the reporter that it won fourteen awards during the past six months and that four out of five customers interviewed by a third-party analyst firm rated it the best. You need to have the substance to back up your claims; otherwise, the reporter's going to get frustrated.



4. *Check in with the reporter.* It's amazing how often spokespeople think they have clearly answered a reporter's question when it turns out the reporter is either looking for an answer to another question or hasn't completely understood the spokesperson's point. At some point during the interview, the executive or PR person should check in with the reporter to clarify her thought process and make sure her questions are being answered. We often say, "Hey, Jane, we've covered a lot of information thus far. Are we addressing the questions you had in mind? Is any of this unclear? What do you think about all of this?" If you don't check in during the conversation, you may get off the phone thinking the reporter completely understood what you were talking about, only to read a story that completely misses the mark.
5. *Keep the conversation on track.* Reporters typically don't have a lot of time to spare. Most work on tight deadlines and have little time to report and write their stories. Be cognizant of their time by staying on message and getting to the point quickly. State your most important information upfront, and then back it up with solid facts and examples. Say as much as is necessary to thoroughly make your point, then stop talking and wait for the next question.
6. *Answer questions directly.* If you watch the Sunday talk shows, you'll often observe politicians trying to duck uncomfortable questions posed by reporters. This practice irritates reporters and quickly erodes the relationship. If a reporter asks a question you can't or don't want to answer, never evade the question or say, "No comment." Instead acknowledge the question, and tell the reporter why you can't answer it. For example, "We're not prepared to talk about that right now because we've signed a non-disclosure agreement with a customer" or whatever the case may be. Similarly, if the reporter has told you in advance that the conversation will focus on one topic but starts probing about a more controversial subject that your organization doesn't want to address, the PR representative should step in and say, "You know, Jane, when I agreed to put you in touch with Joe, my understanding was that you were going to focus on X, Y, and Z. We're really not prepared to talk about Q because we have to respect employee privacy issues, but what I can tell you is . . ."
7. *Use bridging techniques to convey your message.* A great spokesperson knows how to use bridging techniques as a way of making the transition from the question being asked to the message he wants to convey. For example, you might say, "Jane, that's a really good question. Let me give you a little background." You then give the reporter the

- background you want to convey leading up to answering the question. Other examples of bridging techniques might be, "That speaks to a bigger point, which is . . .," "The real issue here is . . .," and "What's important to remember, however, is . . ."
8. *Be careful about "off the record."* Providing information to reporters off the record can be a great way to forge a stronger relationship. However, extreme caution is a must here. This is definitely terrain for the experienced spokesperson and not the novice. If you do decide to take this route, make sure you're talking to a reporter you trust. Make sure you clarify what "off the record" means before you agree to divulge any information. Technically, "off the record" means the reporter may not publish the information at all whereas "not for attribution" means the reporter can use the information but must keep your identity anonymous. If you decide to allow the reporter to publish the information without referring to you by name, you'll need to negotiate exactly how you'll be characterized in the story. In the context of what's being said, a quote attributed to "the CEO of a small Seattle-based mobile wireless company" may turn out not to be anonymous at all.
  9. *Don't be defensive or dismissive.* If a reporter asks a tough question, it's important never to become defensive or dismissive. If you think the question is irrelevant or unimportant, take a deep breath and a step back and then politely answer it anyway. If you're defensive or dismissive, you're likely going to end up hurting the reporter's feelings and harming the relationship. Be friendly, patient, and polite, and work with the reporter to get your story told accurately.
  10. *Listen for clues.* During the interview, listen for clues about the reporter's approach to the story. This will enable you to think through ways to bolster your organization's position with additional information or interviews after the call. If the reporter bombards you with tough questions, you'll know she may write a negative article. If this happens, the spokesperson and PR person may want to brainstorm about whom else they can put the reporter in touch with to shape her perspective. Perhaps the perspective of a customer, a partner, or an industry analyst may bolster your argument. If you do suggest another interview, however, make sure the person truly has something significant to add that hasn't already been discussed. Otherwise, the reporter will feel that you're wasting her time, and your organization will lose credibility.



11. *Review your performance.* It's important to debrief once the interview is over to learn what went well and what could have gone better. If you're the company executive, ask your PR specialist for feedback and take it to heart. Read the transcript to review the messages you conveyed and how you delivered them. If you're the PR specialist, and the reporter has requested follow-up information, use the opportunity to ask for feedback on how she thinks the call went. Taking the time to debrief helps ensure that you're meeting the reporter's needs and are improving your media interview skills over time.

## Handling a High Volume of Media Interest

Many organizations have to work proactively to attract media interest. But for some companies, the challenge is to respond effectively to a high volume of media requests. Perhaps your organization has broad recognition, and media interest is consistently high. Or perhaps you've just issued a popular announcement or are immersed in a crisis and are receiving a large volume of media inquiries over a limited period of time.

"One of the things that's different about Second Life is the sheer volume of interest," says Catherine Smith, director of marketing and brand strategy for Linden Lab, creator of Second Life. "I've never experienced anything like it before. At first, I didn't do any proactive PR because I was completely immersed in responding to requests for information."

So what do you do when you're getting a large volume of media inquiries? Here are five tips to help you react in the best way possible:

1. *Set up a response system.* Designate one person or more to handle the incoming requests, and make it clear to everyone in the organization who's authorized to respond and what to do if the media contacts them. Develop relationships with experts in your organization; help them understand your need for them to respond quickly as requests for information come in.
2. *Track your calls.* Make sure you track all media requests your organization receives. Keep a spreadsheet that lists who called, the date of the inquiry, the media outlet, what the inquiry was, who handled the request, and when it was responded to. This will help you analyze the types of inquiries you're getting and when you're receiving them.
3. *Develop talking points.* Create talking points to help your company respond quickly to multiple requests for the same information. Develop a list of experts in the organization whom you can contact for specific information.
4. *Respond promptly to all requests.* If a reporter calls or sends an e-mail, make a point to return his or her call within the hour. Work to understand the reporter's questions and the story the reporter plans to write. Make sure you know the reporter's deadline, and provide him with information in a timely manner. Be sure to ask the reporter when the story will appear.
5. *Focus your efforts.* When you're receiving a high volume of calls, it's impossible to grant every reporter an interview with the CEO or your organization's top executives. Learn the target audience of each media outlet, consider the story the reporter is writing, decide whether the opportunity fits with your company's business objectives, and be strategic about which interviews you set up. "Starbucks gets



a ton of press coverage, more than any other brand I've ever worked with," says Brad Stevens, Starbucks' former vice president of U.S. marketing. "When you're facing this situation, the question you need to ask yourself is, 'Are you being strategic around the kind of media you're generating? How much of your publicity is done to you versus you deciding how you want to influence it?'"

## FORGING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Not only does forging great media relationships require giving great interviews, it entails maintaining the connection over time. Says Lee Weinstein, principal of Lee Weinstein & Associates and Nike's former director of global corporation communications, "My underlying philosophy about public relations is that relationships are absolutely key. I mean, the title of our profession has 'relations' in it. And all great relationships are both mutually beneficial and have an element of trust." Here are some additional strategies you can implement to build and maintain meaningful relationships:

1. *Make yourself available.* If you're distributing a press release or your company is making a story pitch to the media, it's imperative that the spokesperson be available to talk to reporters. That may seem obvious, but we've actually seen companies fail to plan for this. For example, one company we worked with actually organized a press tour for a specific week without first confirming the dates with the spokesperson. It turned out that the spokesperson had scheduled an eye surgery right before the tour, had no time to prepare, and had to wear dark sunglasses because his eyes were swollen, which made a strange impression with the media. If you're releasing news, you need to make sure you're available to respond to the media's calls, know what messages you want to convey, and understand the overall objectives of your effort.
2. *Be aware of deadlines.* Along the same lines, it's important to respond quickly to information requests from the media. When a reporter calls, we make a point to call her back within the same hour. Once you know the information she's seeking, it's OK to allow yourself some time to collect your thoughts and any additional information you need to participate in the interview. However, always ask the reporter what her deadline is and agree on a specific time to call her back so you're sure to make her deadline.
3. *Suggest relevant story ideas.* A great way to develop lasting relationships with reporters is to develop a deep understanding of the specific beats

they cover and suggest relevant story ideas. As discussed in Principle 3, it's important to do your homework before calling a reporter to see what kinds of stories the publication writes about and what specific beat the reporter covers. There's nothing more frustrating to a busy reporter than to receive story pitches that are self-promotional, irrelevant, or off the mark. Conversely, there's nothing more helpful than to get a relevant, timely story idea. "I think it's important not to waste anyone's time but only bring reporters stories they're truly interested in," says Catherine Smith, director of marketing and brand strategy for Linden Lab. "Reporters get spammed with hundreds of press releases that aren't relevant to them. If you do that, I can guarantee they won't talk to you."

4. *Communicate frequently.* Even if you don't have a story idea that involves your company, you can keep your company top of mind with reporters by staying in touch with them regularly. If you do contact them, however, make sure you have something to offer that truly adds value. You may want to call them to share a piece of information about the industry that may help them do a better job or give them a quick call to bring them up-to-date about your company. "Rather than flooding reporters with the latest news, we spend a lot of time making informal phone calls," says Stan Sorensen, vice president of marketing at Egencia, an Expedia, Inc. company. "The reason why that's so important to us is that these folks are always working on stories, and our ultimate goal is to make sure our messages are included in any stories they're working on."
5. *Read what they write.* Another way to build relationships is to periodically read what reporters write and send an e-mail sharing your feedback on a story they wrote. Sending an occasional comment on a story they wrote shows you're paying attention and are interested in the work they do. Says Elaine Long, the media, business, and executive coach, "Building relationships requires learning about what the journalist is writing about and what their point of view is on things. People feel special when others take the opportunity to see and hear them."
6. *Get to know them personally.* As with any business relationship, it's a great idea to get to know the reporters you work with as human beings. When you're in town, ask them to lunch so you can get to know each other. Or get better acquainted on the phone. Perhaps the reporter just had a baby. Maybe she shares the same interest in running that you do. Perhaps she just published a book, and you decide to read it so that you can discuss it with her. When you get to know reporters on a personal level, all of a sudden they will welcome your phone calls. It also makes your job a lot more interesting and fun.



## *What to Do When the Story Is Inaccurate*

You've completed the interview believing the reporter understood the topic and the messages you were trying to convey. But when you pick up the publication a few days later, you see that you've been misquoted or that the story contains inaccurate statements. What do you do?

If the mistake is insignificant, you may want to let it pass. Correcting a minor inaccuracy that doesn't affect the overall story probably isn't worth your energy. However, if the inaccuracy is important, you'll need to engage the reporter to find out what happened.

We recommend doing this in a deferential way that allows the reporter to save face. The reporter believes the story is accurate, so pointing out an inaccuracy will likely create cognitive dissonance. In this uncomfortable situation, it's important to be diplomatic and appeal to the reporter's desire to do a good job. For example, you might say, "I'm sure you're committed to writing accurate articles, and we must not have done a good job relaying our messages during the interview. I realize we were talking kind of fast, and perhaps we could have provided you with more detail on X, Y, and Z. Help us understand your perspective regarding what happened and what we can do differently to make sure future articles about our company are accurate."

When you've reached agreement with the reporter about the reason for the inaccuracy, request a correction. Then figure out the steps you can take to help the reporter write more accurate stories in the future. Perhaps you'll want to provide the reporter with a transcript of the call. Or maybe you'll want to circle back with the reporter after the next call to make sure he understood the discussion and determine whether he needs additional questions answered.

Along the same lines, if you believe the reporter to be hostile toward your organization or is covering your news in a biased manner, rather than cutting off the relationship, continue to work with him and strive to develop a better relationship over time. Refusing to work with a reporter doesn't accomplish anything. In most cases, the reporter will continue to cover your company without access to your side of the story, which only makes things worse. Perhaps you don't want to disclose everything about your company, but if you make the reporter feel slighted, it will only fuel the fire. In our minds, it's far better to continue to share your story and work to build a trusted relationship over time.

## **EMBARGOES AND EXCLUSIVES**

Before you get on the phone with reporters, it's critical that you develop a strategy for releasing the news. With some announcements, organizations negotiate embargoes with reporters, requiring them to hold the news until a specific date and time. Companies also occasionally release the news to a single reporter as an exclusive. Before acting on either of those options, it's important to determine whether an embargo or an exclusive makes strategic sense.

### *Releasing News under Embargo*

Occasionally an organization will release a news announcement under embargo—two or three weeks before planning to release it to the wire. Sharing your announcement with reporters far in advance helps them report the news accurately and thoroughly by giving them more time to research and write complex stories. It also offers you insight into the level of media interest in your announcement, allowing you to sweeten the news if interest is low. After speaking to reporters, for example, you may need to go back to the CEO and say, "We have spoken with five reporters, and none of them finds our news particularly significant. I think we could attract more coverage if we could provide five customers who can talk about the significance of our technology or if we could better articulate how our technology is leading the entire category in a new direction."

If you do release news under embargo, make sure the media outlet agrees to honor the embargo before you actually share the news. Never send reporters a press release that simply says, "Embargoed until January 1 at 10 a.m." unless you've first talked to them and secured their spoken or written agreement. Our experience is that most reporters will agree to an embargo if it is negotiated in advance. When you're embargoing a story, it's important to specify the exact hour the embargo is being lifted in addition to the day. If you simply say August 23, you can expect the news to hit at various times throughout the day, which might leave some media outlets with the perception that they were scooped.

### *Releasing News as an Exclusive*

Another way to influence the coverage is to offer up the news as an exclusive to a single media outlet, allowing it alone to break the story. One scenario in which you might want to do this is if you work for a large company and the CEO's time is limited. For example, perhaps you know the story will have greater impact if Bill Gates grants an interview, but he has time for only one meeting, not fifteen. Alternatively, perhaps your organization has a limited budget and can't afford to go out on press tour. Giving the story to a single trusted reporter and allowing him to report it in detail may help you reap the strongest benefit with the resources you have.



Another situation in which an exclusive may make the most sense is if the story is complex and the significance will emerge only if the reporter provides a great deal of background analysis. Perhaps you're releasing news about a partnership deal, and the significance isn't immediately obvious. By providing a detailed briefing to one reporter who can bring the story to life, other reporters will often follow suit, reporting the full significance of the news based on the first story that appeared.

If you take this approach, we recommend you first weigh the impact an exclusive will have on your relationship with other media outlets. If you work for a start-up that's proactively seeking coverage, giving an exclusive to one publication may damage your relationship with the publication's competitors, who may decide not to cover your next announcement. On the other hand, if you work for a global company such as Microsoft or Nike, an exclusive may not damage your relationships at all. Because your news is seen as highly significant, the media doesn't have the luxury of ignoring it for risk of being scooped by competitors. Even if you occasionally grant an exclusive to one publication, the others will continue to cover your company's news. The reality is they have to in order to remain competitive.

## **SETTING COVERAGE EXPECTATIONS**

After each important interview, the PR person should provide a recap to key executives summarizing how the interview went and, if relevant, explaining the organization's vulnerabilities. If the interview didn't go well, we usually send an e-mail saying something like, "I want to let you know that Joe had a really tough interview today. He did the best he could, but here's where we ran into some problems. I want to give you a heads-up that this is the angle the reporter is taking, and I think the headline may be this, and here's what we're doing. If you have any ideas between now and three p.m. today, please let me know because I'm doing everything in my power to head this in a different direction." Providing recaps like this is critical because it allows you to set expectations and eliminate surprises.

Forging better relationships with the media is one of the key ways to take PR to a more strategic level. In Principle 8, we'll show you how to keep the information flowing inside and outside the company once your PR plan is in the implementation stage and the media starts covering your news.