

Dealing With The PRESS



1. Speculating or Guessing

- Avoid answering questions with speculative or unverified information. Stick to what you know and can confirm.
- **Example: BP Oil Spill, 2010**
- Context: During the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, BP faced intense media scrutiny. At the height of the crisis, BP executives made speculative comments about the amount of oil leaking into the Gulf of Mexico. BP's CEO Tony Hayward speculated: There are only 1,000 barrels of oil leaking per day. It was closer to 60,000 barrels per day.

How It Backfired:

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- Loss of Credibility
 - Negative Public Perception
 - Legal and Financial Repercussions
 - Long-Term Brand Damage



2. Saying “No Comment”

- This can appear evasive or untrustworthy. Instead, explain why you cannot provide an answer (e.g., the matter is under investigation or confidential).
- **Example: Enron Scandal, Early 2000s**
- Context:
During the collapse of Enron in 2001, the company faced significant media inquiries regarding its financial practices and the growing allegations of fraud. Key executives and spokespeople often responded to press questions with a blanket "no comment."

How It Backfired:

- Perception of Guilt
- Loss of Trust
- Media Frenzy
- Collapse of Stakeholder Confidence
- Legal Consequences



3. Losing Your Temper

- Stay calm and professional, even if the question feels provocative or unfair. Losing your composure reflects poorly on you and your organization.
- **Example: Tesla and Elon Musk, 2018**
- Context:
In 2018, Tesla CEO Elon Musk participated in a quarterly earnings call with analysts to discuss the company's performance. During the call, analysts asked critical and probing questions, Musk interrupted and angrily dismissed the question, saying, “Boring, bonehead questions are not cool.” He cut off another analyst's inquiry, stating, “Next. Sorry. These questions are so dry. They’re killing me.”

How It Backfired:

- Damaged Investor Confidence: Tesla's stock dropped 5.6% the following day.
- Negative Media Coverage
- Reinforced Perception of Unpredictability
- Need for Damage Control



4. Providing Too Much Information

- Keep your answers concise and to the point. Over-explaining can lead to unintended consequences or create more questions.
- **Example: Equifax Data Breach, 2017**
- Context:
In 2017, Equifax suffered a massive data breach that exposed the personal information of 147 million people. During a congressional hearing and media interviews, then-CEO Richard Smith provided extensive and overly detailed explanations about the breach, including technical aspects of cybersecurity, their internal protocols, and step-by-step descriptions of how the breach occurred.

How It Backfired:

- Highlighted Negligence
- Confused the Public
- Invited Further Scrutiny
- Lost Focus on Remediation
- Damaged Trust



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5. Going Off the Record

- There's no true "off the record" in media interactions. Assume everything you say could be published or broadcast.
- **Example: Mitt Romney's "47 Percent" Comment, 2012**
- Context:
During the 2012 U.S. presidential election, Republican candidate Mitt Romney attended a private fundraiser where he made controversial remarks about voters who he claimed were reliant on government aid. The event was intended to be closed to the press, and Romney likely believed his comments would remain private or "off the record."
- Romney stated, "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what... [they] are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims." Unknown to Romney, someone at the event recorded his remarks and later released the footage to the media.

How It Backfired:

- Media Firestorm
- Damage to Campaign
- Shifted Focus
- Enduring Reputation Damage: Even years later, the "47 percent" comment remains a defining moment of Romney's campaign.



6. Lying or Misleading

- Being dishonest or providing inaccurate information can damage your credibility and the organization's reputation permanently.
- **Example: Volkswagen Emissions Scandal, 2015**
- Context:
In 2015, it was revealed that Volkswagen (VW) had installed "defeat devices" in millions of its diesel vehicles to cheat emissions tests. For years, the company had marketed these cars as environmentally friendly and compliant with emissions standards, despite knowing they emitted pollutants far above legal limits during normal driving conditions.

How It Backfired:

- Massive Financial Penalties: Over \$30 BILLION in fines and damages.
- Severe Reputation Damage
- Leadership Fallout
- Loss of Market Share
- Regulatory Repercussion



7. Making Personal Attacks

- Avoid criticizing competitors, colleagues, or the media itself. Stay focused on your message.
- **Example: Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick vs. Media, 2014**
- Context:
In 2014, Uber was rapidly expanding but faced significant criticism from the media and competitors. During a private dinner with journalists, a senior Uber executive, Emil Michael, suggested that Uber could spend millions to dig up personal dirt on journalists who criticized the company, specifically targeting Sarah Lacy, a journalist who had been vocal about Uber's culture.

How It Backfired:

- Damaged Uber's Reputation
- Media Backlash
- Loss of Consumer Trust
- Leadership Crisis



8. Forgetting Key Messages

- Don't get sidetracked. Keep responses aligned with the organization's core message and objectives.
- **Example: Pepsi's Kendall Jenner Commercial Controversy, 2017**
- Context:
In 2017, Pepsi released a highly publicized ad featuring Kendall Jenner, which depicted her joining a protest and using a can of Pepsi to defuse tensions with police officers. The ad attempted to associate Pepsi with unity and activism but failed to stay aligned with the company's core message. Trivializing real-world social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and other movements.

How It Backfired:

- Public Outrage
- Misalignment with Core Message
- Shifted Focus: They even had to issue a public apology and pull the ad.



9. Speaking Beyond Your Authority

- Stick to your area of responsibility. Avoid commenting on topics or decisions outside your expertise or role.
- **Example: John Stumpf and the Wells Fargo Scandal, 2016**
- Context:
In 2016, Wells Fargo was embroiled in a scandal where employees opened millions of unauthorized customer accounts to meet aggressive sales targets. During a congressional hearing, then-CEO John Stumpf made comments attempting to shift blame onto low-level employees, rather than addressing systemic issues within the company's leadership and culture.

How It Backfired:

- Undermined Credibility
- Heightened Scrutiny
- Leadership Fallout
- Brand Damage



10. Rushing to Respond Without Preparation

- Take the time to think through your response. It's okay to ask for time to gather the facts or consult with your team.
- **Example: United Airlines Passenger Removal Incident, 2017**
- Context:
In 2017, a viral video showed a passenger being forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight to accommodate airline staff. The video sparked widespread outrage over the treatment of the passenger, Dr. David Dao, and quickly became a public relations nightmare. CEO Oscar Munoz rushed to make statements without having all of the information.

How It Backfired:

- Appeared Insensitive
- Escalated Backlash
- Revised Statements Undermined Credibility
- Stock Price Impacted



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