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## Online Extra



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### Five Mistakes Executives Make When Talking to the Media

by Jennifer C. Thomas, president and founder of MediaReady Consulting  
July 22, 2008

**A**n executive agrees to be interviewed on television or the radio. It appears to be a simple assignment. She will speak for three to five minutes on a topic reflecting her expertise. She's seen plenty of other experts become media analysts, and they make it look easy. It's as simple as showing up and answering the questions, right? Wrong. Five minutes of on-air fame can prove disastrous if the executive is not media ready. You must tackle an interview in the same way you would prepare for a board of directors' meeting at a major corporation. Here are five mistakes to avoid and the keys to a successful interview that are essential when you "meet the press."

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#### Not Being Prepared

It sounds like an old refrain, but it's an all-too-common and completely reversible mistake: not being prepared. Preparation is the key when it comes to media matters. There are vital questions to consider before an interview: Who will the interviewer be? Is the interview live or will it be taped? Will your comments be used inside of a story or stand alone? Why were you chosen to do the interview, or why have you chosen to speak to the press? All of these simple yet sound questions will help you narrow your focus. If you are a CEO, for example and are asked to speak about diversity, then you will want to know in what context your comments will be made and clarify the terms of diversity in which you will be referring. Be clear on the knowing the context of the interview and then practice your talking points aloud to yourself, with an associate or a friend.

#### Being Too Verbose

There's a term of endearment used in the media when referring to a person who knows how to speak succinctly and in simple sentences: "Speaking in sound bites." The guest will likely be called upon again. On the other hand, the biggest nightmare behind the scenes is when a guest barely breathes in between sentences or the reporter asks one question and isn't able to get in another word edgewise. Remember, when doing an interview to "K.I.S." – keep it simple. Also, speak as you would to your associates or even your friends. A monotone inflection and a deer-in-headlights look will make you stand out– but for the wrong reasons.



#### Not Knowing Media 101

If you are in pharmaceutical sales, you would have to learn the basics of medical terminology. If you were going to appear in a court of law, it would be wise to learn some of the key terms to understand the case. Likewise, every person who is the focus of a media interview should know the basic shop talk. For the actual interview there are technical terms. Know this broadcast terminology: a lavalier or "lav", mic, which is a small microphone that is clipped to your lapel or clothing; production time cues such as "stretch" and "wrap", which signals the reporter to end the interview or to take more time; an IFB – interruptible feedback– is an earpiece that talent and guests wear to hear the director or producer; sot, sound bite and sound on tape, which is recorded audio; package, which is a reporter's story that's comprised of video, sots and audio track.

#### Assuming Anything Is Off The Record

In recent news events, a national figure made comments to a fellow interviewee after the conclusion of the interview. He thought the microphone and camera were off and made disparaging remarks about another public figure. Both the mic and camera were on, and his comments were broadcast internationally. This is a prime case in point. Never, ever assume that comments you make either on camera, into a recording device, or even over the phone are "off the record" or will not be reported. Most journalists use integrity when an interviewee makes a comment for which she does not want to be quoted. However, in this era when technology abounds, assume everything you say may be used against you in the court of public opinion.

#### Not Marketing Yourself Or Business

There are people you may always see on a news program, or a talk show who provide advice, along with the opportunity to purchase their latest book, or market their services. You must remember this: three minutes of airtime is priceless in terms of publicity and marketing opportunities. Just as you must know the reason for your appearance, you must likewise know your personal goal for the segment. If you offer a workshop, or have a product or business, be sure to find a way to include that in your segment. The best interview is one in which the audience is informed and the guest is remembered. Make it a win-win opportunity.

#### About Jennifer C. Thomas

Jennifer C. Thomas is president and founder of Atlanta-based MediaReady Consulting, which coaches professionals to "master their media savvy with effective communication skills." A 20-year veteran of broadcast journalism, Thomas was most recently an executive producer for CNN Headline News and is a former reporter, anchor, talk-show host and field producer for such media giants as NBC, ABC and New York Times owned-and-operation stations. While at CNN and Headline News, she helped capture major tragedies such as Hurricane Katrina and the September 11th terrorist attacks.

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