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Defending Your "Turf" Play Offense

by Max Utsler

An old joke made its way through e-mail a few years back. It was something like, "You know it's a bad day when you wake up in the morning, and Mike Wallace and a *60 Minutes* crew are perched on your front porch."

Well ol' Mike has retired and, for the most part, you'll never have to worry about someone else from *60 Minutes* heading to your 3rd base coach's box and asking what caused that giant mushroom cloud. But, the recent explosion of new media outlets combined with the more traditional media outlets has led to a whole new army of reporters who just might be interested in how you handle (or don't handle) your business. That growth of media outlets has re-emphasized for every potential newsmaker, the importance of knowing how to deal with the media, or as you should think of it, defending your "turf."

Say 'Goodbye' to the Simple Life

Back when you were much younger (probably only five or 10 years ago), you could assess potential media coverage by considering the local newspaper, the local talk radio station and the local TV news outlet. You knew the reporters by name and by sight, and they knew you. You shopped at the same stores, ate at the same restaurants and told similar stories about how high your golf handicap should be. Ahhhh, life was so simple then.

Then along came that darn internet, and your world turned upside down. You quickly moved into the age of instant news and the self-appointed, citizen journalist. Thoughtful, edited journalism gave way to "seat-of-the-pants" journalism. Fact-based reporting gave way

to opinion and commentary. You have now entered a world of bloggers, twitterers and whole bunch of 'ers that haven't even been invented yet. Better get ready.

Play Offense

The first step in dealing with this hyper-speed news media cycle is to do what you should have been doing all along—play offense. Most newsmakers love to contact the media when they bring "good news." Your department received an award from an environmental organization—check. Number of turf-related injuries reduced in the past 12 months—check. You come up with an innovative way of watering the playing fields—check. Those are all valid stories, and you should contact the local media to get the word out.

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maybe it will go away."

But what happens when the news is not so good or just downright bad? Many organizations follow a, "if we just don't feed it, maybe it will go away" philosophy. Toyota and BP pretty much took that approach in recent months. Now that worked well, didn't it?

Had those organizations taken more early ownership of the story, each would have greatly reduced the self-inflicted public relations damage. Yes, the news would have been truly negative in the early days, but maybe, just maybe, if they had a chance to advance their version of what happened, perhaps the media might have seen another side and soft-pedaled some of the criticism. You

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could argue that would be a losing proposition. And the “just ignore it” plan was not?

Be Proactive

In all likelihood you will never face that kind of major crisis. But one way to keep a minor crisis from becoming a major one is to initiate the coverage. Let’s look at some examples that you could encounter.

1. Injuries grow as poor lighting hampers your key fields
2. Staph infections develop in players using the synthetic turf fields
3. Bleachers fail during kids soccer game

If the media get a tip on what happened in any of those cases, you will be playing defense, answering the “How could you ever let that happen?” question. You know what it’s like when a parent or coach decides to escalate something that you think is rather insignificant. Things can get out of hand in a hurry.

Now let’s take a look at how to initiate coverage and frame each of those stories in a more positive way.

1. The lighting on River Bend Field is more than 30 years old. We haven’t been able to find parts to repair some of the broken units. As a result the illumination is about half of what it should be. That has led to a number of recent injuries. We need new lights, but that is going to cost more than \$200,000. This is a bad time to be asking the city for more money. We may have to stop using that field.
2. A local pediatrician recently contacted us and said he had been treating a number of kids with staph infection. He had discovered that all of them were soccer players who play their games on the synthetic surface at Partridge Park. Once he called that to our attention, we applied a non-toxic chemical to rid those fields of potential problems. The surface is clean and ready for its heavy fall use.

3. Fortunately no one was hurt seriously, but three parents had to seek medical attention when the front row of wooden bleachers snapped during a girls’ softball game. That incident has prompted us to begin inspecting every row of every set of bleachers we have at our 73 facilities. We will have the full inspection completed by the end of the week.

Be Truthful

The process follows a very simple formula. Admit the wrongdoing, then explain how you will keep it from happening again. If you admit to the problem, it’s very hard for the reporter to keep beating you up over it. Deny the problem, and the reporter will go after you like crabgrass on zoysia.

This all starts from a premise that if you are a part of a story that has legitimate public interest, you have a responsibility to be accessible to the media. This is especially true if you work for a taxpayer-supported, government body like many of you do.

While the process begins with initiating the coverage, your job is far from finished. Now you must handle the interview. Follow the **ADSR** approach in executing the rest of the process.

Anticipate

The first step is Anticipate. You’ve been to enough movies and seen enough TV cop shows to have a good idea of what that reporter will be asking you. Run through the journalist’s checklist of the Five W’s and the H. You can easily answer the “who, what, when and where” questions. They are very fact-oriented and not subject to much interpretation. Develop a handout of facts about the story to give to the reporter. That will save time as well as improve the reporter’s accuracy. Consider the visual possibilities for this particular story. Take the reporter to the “where.” You will get more coverage and decrease the possibility of a misinterpretation.

“Admit the wrongdoing, then explain how you will keep it from happening again.”

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Develop an Agenda

The “why and how” questions will be much more subjective and the likely focus of an interview. To handle the why and how questions, you must move to the Develop an Agenda stage. Decide what you are going to say prior to the start of the interview. This is the message you want to get across. It should address the reporter’s question but be totally based on what is best for you and your organization. Use it in a pre-interview as well as the one where the camera is rolling or the reporter is taking notes. Never say “No comment.” That never looks or sounds good. If you can’t answer give a *substantive* reason such as “This is currently going through the courts, and I wouldn’t want to jeopardize that process,” or “We don’t have the answer to that right now, but we should know more in the next 48 hours.” Never ask to go “off the record.” Every reporter and source seems to have a different idea of what that means. If you must say something but don’t want your name associated with it, be very clear when talking to the reporter. Say something like, “I’m going to tell you what is really going on here. However, if I hear my name mentioned in conjunction with this information, I will come to your office with my 33”/31 oz. maple MaxBat and crack it over both of your kneecaps. Do you understand?” This is no time for subtlety.

Speak in Bites

The execution of the agenda comes next so remember to **Speak in Bites**. The world of TV is built on 10 to 15 second sound bites. Learn to speak that language and use it for radio, newspapers and online interviews as well as TV. Here’s why. A 15 second bite will undoubtedly be narrowly focused (as in, focused on your agenda). You won’t have time to move off the subject. The 15 second bite also greatly reduces your chance of being misquoted. Give a 60 second answer and expect the reporter to get down every word—not a chance. Use a personal experience or anecdote to get your point across. Don’t be afraid to express your feelings and show some emotion. Just don’t allow yourself to move into the melodramatic.

Your Bill of Media Rights

- You have the right to basically know what will be covered in an interview
- You have the right to not be subjected to a hostile interview
- You have the right to not answer a particular question
- You have the right to expect an accurate story
- You *do not* have the right to decide what is news
- You *do not* have the right to get a prepared list of questions
- You *do not* have the right to know what else the reporter knows about the story
- You *do not* have the right to see or hear a story before it airs or prints

Think 15 seconds as your time limit for every question the reporter asks. Keep the focus on your agenda.

Repeat it

The final stage is Repetition. Know how to get your agenda across. Keep repeating it. Address the reporter’s question briefly, then bring it back to your agenda.

If you follow those steps, you will increase your confidence in handling any kind of a media situation. Plus, you will be well on your way to defending your “turf.”

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