

Opinion

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Coping with the media



Emory Daniels

THERE AREN'T any college courses to teach business-types, politicians or others how to deal with reporters. As a result, many botch it.

One of the few attempts to teach executives and others how to deal with the media has been made by Myles Martel in his new book "Before You Say A Word — The Executive Guide to Effective Communication."

Martel served as President Reagan's personal debate coach in 1980, as a speech coach for 15 U.S. senators and as a communications consultant for a number of Fortune 500 corporations.

A former journalist, Martel offers more than textbook theory. He suggests to executives:

"The media needs you, that is true. But you need the media — sometimes to an even greater extent. . . . You need the media to know what is going on in the world around you. . . . And if you choose to 'stonewall' the press, you will appear to be hiding, to be guilty of some unstated but obviously very serious crime."

Reporters covering business need the assistance of executives, but their job is reporting news not public relations. "Don't believe the reporter is there — from his or her point of view — to help you. The reporter is after a story and usually doesn't care if your stock will plummet or soar as a result. . . . The key, then, is to find the point of convergence of interests. . . . A paranoid feeling that the press is out to get you is usually due to a misunderstanding of their role."

SOME GOOD ADVICE offered by Martel:

- Respond quickly to all inquiries — a response after deadline is no response at all.
- Don't try to put something "off the record" if you have begun to talk.
- Be frank, fair and factual.
- Never try to be an editor. You have no right to review in advance of publication any copy prepared by a reporter. Don't try to influence a reporter on how to handle a story.
- Don't try to "kill" a story.
- Avoid complaining about a particular reporter. Most media organizations will react the same way you would to an attack on one of your corporate "stars."
- If an error of fact appears in a story, promptly call the reporter or editor. If you don't react quickly, erroneous claims will

come back to haunt you time and again in coming weeks. (Newspapers maintain " morgues" of clippings of past articles which they rely on for background. Make sure the background is correct).

• When an error of fact occurs, your best defense is reasoned, specific rebuttal. Don't just say the story is wrong — prove how it is wrong.

• Don't question the newspaper's right to inquire (meddle) into your affairs; there is no way to win that argument.

• Don't threaten to pull your advertisements. "By the perverse nature of the relationship between the advertising department and the newsroom of most papers, you could be almost guaranteeing front-page coverage for all your dirty linen for some time to come if you choose such a tactic."

• Any newspaper will run a correction of factual error, Martel points out, but more effective is for the "victim" to write a letter to the editor aimed at the readers as the audience or buy advertising.

NEVER, NEVER say "no comment," Martel says.

"No matter how valid the reasoning for not wanting to speak on a certain subject, the words 'no comment' transmit an instant 'guilty' verdict to the audience."

Never call a press conference if you don't have any news to announce. Reporters look for stories. If there are none, they'll fish for one. "If a reporter returns to the newsroom with no story at all, his editor will be reluctant to assign a reporter to any future conferences you might schedule."

A pretty good primer for getting off on the right foot, and staying that way, with the press. Better to get off on the right foot than to end up with foot in mouth — and with business executives, that happens far more than it should.

Daniels is editor of the Plymouth Observer.

oral quarrel

Mixed reviews for Jackson

Today's Oral Quarrel asked readers how Jesse Jackson's successful diplomatic initiative in Syria affected the way they feel about him as a presidential candidate.

Following are the responses:

If he is elected, which I very seriously doubt, he will soon change his mind and become a spoiled conceited man.

I think he is just trying to get brownie points for his own little success venture.

I don't.

Of the present people considering the presidency, I vote for Jesse Jackson.

For crying out loud, who ever thought of him as a presidential candidate? Yuck.

I was delighted that Jackson is going to be a candidate for the presidential election. I just hope he splits that Democratic party all to slithering because I am strictly a Reagan man.

I am very glad he got the Navy lieutenant released but I still don't think he is a good presidential candidate because he does not have any political experience, and I would also like to add that I wonder if that Navy lieutenant was white if Jesse Jackson would have been in such a big hurry to have him released.

I don't really believe he succeeded in anything. I believe the Syrians just wanted to embarrass the Reagan administration and that is one way they thought this would be possible. I think the whole thing backfired and didn't accomplish what they intended to do to Reagan and I don't think it did a thing to help Jackson.

While I commend Jesse Jackson's effort in freeing Robert Goodman, I personally do not believe it has changed my feeling towards him as a Democratic candidate. I believe, at most, proved to be helpful but that I would still vote the way I would have voted.

I feel it's great to get Goodman out of Syria. I don't think he should have gone against President Reagan's wishes in doing it and I think it was purely a political move.

I am very happy that I. Goodman was released, however, I feel that Syria would have done anything to embarrass the Reagan administration and Jesse Jackson was aware of this. Personally, I do not care for the man and certainly do not trust him. What he did was strictly political on his part.

I respect him for doing the right thing. He got in there and he did it, however, I always vote for people I respect but one incident isn't enough to build that up. He is a very fine man.

Jackson going to Syria could not be called a diplomatic mission but a pure political play by an arrogant inflated ego. Granted, he succeeded in getting Goodman out but would the attempt have been made if the soldier had been white. As a presidential candidate, he definitely is not the caliber of the person we should have at the head of the country. Possibly at a future time, we will have a black president but definitely not of Jackson's caliber.

Jesse Jackson is a con man that got lucky. His trip was paid for by Assad of Syria. I wouldn't vote for him on a bet and besides I don't understand a word he says.



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