

ASHU DUTT'S VIEWS ON UNDERSTANDING TV

Interaction is key...

There are thousands of companies and thousands of senior company executives. There is this impression that media knows about them and will seek them out when required. Well maybe, if you talk about the first ten or the first twenty companies. The real problem is that the media does not necessarily know who is out there - most people in corporate communications never really come and tell you what their companies are doing. Media is always looking for great ideas and so, no matter how big or small the company is - the important factor here is interaction.

The importance of developing relationships ...

Another important point is that media comprises of several different people and it is important to develop relationships with each person in the target media who is relevant to your company's business. The key is to keep in touch regularly, interact and explain what is going on. On a desk cluttered with 300 faxes in a day, a phone call explaining the idea always helps - it is important to sell the idea and not the fact that X CEO or Y CEO is coming into town.

Tapping the right person...

Very often corporate communicators attempt to reach out to ten different people in the same media source. If one refuses they will go to the next person and then onto the next - this is something best avoided. In most media organisations there is one person responsible and if you try to bypass him then in all probability you may end up not having any help at all.

A unique idea works...

A unique idea is always welcome, say event management firms - nobody thinks that they have anything to do with corporate India - you always think of the Tata's and the Birla's when it comes to corporate India -- but there is a world out there which is interested in knowing about new professions.

Communicate the idea, it always works...

Just recently someone called and said they were setting up a dedicated human resources web site. We found the concept very interesting and featured it. What is recommended is for company's to come forward with their ideas and concepts and 90 per cent of media will consider that idea. Therefore it is important not to sell a press conference but to go one step beyond and talk about the idea behind it to the media.

The importance of timing on television as

It is absolutely critical to keep a promise made to the media, and more so to the electronic media. This may sound like a long statement, but there are people who will say they will be there at a particular time and then fail to

a medium.... say they will be there at a particular time and then fail to keep the appointment. Corporate communicators and managements must understand that on television there is hardly any time- say if for three minutes of live airtime the guest does not turn up it is rather late to find a replacement. So if your company representative cannot come owing to whatever reason, please make a call to appraise us. However do it an hour in advance, two hours in advance, or else you have killed the relationship.

An untutored and natural speaker is preferable.... When you send in guests, whomever they may be - VPs, analysts, CEOs or anybody else - please do not tutor them about what to say and what not to say or provide them with predetermined answers to possible questions. These are all senior people in their professions who have not reached their present position without having the right communication skills. The interview is more meaningful when the conversation flows naturally. However, certain points that you feel are sensitive should be pointed out. Besides, business programmes are more staid and the issues more macro, possibly pertaining to developments in a particular sector. These are generally safe points and it is best to have a guest face the camera when he is natural.

Prioritise messages and learn to be brief... There are two important things to know while facing the camera. One is what we call 'bytes' in TV parlance and two, 'TV interview'. There is a difference between the two. In a byte you have 30 seconds, one minute or at the most one-and-a-half- minutes to get your idea or point across. So if you must tutor your CEO or other guests, you must tell them how to get across key messages and compress information in that one minute. If you stretch it beyond that time, the key message is likely to get missed as your guest's viewpoint will not be on air for more than that time in what is most probably an industry story.

The chat mould in an interview format works best... When you come in for an interview, the ground rule is to acquaint yourself with your surroundings and interviewer and feel at ease. However be warned as most interviewers will try and do some trick questioning. So it is best if you converse naturally and a minor slip up should not be of much concern. After all, that is how we chat in our normal lives.

Allow for interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee ... A crucial point is to allow for a brief familiarisation conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, maybe over the telephone. 50 per cent of the guests get confirmed on to a programme once the interviewer has had a chat with the guest. The brief interface sometimes does put things into perspective.

A picture A tip on the dress code, as basic as that may sound! To

speaks more than a thousand words...

wear a suit and a tie, always helps. At the end of the day you are communicating a face, the idea follows. As they say, a picture speaks more than a thousand words. It is equally important to have the CEO describe a complex concept with great ease. If he can do that and look presentable at the same time, it is a perfect fit.

The magic of personal communication...

Once again let me stress upon personal communication. Make personal visits, speak to the media over the phone at-least once or twice a month, if not more. It works miracles and in the long run you will be happier at that.

QUESTION & ANSWER

How do you address the issue of clarifications on television?

Mr. Dutt: I personally feel the real problem is that when things are good, every corporation is ready to talk to media. If something goes wrong, then the tendency is to shut off. This is when the company starts getting misquoted. Many of you would just say, 'not available for comment'. Even when things have gone wrong you must talk to the media you are dealing with. Explain to them your problems or why you cannot give them the desired information and maybe they will not even bring it up. It is important to keep the channels of communications open irrespective of whether you are doing well or not. In a particular quarter your earnings may be great, the next quarter they may have had a set back because of certain circumstances – it is important to explain those circumstances to the media. We cannot say, "sources said", as is often the case with print publications. We have to document and be clear about our source of information.

Let me give you an example. We incorrectly aired a few days back, the quarterly results of one of the larger companies. Upon checking the source, we realised that we had got this information from a wire service. We had backup, and hence the importance of knowing clearly the source of information and not being dubious about it.

On how a programme is made and what is the system followed...

Mr. Dutt: It is not like we wake up in the morning and have already decided who is going to be on and who is not going to be on. Let us assume that you work for a telecom company and that you keep in regular touch with the media. Hence when there has been some announcement on the telecom policy, then in all probability, you will be the first person whom media will call to seek clarification or a comment.

On the abruptness

Mr. Dutt: Maybe you should see how it works in the studio. The anchor is sitting with earphones and the

with which anchors cut off people that puts the person being interviewed in very poor light. What is it that can be done about it?

producer in the production control room is shouting in your ears every thirty seconds "wrap up, time is over"!! This may seem abrupt to you because I cannot tell the production control room (PCR) to stop it. In a 24-hour channel you have another programme ready to go on air, and so may not have that extra minute to wrap up. Further, to justify people who produce independent programmes, they are the people who have to pay for the studio time and that can prove to a very expensive proposition!

Is there a mechanism by which we can tabulate the audiences switching onto a programme. Very often anchors come across as fairly passionate in their programmes on burning issues. However the anchor does have a responsibility to present a balanced view and present both sides of the story.
Comment

Mr. Dutt: Broadly you could check the demographic profiles of the audiences of the channel/programme and also the TRPs of the programme.

Mr. Dutt: We normally have people from both sides to present their views for balanced reporting. I agree that we do play to the galleries to an extent, but mostly a story precedes an interview and that presents a balanced view. Mr. Dutt added that should a bias appear, 95 per cent of the time it is nothing personal. The aim here is not to be rude to anyone but sometimes the flow of questioning follows a particular trend that make the interviewer appear biased.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Ashu Dutt, Business News Consultant & Anchor, STAR News, at PR Pundit's workshop - Your Practical Interface With Media, held in New Delhi on August 24, 1999)