

News Conferences – Just Say No

By Andrea Obston, President, Andrea Obston Crisis Management

What do Denny Crane, Bill Gates and Donald Trump have in common? Besides their strong ability to both charm and repel audiences, each of them has a deep and abiding love of news conferences.

And what's not to love? A room full of reporters focused on what your client has to say. The lights. The cameras. The action. It's grand.

It's not. In my experience, a news conference is nothing more than a big risk for your clients to look bad in front of a lot of people. The problem is that it's too easy for news conferences to get out of control. A reporter -or worse, an angry blogger – asks a nasty question and, before you know it, all the reporters are taking a clue from her. Like a pack of dogs, one jumps on your client and the others pile on, hurtling nasty questions and cynicism.

Journalists don't even like news conferences. What TV reporter wants to get a shot of another station's reporter asking a question? And they dislike the fact that everyone gets the same sound bites. There's no opportunity for a reporter to get his or her own take on the material because they are asking their question in a room with other reporters. More importantly, there's no way for your client to connect with these people to tell their side of the story.

News conferences are also downright stressful to those on the hot seat. Most clients simply aren't built to face a roomful of hungry reporters. Questions can come fast and furiously and even if your client has been extensively media trained, chances are it will be difficult for them to control the message.

Most news conferences are nothing more than smoke and mirrors. People call them at the drop of a hat (think LOB towards the end of the session) for perfectly ridiculous reasons. Just because you hold a press conference doesn't make a weak story more appealing. They do, however, have their place. They can be useful for major announcements. Or when everyone needs to get the same information at the same time from a publicly traded company. Or in some urgent crisis situations when public safety is at stake.

But don't expect reporters to flock to a press conference just because it's happening. If something (anything) "better" comes up you can expect them to blow you off, even if they told you they'd be there. A colleague of mine was well on her way to impressing her employer. She had delivering a roomful of reporters to a press conference about the company's donation of a sound system for the hearing impaired. Moments before the company's president rose to deliver the announcement, a TV cameraman ran into the room with the news of a plane crash at Bradley Airport. Reporters

stampeded from the room, leaving my colleague and her bosses alone with their good news.

So what's the alternative? We prefer one-on-one, pre-scheduled interviews of limited length with reporters. This allows them to get their own take on the information. In addition, they are less likely to beat up on a CEO when they're not trying to beat out a roomful of their peers for the story.

We used this strategy successfully when we did crisis management for a public official whose political enemies were whispering good-enough lies into the ear of an over-eager reporter. The result was a series of unsubstantiated stories that amounted to character assassination in the state's largest newspaper. After a few weeks of this my client decided she had to withdraw from her position. She felt it was the only way to salvage her reputation and refocus the conversation on the needs of her constituents. She came to us to manage her withdrawal and shorten the time the story would hang around.

We immediately rejected the idea of making that announcement at a news conference. The issues were complicated and she was too emotionally spent to stand up in a roomful of reporters fielding personal questions. Instead, we contacted individual reporters in the days before the announcement telling them we would be sending out a statement containing a major announcement from her on Friday. We then offered to book them half-hour interviews soon after the announcement. Naturally, many pushed to get the information early. But, we reiterated that one statement would be issued that day and that they'd get personal access to her to ask their own questions. These interviews gave our client the ability to connect with individual reporters and share her take on the facts of the story. The results were very positive. The news reports they did were overwhelmingly sympathetic to her point of view. Many sought out other public officials who gave them admiring quotes about her service to the community. She left office with dignity and the story was gone in three days.

In the end, we strongly recommend you guide your clients away from holding news conferences in favor of a more personal and productive way for them to tell their stories.

A columnist once wrote that Donald Trump was publicity bulimic – that is someone who needs to consume so much media attention that the rest of us want to throw up. Don't let The Donald be your client's role model for communications.

