

# Honesty is the Best Policy -- Especially When It Comes to Dealing with the Press

By Carolyn Moncel

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As a child growing up in Chicago, my friends and I would often yell at each other, "Cheaters never prosper!" if we thought someone was playing unfairly on our Catholic school playground. In the business world over the years, I've learned that there's a lot of truth in that statement. Cheaters don't always succeed in business, and while we're on the subject, liars are always discovered.

We've seen these lessons played out a lot lately. The newspapers have been flooded with commentary about a former New York Times reporter and the poor conduct he displayed by purposely filing inaccurate stories. While his actions have cast a very negative light on the journalism community as a whole, causing many business owners to wonder if they've been treated fairly by the media in the past, it's important to note that unscrupulous reporters represent just a few "bad apples" in a very large barrel. Most journalists possess great integrity. It's their job to search for the truth so if you're a small-business owner ready to tell your company story, honesty is still the best policy - especially when it comes to dealing with the press.

So why do people lie to the press in the first place? You'd think that the most obvious answer would be because they have something to hide. In actuality many times lies are told inadvertently. Here are common examples and the ways in which to avoid these mistakes before it destroys your reputation: -

Not knowing what to say when a reporter phones. Two examples come to mind. First it's always tough being a business owner because sometimes crises arise. When they do surface, it's difficult to know what to say to anyone, let alone a reporter. Second, it can be equally difficult to conduct interviews with the press if you're either a new business owner or you've only had limited exposure to media interviews. In either case, it's simply unnecessary to lie, because if you know yourself and your business inside out, then you will have plenty to say. When in doubt about a question, ask the reporter to clarify then give the straightest answer possible, and only elaborate if you feel comfortable doing so.

Perceiving your company story to be boring. Never embellish your company story. Remember that in addition to the basic facts about your company, it's the little tidbits that seem unimportant that can actually peak a reporter's interest.

Not knowing how to respond to the reporter's questions. There's no shame in not knowing an answer. The reporter will respect your honesty, and by doing so, your story placement can still be secured - as long as you make it a top priority to find the answers to the questions and deliver them to the reporter immediately.

Lack of preparation before the interview. Do a little research on the reporter prior to the interview by reading past articles. Then try to anticipate the types of questions that reporter might ask, and prepare truthful answers for them. It's fine to ask the reporter what the story topic will be before doing the interview. That information will also give you some additional clues about the story's tone. If you don't believe me, then take advice from veteran CBS News anchor, Dan Rather. He says when doubt as to how you should answer a reporter's questions, there is four acceptable answers:

1. I know that answer, and I will give it to you
2. I don't know the answer, but I will try to find it and give it to you
3. I know the answer, but I'm not going to tell you
4. I know the answer, but I'll have to kill you if I tell you.

The last one, of course, is a joke, but you get the idea. Next month's topic will cover what you should say once the media calls. Until then follow playground rules and never lie to the media - period. There is no profit in doing so, and you'll only end up hurting yourself and your company's credibility. Always tell the truth, even if the truth turns out not to be all that interesting.

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