Sneak Peeks and Deflections
Two Often Ignored Media Interview Techniques
Every Executive Needs to Know

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Why do media interviews sometimes go off the rails? The biggest reason may be that your spokespersons don’t possess the tools needed to direct the interview on your preferred course. For instance, are they able to plant a question by giving the reporter a peek around the corner? And can they successfully block questions they should not address?

When it comes to controlling the direction of a media interview, media sources have several techniques at their disposal. This paper discusses two of them—the “sneak peek” and the “deflection.”

**Technique One: A Peek Around the Bend**

The sneak peek is actually a simple concept, and one that is fairly easy to implement. When you employ this tactic, you use a phrase at the conclusion of your response to tempt the reporter, giving him a clue of what awaits around the corner. You need only supply the raw materials, then stand back and let the reporter use them to build the next logical question.

The sneak peek is advisable when you want to encourage a reporter to dig deeper into a key part of your message or when you want to tell a story and have the reporter think it was his question that unearthed it.

It is a straightforward matter to tag a sneak peek on the end of your answer. Here is some specific language you can use when offering a sneak peek:

- “There’s more to that story.”
- “And that’s not all.”
- “There is even more exciting news.”
- “I can give you plenty of examples.”

In effect, you are writing the reporter’s next question for him. Let’s illustrate with an example. If your message centered on the value of a new program your company just initiated to bring technology into more schools, your exchange might sound like this:

**Reporter:** “How does your program work?”
**You:** “We have organized a consortium of companies committed to providing both hardware and talent to our schools nationwide. There are dozens of examples of our good works.”

What might the reporter’s next question be? You guessed it: “Tell me about some of those examples.”
Technique Two: Forging a Force Field
Another valuable tool in your media relations arsenal is the deflection. As the name suggests, this technique empowers you with a verbal shield to help ward off needlessly pointed reporter queries.

Deflection can be used when the questioning gets heated. Savvy media sources regard even antagonistic or uninformed questions as added opportunities to tell their story. The trick is to remain focused, refusing to allow the reporter to draw you into a debate that does neither you nor your organization any good.

Here are some sample replies:
- “The fact of the matter is...”
- “Actually...”
- “In fact...”
- “In reality...”

There may be other times when you need to block a question because it is misdirected or irrelevant, touches upon proprietary information, or requires you to speculate. Briefly tell the reporter why you cannot respond, then follow that deflection right back to your message. For example:
- That involves proprietary information, so let’s look at the facts that are on the public record...”
- “The report being released today doesn’t address that legislation. What it does say is...”
- “We could spend all day swapping rumors. Let us instead focus on the facts...”

Communicate with Purpose
Deflection phrases like the ones above are critical to successful communication. If you try to stonewall the reporter by saying, “I can’t talk about that” or “no comment,” you will succeed only in raising his suspicions. When you refuse to comment, what is likely to be his next question? In all probability, it will be a pointed, “Why not?”

If, on the other hand, you communicate with purpose using the deflection technique, your exchange might look something like this:

Reporter: “Isn’t it true that your new product has been responsible for over a dozen deaths?”
You: “The fact of the matter is rigorous studies by independent third parties have found our new product to be safe. For example...”

Note that this communications construct gets you right back where you want to be, on the familiar turf of your message. What is the reporter’s next question in this instance? It may well be “Tell me about those studies.” Doesn’t talking about supportive studies sound like more friendly ground than delving into the details of why you are refusing to comment?
Playing the Odds
It is important to recognize that techniques like the deflection and the sneak peek are not guaranteed to work every time. Rather, they are important for two reasons. First, they help you to alter the tone of the interview. To be sure, you are not likely to shift it 180 degrees from wholeheartedly hostile to positively pleasant. Shifting it even a few degrees, however, gives you a bit more breathing room. Second, we are dealing in probabilities here, trying to raise your odds for success in any exchange with a reporter.

Using a sneak peek here raises your odds slightly. Employing a deflection there raises them slightly again. Before you know it, by using these techniques and others rigorously throughout your interviews, you have succeeded in making your interviews more message driven. Moreover, you have transformed yourself into a star media source—one that will benefit your organization’s reputation and your own career.

The sneak peek and the deflection not only help to guide the reporter. By making it easier for you to return to your message, they also help remind you of what you are there to talk about.

Training Your Executives
One large issue, of course, is how to teach your spokespeople to use these techniques. First of all, you yourself must be conversant with using them. This allows you to provide them with real world examples they can employ in their media interviews. If you find yourself struggling with these tactics, either find someone else on your communications team capable of the job or secure a consultant whose sole focus is how to teach executives to conduct themselves during media interviews.

Next, encourage your spokespeople to practice in a meaningful way. You will need to take the lead here because, for better or worse, their everyday duties often lead them to ignore the part of their job that involves talking with reporters. Arrange specifics times to conduct practice interviews with them, asking questions that should be answered with either the sneak peek or the deflection.

Drop by their offices every so often for snap interviews in which you ask the same type of challenging questions. Collar them in the hallway and do the same thing. Every so often, hold a media training workshop and instruct your training consultant to focus part of the learning on these two techniques.

Guiding the direction of an interview neither begins nor ends with the sneak peek and the deflection. Other techniques, such as bridging and flagging, also play vital roles. Those are subjects for another paper.
Practical Next Steps
Let’s talk action items by concluding with three questions:

1. What are your objectives when using the sneak peek and the deflection?
   - Encourage your spokespeople to stick to their message when dealing with reporters.
   - Deliver your message more broadly and consistently.
   - Empower your spokespeople with tools they can use during interviews.

2. How can you measure whether your spokespeople are using these techniques successfully?
   - Assess the results of their interviews. Do their quotes appear in print or on video? And are they the quotes you want to read and hear?
   - Assess practice sessions you hold with them.
   - Gauge feedback you get from media training consultants you work with.

3. What value do these tactics provide for you, your spokespeople, and your organization?
   - Earn more positive news clips.
   - Cultivate more and better spokespeople.
   - See a more unfiltered version of your message in print, broadcast, and online.
About the Author

Ed Barks leads media training workshops for executives who want to enhance their reputations, and for organizations that want to achieve their long-term business goals.

He is the author of the book *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations* and the media relations guide *Face the Press with Confidence: The Media Interview Companion*.

As President of Barks Communications since 1997 and a former radio broadcaster, he has taught more than 3900 business leaders, association executives, government officials, athletes, entertainers, non-profit executives, and public relations staff how to succeed when they deal with the media.

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