

Don Draper's PR Lessons

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From HBC's Sound Bites Blog (www.hellermanbaretz.com/soundbites)

The fourth season of Mad Men is underway, and it kicked off with an episode on a subject near and dear to our hearts. Not boozy lunches or awkward Thanksgiving dinners-no, we're talking about "Public Relations," the title and subject of the season premiere. (Yes, yes, we're three episodes in already, but with the power outage in DC that knocked out cable on premier night and work, Sound Bites just got caught up this week - with a few glasses of scotch to boot.)

In the premiere, [Don Draper](#), a Madison Avenue whiz who can [make you weep](#) with a sales pitch for a slide projector, gives a disastrous interview to [Advertising Age](#), proving that even those skilled at articulating messages for clients can be terrible at talking about themselves. The interview unravels from the start, when the reporter serves up a softball-he asks Draper to describe himself. Draper evades the question, and the result is tragic. Hoping for a flattering profile of the fledging ad firm they've just started, Draper and his partners read, instead, an uncomplimentary story calling him a "cipher." Draper's partners rightly call him out on the lost opportunity.

Now . . . how do you avoid this fate?

First, think about interviews the way Draper's partners do: as golden opportunities. Take advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate how you are thinking about, and helping clients with, difficult problems. Reporters don't want to hear empty braggadocio, but be aware that an interview is a chance to stand out and embrace it.

Assuming that positive mindset going in is half the battle. As for the actual interview, following these "dos" and "don'ts" is our prescription for success:

DO:

- Be passionate. If you're not excited about yourself and your accomplishments why would anyone else be?
- Have a strong point of view. No reporter wants to quote a perspective that is watered down or hedged to the extreme. Focus on the opinions that you can be definitive about.
- Take control of the interview. Ask questions to avoid misquotes and verify that the reporter is finding your information useful ("Am I being clear?" "Are you getting what you need").
- Prepare no more than three key messages. Saying a lot makes it hard for a reporter to grasp what's important, leading to them using nothing or the wrong thing.
- Keep the key messages short and sweet, and repeat.

- Prepare sound bites. Speak in short, pithy comments you can imagine in quotes that articulate your point. To give but one example, the highly quotable Prof. Joseph Grundfest of Stanford University memorably referred to the backdating options scandals as a "corporate hygiene issue." Analogies or metaphors that paint a vivid picture are the best.
- Use signal words to underline your points (e.g., "The key is . . ."). Again, this helps to ensure that the reporter will pick up the meat of your comments.
- Use facts. Comments supported by facts are not only much more persuasive, but much more likely to find themselves into a story.
- Avoid jargon. Please.

DON'T:

- Give long answers. As noted, long answers make it hard for reporters to identify the most relevant parts.
- Get provoked. Regardless of how irritated you may become with a question, always maintain a calm and kind demeanor. There is simply no upside to getting ticked off.
- Make it up. It's perfectly okay to say you don't know something, and if that's the case, by all means let the reporter know.
- Read from a script. You - are - going - to - sound - very - unnatural.
- Talk about competition. Telling a reporter how much you've achieved is okay; telling her how little the guys across the street have achieved will give you a bad reputation and quick.
- Speak off the record. This introduces too many variables and potential for misunderstanding.
- Say anything you wouldn't want printed. Period.

As for Don himself-he gets it right in the end. After Advertising Age comes out, he sets himself up for a do-over interview with a Wall Street Journal reporter. [AMC's recap](#) describes the scene this way: "At lunch with the reporter, Don abandons modesty. 'Last year, our agency was being swallowed whole,' he says. 'I could die of boredom or holster up my guns. So I walked into Lane Pryce's office and I said, "Fire us." Within a year, we'd taken over two floors of the Time-Life Building.'"

Now that's some great PR.