



## **How to improve your relationship with the media: 10 suggestions to succeed in your relationship with the press**

By Pablo Gato

The relationship with the media is very important, it can often be decisive. A bad interview can sink a political career. However, knowing how to deal efficiently with the press can raise your prestige and reputation exponentially. Those who don't understand the power of the press and the need to be well prepared for that relationship are bound to pay the price of their impudence, arrogance or ignorance. And even though this may seem obvious, especially for professional politicians, the truth is that there are many in this field that are still not adequately prepared for this relationship with the press. That relationship, by its very nature, is many times an adversarial one, but often it doesn't have to be necessarily confrontational. If you understand how it functions, what they want and how to help the media, you will already have won an important battle before it even starts.

Even President Barack Obama has said that not knowing how to communicate his message well has been one of the key factors in the recent and serious setbacks for the Democrats. One of the most significant being the loss of the Senate seat in Massachusetts, which during almost five decades had been a bastion of the Democrats and, more concretely, of the Kennedy family. This has brought about a quick demise of the President's health care reform plan since the Democrats no longer have the 60 Senators needed to pass the bill, even with all the Republican members in opposition. This problem that the White House is currently facing is not limited to its relationship with the press. It encompasses a wider strategic communications framework. Polls show that the majority of Americans do not understand the President's health care reform plan or how he's going to meet his economic plan's goals. Therefore, there is a structural communications problem. Nevertheless, the relationship with journalists is an essential part of this communication.

### **First suggestion.**

Take the media and journalists very seriously. Do not underestimate them and do treat them professionally and respectfully. Understand that they're doing their job. If you treat them with respect, they will do the same with you, something that will undoubtedly be reflected in how they cover you. Unless they have been unprofessional when dealing with you, make sure you grant interviews to everyone. President Obama has decided to ignore conservative network FOX and this is letting conservatives give their opinions without the Administration being able



to respond. That is, the White House is allowing its opponents to define the debate and the message in some forums.

### **Second.**

Do not repeat your talking points regardless of what the press asks you. If you do so, journalists will think you think they're stupid or that you have no idea what you're talking about and this will be obvious in their coverage. It is understandable for you to try to convey your "message for the day," but you must be careful to do it in a smart way. Using the appropriate techniques, but without ignoring the reporter's need for information. A good communicator will know how to convey his or her message effectively, regardless of what he or she is asked.

### **Third.**

When you give an interview, be very aware of the audience whom you're speaking and tailor your message to that audience. The reporter is a conduit to reach that audience, not an end in and of him or herself. Give examples about what you're talking about to stress your message and make it credible. Just because you say something doesn't make it true. Giving concrete examples does.

### **Fourth.**

Simplify your message. Don't speak in a confusing manner. Do it in a correct and clear way. So that anyone can understand you. Don't use jargon or abbreviations unless you explain their meaning as well. If the journalist covering your story is not an expert in your field, he or she could not understand what you're saying and will probably misquote you. If that happens, don't complain because you were partly responsible for the misunderstanding. You did not convey your message clearly and simply. You did not make sure that you were understood.

### **Fifth.**

Don't improvise anything. Practice. Even the best communicators have acknowledged that their success has been based on practicing. Former President Bill Clinton is among these. During the Democratic Party Convention prior to his nomination to the presidency, Clinton received the loudest applause during his speech when he finally said "and in conclusion..." People were bored listening to him. He didn't know how to communicate well. He later became one of the Presidents who best communicated with the people. Communication is an art and it must be practiced constantly.



### **Sixth.**

Learn techniques that will enable you to answer any question effectively. Any person in the public eye must take media training classes. These techniques will help you to answer any question, regardless of how difficult it is. When you practice these techniques you will not even notice that your answers are following a concrete methodology. If you don't master these techniques, your answers will seem mechanical and not truthful. I am not talking of being manipulative but of communicating effectively.

### **Seventh.**

Don't lie. Telling the truth about some subjects can raise many an eyebrow among some politicians, but if you lie, in the end, will make things worse. If you make a mistake or there is a crisis, show your empathy and promise to learn from your mistake so that it won't happen again. If you lie and the media finds out, they will hound you and destroy your public image.

### **Eighth.**

Don't improvise your relationship with the press. Don't call reporters only when you need them. You need to keep this relationship alive. If the relationship is there, you will always have more access when you need them.

### **Ninth.**

Understand the workings of the media. They usually need access to you quickly and have a deadline to write their article or air their report. You need to adapt to this or you will not be part of the report, which will make you miss the opportunity to convey your message to the audience.

### **Tenth.**

Never say "no comment," no matter how bad the situation. This makes you seem guilty or like you're hiding something, even if that's not so. Journalists want an answer to their question, but if for any reason you cannot answer give them something they can use. If the press can get a quote, the pressure will diminish.

Obviously, these are just a few basic suggestions. There are many more, although the most important thing is to learn the methodology in depth.

Sadly, journalism is becoming more superficial by the day. It's a daily struggle to see who is the most sensationalist. That said there are still serious and professional journalists around. You



are under no obligation to grant interviews to those who are not, but if you do be extremely ready so that it is you who is in control of the interview. The reporter can ask whatever he or she wants, but you control what comes out of your mouth. Stay focused on your message.

Many times it has nothing to do with defending yourself from the press, but about understanding how it works and what reporters need. Once you understand this and are thoroughly prepared, the benefits of maintaining a constant relationship with the media will be enormous.

You, your spokespersons or communications specialists must be trained to communicate well. It's not enough to think that we can communicate well or even the fact that we have been journalists. The specific methodologies must be learned. It isn't the same to ask a question as it is to answer one.

Surprisingly, many well-known politicians and public figures never get this training. Later, they pay the prices, whether during a media debacle or not knowing how to maximize the free benefit to their reputation that is provided by the media. If you had to play a tennis match with Rafael Nadal, would you train ahead of time or would you merely show up at the tennis court for him to make mincemeat out of you? It's the same with the press. You must be ready to ensure you succeed.

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