

An Executive's Nightmare: The Ambush Interview

By Virgil Scudder

Few things frighten most executives more than the thought that a TV reporter, camera rolling, might suddenly jump out of the bushes and start firing tough questions for which the executive does not have a ready answer. The resulting video footage on the evening news can damage companies and even end careers.

True, this situation happens less often these days as television stations and networks make big cutbacks in news staffs. But, it does happen on occasion and the potential danger is no less than it has historically been.

In fact, it may be even greater. The ranks of the potential ambushers have multiplied dramatically, thanks to the smartphone and the willingness of TV newsrooms to use even low grade video from amateurs to tell a story. In fact, NBC News is setting up a unit just to take in and process citizen videos.

But, an ambush confrontation does not have to be a disaster. Here are the three key elements of survival and potential success.

1. Be prepared.
2. Seize control.
3. Stay calm and confident.

There are two types of ambush interview: the predictable and the unpredictable. The principles listed above apply to both.

In each case, it's important to be friendly and produce a big smile. Act as if you're delighted to see the reporter or reporters even if you're not. Shake hands and ask the individual's name if you don't know it. This approach, which will undoubtedly be recorded on camera, projects openness and confidence.

The unscheduled interview most likely to occur is when an organization is involved in a major news story or current issue and an official is making a public, or at least well publicized, appearance. Good examples would be a public hearing, or even a closed hearing, a court appearance, or an industry conference. There is no excuse for not being prepared for these.

Here's how to handle it. Walk out of the room with three key points ("must airs") well in mind. Those points can often be prepared in advance and then modified, if need be, based on new developments. Identify the most likely and most difficult questions in advance and have a three-point answer prepared for each. Using the satisfy-and-steer technique, move the first question into a presentation of your key points. Subsequent questions are very likely to stem from those points. The executive is clearly in control.

Taking control of the unpredictable ambush interview may be a little harder but it is achievable. When confronted by the reporter and camera, don't start by **answering** questions, no matter what the first question is. Start by **asking** questions: who are you, what organization are you reporting for, and what is your story about? Control has now shifted from the reporter to you.

Based on his or her answers, you now have a number of options.

One, if you are very comfortable with the topic and have your message points worked out, you can simply deliver them. Two, if you're not the right person to comment on that topic, say so and direct them to the public relations official who can provide information or an interview source or at least a discreet turndown. Either way, you don't end up on the evening news. If you're willing to talk about the subject but don't feel prepared, buy some time by saying, "I need to touch base with my office on an important matter first, then I'd be glad to talk to you." That not only gives you some "think" time, it also enables you to talk to your PR pro to create or refine your key points.

There is another form of ambush interview that most people don't think about. That is the telephone call from a radio reporter that gets thrown on the air live without your being told. Being caught off-guard can lead to saying some things you'll later regret. So, a good policy is to say, in a very friendly manner, "John, I wasn't expecting your call and this is not a good time for me. When can I call you back?" Now, if you are on live, the reporter looks like the bad guy, rather than you. If not, you've bought time to get your thoughts together. But, be sure you're the proper person to comment on that issue for your organization. If not, tell the reporter to call the PR department.

By following these principles and techniques, you should never have to explain to your boss or shareholders why your impromptu comments embarrassed the organization.