

28.09.06 (smz) – **TIPS FOR CEOS WHEN TALKING TO THE MEDIA**

The economic background

Before we start to discuss some major mistakes CEOs make in their media approach, let us set the scene. To start with, any communication media such as newspapers, magazines, TV show or online blogs represent an economic system with a business model behind it. Editors bear part of the burden to sell the product and to generate advertising opportunities. Since the economic downturn in new media in 2001, many editors have been laid off or their contracts have been changed into freelance contracts, placing an enormous burden on the remainders. The few lucky ones are today responsible for much more editorial content, for more multimedia enhancements and for a significantly faster production time of their print articles or TV features. Freelancers got away with corrupting some of the established pricing and new kids on the block like amateurs who turned out professionals did add to the mounting competitive pressure. The catchy headline and the paparazzi photo, the secret video taping and the revealing quote are sought after by many journalists of today, as a means of survival. Gone are the times where a senior editor could work for weeks on a background article and research the details in person and on the actual location, not relying on secondary research on his computer.

Who are you talking to?

Whenever a CEO talks to a journalist, consequently he/she not only finds someone who listens to his/her message, but also someone who seeks to build a reputation from this conversation, to a much higher degree than in the past. Some editors seek to become

friends with CEOs, others seek to find their weak points, and both models serve their purpose: they sell.

What are typical CEO mistakes?

In this economic context, what mistakes do CEOs make? Here is a list, compiled by Bruno Affentranger, deputy editor-in-chief of Switzerland’s business weekly, Cash magazine:

a) Attack: Some CEOs think that attacking the media is a strategy that works. It does not. The media will always win. When a CEO just recently complained that he was being chased by the media in an almost inhuman way, people behind the scenes laughed. A few weeks later, he has simply disappeared from the screens.

b) Playing the victim: not the least better. If a CEO describes how he/she suffers from too much public attention, if he/she makes a pledge to leave her loved-ones out of the public eye, he/she has lost too. Anyone can remember the time when that particular person was so eager to get media attention. Now she pays the price.

c) Being silent: Perhaps the most dangerous mistake of all possible mistakes. Today, silence creates suspicion. If a CEO does not master the art of saying nothing by appearing in public, he/she is in danger. This ability is a truly essential means to maintain trust levels high all the time, especially in times of crisis or looming crisis. A loss of trust cannot be regained through non-communication. If a CEO remains silent amongst merger speculation and does not present himself in the driver’s seat, he may not survive.

d) Falling in love with a fake personality: Some CEOs are so flabbergasted by their assumed media personality that they fall in love with a fake image. They even try to live and enhance it. If, for instance, a hard-hitting CEO agrees to appear as a teddy bear in an orange suit in a home story of a family tabloid, he demolishes his image more than anything. These pictures will stay with him, repeatedly, maybe forever.

e) Not building relationships: If a CEO perceives a journalist as a service person or someone who is dependent on getting access to the CEO's knowledge, a dangerous imbalance becomes apparent. The imbalance ultimately will lead to friction and misunderstanding. In this category we find those CEOs who demands proofreading of each article or TV piece before publication. This is not a working relationship with mutual understanding and trust. Fear, uncertainty and doubt do not pay off on the CEO level.

f) Not providing contextual information: Journalists need background information. They need meetings with CEOs without the pressure to immediately produce content. Media people need industry updates and facts/figures collections. They appreciate the informal talk more than anything, because that removes the mutual pressure in an atmosphere of confidentiality off-the-records.

Can you trust journalists under pressure, as said above? Absolutely, confirms Bruno Affentranger of Cash from his year-long experience. What is his advice for CEOs? “If you seek fair treatment, talk to us frequently. Let us talk. Invite us to your fire-place twice a year. Help us to gain perspective on your key issues. Provide context. But – stop doing interviews.”

The surprise statement of Affentranger about stopping the interview routine clarifies the role of our own CEO Positioning Interview™: ue to all the constraints and legal problems with live interviews, the canned version is bound to replace the live version.

Carly Fiorina (ex H-P)

Klaus Kleinfeld (Siemens)

Kevin Rollins (Dell)



Christian Streiff (ex-Airbus)

Josef Ackermann (Dt. Bank)