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Abbey Malik

A major role of a public or media relations professional is that of an advisor. When C-suite executives, vice presidents and other high-level management propose any type of marketing endeavor, we shouldn't jump right into getting the ball rolling on the project. Certainly some ideas are instant winners; we know them when we hear them. This isn't every idea, however, so our role is to step back, consider the options and advise on the proper next step.

And arguably no form of publicity needs our counsel more than the press conference—that hectic, whirlwind event that must balance high production standards and charismatic presentation with information of real value. The press conferences I've worked on have been mostly successful. However, one recent event I helped organize took a turn for the worse. I learned more during this project than I could have in a semester-long course.

My organization applied to be part of a large-scale event that would've had a strong economic impact on the surrounding community and region, and we needed everyone's cooperation and enthusiasm. A press conference was used to successfully announce our intentions, and afterward we kept the community informed through media alerts and press releases. Throughout various steps of the process leading up to the decision deadline, we periodically disseminated these updates as needed.

Then we got word of a decision: We weren't chosen to be a part of the event. It was incredibly disappointing. And now we needed to tackle the looming task of informing the public. Here's where things went wrong: Someone decided we needed to hold a press conference, and the communications professionals on hand didn't talk anyone out of it.

Before we continue, let's look at the benefits of press conferences: They are platforms for important announcements that have impact on the future. They can (and should be) visually stimulating and can make people, places and events look more fabulous and important than they actually are. Of more significance, it's a way to ensure that news outlets receive your message at the same time. This is important in allowing a variety of media outlets a fair chance to report your news.

In addition, press conferences aren't just for glamour and glitz, they're also ideal avenues for making updates about ongoing situations to large groups of individuals—the oil spill in the Gulf Coast, recovery efforts in Haiti, the trapped miners in Chile and the like.

So why was a press conference a bad choice of dissemination for this particular news item? Well, when we asked media reps to come to our press conference, they expected us to announce that we were indeed chosen to be a part of the important future event for which we applied. Their attendance at our press conference would result in interviews, sound bites and video clips that could be used that day and in future coverage.

Instead, we unintentionally misled them...and disappointed them. The moment the press began arriving and filing into the designated press conference area, my heart sank as I heard excited chatter from the people who were sure we'd gotten it and who were hoping to be a part of the event. At the press conference, when our spokesperson broke the news that we weren't chosen to be part of the event to which we applied, you could hear a collective sigh.

How *should* communications professionals have handled the spread of this news item? In this instance, we should have issued a media alert via e-mail and our Web site that included a written statement, a very short video statement from our spokesperson, and an audio clip of the statement, also from our spokesperson. Phone calls to important media outlets to let them know of the news and the material would immediately follow.

Though some members of the press were disappointed, it didn't harm any relationships, thankfully. We live and we learn, and in media and public relations, lessons are around every corner, no matter how long we're in the business.

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October 29, 2010

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