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LIFESTYLES

Are You Ready for Fame?

A CEO who responds to a situation with confidence and composure can become a corporate superhero.

Andy Warhol predicted that one day, every American would be famous for 15 minutes. Are you ready for your time in the spotlight?

Today, business execs and entrepreneurs must determine whether becoming famous is in the best interest of their companies and their careers. How do you decide whether or not to pursue publicity? What are the rewards, traps, and pitfalls of being the center of attention in a crisis or in a celebration? Will publicity result in increased business—or will it diminish returns? And, if you decide to pursue publicity, how do you best prepare yourself for interviews?

If you're outgoing and gregarious like Dave Thomas, the senior chairman of the board and founder of Wendy's, becoming the company's leading spokesperson may be good for business. But is it necessary? The late Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, built his company into a retail powerhouse while he remained behind the scenes.

When a company is interested in having the CEO, CFO, or other senior executives participate in a major announcement of a change in a company's direction, such as the launch of a new product, an initial public offering, or the acquisition of another company, media training consultants are frequently retained to prepare that

individual for the event. **Joyce Newman, president of the New York-based Newman Group**, which specializes in training people to speak to the media and has consulted for Bear Stearns, Philip Morris, IBM, and BBDO Worldwide (an advertising firm), says that even the most seasoned entrepreneur or CEO will likely feel anxious about public speaking or launching or participating in a media campaign. She trains business execs to focus on three points: "the safety net, the security belt, and the parachute." The safety net is the main point that the executive wants to communicate about his or her company; the security belt refers to developing and expanding on that point; and the parachute is designed to guide the speaker back to the original point.

"It's [the spokesperson's] job to handle these three points and not go off on a tangent," says Newman. If a reporter asks a question which the spokesperson cannot answer, Newman trains him or her to reply, "I hear what you're saying. That's not our purpose today."

Before meeting a CEO, Newman will usually request a tape of the person speaking. Upon meeting the CEO, she may choose to show him or her the tape and ask for a self-critique. "Video doesn't lie. It's the instant ego-leveler," says Newman. She then asks the CEO to describe his or her strongest qualities; typical responses include leadership ability, decisiveness, integrity, and confidence. Ultimately, those are the qualities she will help the CEO convey in communication. She teaches specific skills, such as how to make eye contact with an audience and use visual aids effectively. She also choreographs gestures—such as leaning forward, shrugging the shoulders, and nodding the head—to humanize the speaker.

Sometimes, CEOs have no choice in the matter of participating in publicity; a crisis at a company can thrust a CEO into the public eye. For example, James Burke, the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, came forward to address the situation when it was found that their product, Tylenol, had been tampered with.

Alan Caruba, a public relations counselor in Maplewood, N.J., who has written a brochure called "Crisis in Communications," prepares CEOs and companies to deal with unexpected crises.

When a gas line pipe exploded in early 1994 in New Jersey, Caruba says the CEO of Texas Eastern Gas Company (who was not Caruba's client) handled the crisis expertly. The CEO flew immediately to the explosion site and made himself available to handle media questions. "If you're the one in charge, you have the primary responsibility to respond. You must respond immediately. You can't take two days off to decide what to say," says Caruba.

In preparation for a potential disaster, Caruba advises companies to create a crisis communications team. Everyone must understand the role that he or she plays when the crisis occurs. The person who handles the press, whether it's the CEO or the director of corporate communications, must be able to remain composed and not act defensively under pressure. When calls start coming in from local and national newspapers and television stations, the CEO should announce a press conference to handle the onslaught of questions relating to the crisis and, in those

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precious hours before the conference, should consider sending a subordinate to the site to gather as much information as possible.

All of those steps point to Caruba's strongest recommendation: Drown the media with information. The more information you provide, the more open and responsive the perception of your company will be, and the better equipped you will be to restore public confidence.

Caruba suggests that traps to avoid include stonewalling, or refusing to comment; avoiding taking responsibility; not supplying the press with sufficient information; and having too many spokespeople communicating mixed or conflicting messages.

A CEO who tries to avoid publicity during a crisis is making a mistake, says Joyce Newman. "The buck stops with the CEO," she says. While she understands a CEO's reluctance, she notes that if a crisis occurs, the CEO "needs to be on the front line and prepared. The CEO becomes synonymous with the company," she says. Publicist Sandy Harbrecht agrees: "The CEO has to be the company's chief spokesperson. It's difficult to delegate [representation] to someone else. The CEO personifies the company's culture, personality, and values. It comes with the territory."

Still, the rules are not written in stone. Publicist Gary Myers says that one CEO he worked with created his company's vision and then designated a much more outgoing subordinate to be the company's spokesperson. That arrangement helped the company and was most agreeable to the CEO.

Some execs shun personal publicity because they are reluctant to become the target of a crime, a burglary, or a kidnapping. Joyce Newman understands these fears, but contends that a CEO who has those fears can still represent the company and choose to reveal little about personal life, habits, or residence.

Can there be too much publicity? Joyce Newman says that there is no such thing as oversaturation, that all publicity builds brand recognition and distinguishes your company. But fame can have an ugly side. Author Braudy suggests that some people think fame is freeing, but too much fame "imprisons." You may not be able to eat dinner in a restaurant, attend a museum, or enjoy a private life when everybody recognizes you.

When doing publicity, there are traps to avoid. People who have entered the limelight often develop "a feeling of self-importance which can grow into arrogance," says one publicist. Some people get so caught up in their own profiles and press pictures that they forget the reason why they're doing the publicity: to enhance the company's image and boost the company's profits.

Other tips from media insiders include:

- Develop a thick skin concerning publicity. Reporters are skeptical and will raise issues; don't take personally everything written about you.

- Have a realistic sense of what can be accomplished. A *New York Times* profile will not be written the day you hire a consultant; start with trade magazines and build a portfolio of articles.

- Remember that reporters have a job to do—to report the news—so it pays to be careful about what you reveal. Comments that are too revealing may come back to haunt you.

- Publicity is only one part of a campaign which can include advertising, promotions, sponsorships, and internal communication.

- Find out as much as you can about the publication that is going to interview you. Ask the reporter to describe the slant of the story and to identify who else he or she is interviewing for the article.

- Avoid trying to manipulate the press. Treat them honestly, and you'll get a fair shake.

- Practice being interviewed. Work with your public relations director or consultants to rehearse your responses to a variety of questions.

—Gary M. Stern