I still look at the letter at least once a week. It is from a high-level communications executive at Exxon and is dated May 15, 1989—just weeks after the Exxon Valdez disaster, arguably one of the worst public relations blunders in modern history. Immediately after the disaster, I had sent them a letter suggesting media response practice, since coverage in Alaska would be intense. The executive responded by saying they did not need any help. As the story unfolded, the CEO of Exxon was steadfastly “unavailable for comment,” and the barrage of negative press resulting from this approach is a matter of history.

I keep that letter on the wall above my desk as a reminder that even those in the worst trouble will often say they don’t need assistance in coping with the media. In the spirit of this letter, here are the five most commonly given reasons top executives refuse to undergo professional media training. I compiled this list based on a 40-year career in communications, the past 20 of which have been devoted to media training:

1. “Our legal staff has strongly advised me to say ‘no comment’ to the media.” This is the single biggest mistake executives make in dealing with the media, yet it is the advice most often given by company lawyers. Let this be perfectly clear: There is no time when “hiding out” is an acceptable approach. You don’t have to answer media questions; you just have to be available and respond in a caring fashion.

2. “My media relations department handles all reporter inquiries.” Top executives often don’t like to be around when the news hits the fan. This, however, is just the time when they need to openly respond if they are to maintain an image of integrity both with the press and the public. My favorite example of a leader doing the right thing is the response of William Clay Ford, Jr., following the 1999 explosion at the Ford manufacturing plant in River Rouge, MI. Ford, chairman of Ford Motor Co., held a news conference at the site shortly after the explosion, and this was his unforgettable first sentence: “This is the worst day of my life.”

3. “I am a Harvard MBA who makes $1.5 million a year, so no one needs to teach me how to answer questions.” Well, this MBA is correct in one regard: Experienced media coaches never teach anyone how to answer questions. The purpose of media training is to learn how to respond to a reporter’s area of interest
while also making your point. The training emphasizes how to stay “on message” without being sidetracked or becoming defensive.

4. “The media are all a bunch of liberals and hate big business.” This one has been around since I was a reporter and broadcast news executive in the 1960s. The media are so pervasive and diverse now that this comment is just plain silly. While surveys have shown that 80 percent of White House correspondents are in fact registered Democrats, a survey of the political leanings of all reporters in the US would probably be similar to voter registration polls: 25 percent Democrat, 25 percent Republican, the rest Independent.

5. “No matter what I say, reporters will twist my message.” In the National Enquirer, maybe. Perhaps this particular executive is thinking of the editorial page and not the news pages, or perhaps this person really doesn’t understand the difference. What needs to be understood is that the media are the most powerful force in the world. Digest it, and understand it.

The list is longer, but this is a pretty good start. I am still floored when I run into a respected leader who doesn’t understand the importance of media relations. You might consider cutting out this article and putting it on their desk. You may either be fired or made vice president of communications. But not to worry—life, like dealing with the media, will always be a risk. However, history shows, as has my own experience, that news interviews are a risk worth taking when you know exactly what you are doing and why you are doing it.

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