

Never Say, "No Comment"

By Elaine Nathanson, APR, Fellow PRSA

As a journalist turned PR pro, I have a major aversion to the words “no comment,” from both sides of the situation.

As a reporter, “no comment” means “go away,” “I don’t have to talk to you,” “It’s none of your (or your readers or the publics) business.” From a public relations view, it means “I’m guilty,” “I have something to hide from you (or your readers or my clients and customers).”

The words “no comment” are always negative and will always do more harm than commenting about what is really happening.

If you, as a business person or representative of any organization or issue, are not prepared to talk to the news media, you can always ask for more time. Tell them you need a few minutes to compose your thoughts, then **CALL THEM BACK**. When you do call them back, you could say “This is news to me and the company. You can be sure that we will look into the situation and respond as soon as possible.” Or “We are very concerned. As soon as we know more, we will let you know.” Or “For potential legal reasons, I can’t tell you more.”

From a reporter’s point of view, at least you have acknowledged that the story exists, and given the reporter the respect they deserve. Even if you can’t really comment on a situation, you can tell them what you know, even if all you can honestly say is “I don’t know what is going on, but will find out.” The key is to be as honest and open as you can.

Always return a reporter’s phone call as soon as you can. Instruct your support staff to contact you or another person who has the authority to talk about your business. Teach them to ask what the reporter’s deadline is, and make sure they understand the urgency of the request. “Jones did not return phone calls” is almost as bad in a news story as “no comment.” It communicates the same message to a news organization — that you are above the scrutiny of the free press — the fourth arm of a democracy. It might seem small to you, but to a reporter, it is a classic slap in the face.

One instance of “no comment” or failure to communicate can undo years of good public relations and community good will. One situation of limiting media access can scar your reputation with the news media for years to come. You can’t expect the media to print your good news (new buildings, promotions, awards, sales achievements) if you are not respectful of their right to know what is going on inside your business or organization. Any negative situation could hurt your bottom line, but refusing to cooperate with the media won’t make it any better any faster.

Just like your mother always said, “Face the music.”

Elaine Nathanson is the Public Relations Director at Bolchalk Frey Marketing, Advertising & Public Relations. A public relations practitioner for 30 years, she earned her APR (Accredited Public Relations) 22 years ago and was named a Fellow PRSA, a measure of senior achievement, three years ago.

Elaine Nathanson, APR, Fellow PRSA

Public Relations Director
BOLCHALK FREY Marketing
326 S Wilmot C-200
Tucson, AZ 85711-4094
Phone: (520) 745-8221
Fax: (520) 745-5540
Cell: (520) 490-9889
elaine@adwiz.com

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