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Stuart McDonald

Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service

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DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

STUART MCDONALD, Public Affairs Specialist, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Animal Plant Health Inspection Service, Office of Legislative and Public Affairs, Denver, CO

You have to ask yourself, why would you start a technical session dealing with communications. You know we are all here to learn various aspects of our trade. Why start it out with a session on communications? Well, let me give you the answer to that one. The success of every enterprise depends on public goodwill. When I first read that I thought, yes, in a free society the success of every enterprise depends on public goodwill. But then the Berlin wall came down, communism collapsed and you realize that even tyranny cannot withstand the pressure of public goodwill. So, it becomes tremendously important to us all that the public understands what it is that we do, the value of what it is that we do, and the rightness of what it is that we do.

Communications. There are two kinds of communication: wholesale and retail. Retail is what we are doing today -- one-on-one. We are talking back and forth. Wholesale is when you talk to a reporter and it gets in the paper. Or you talk to an electronic journalist and he has tape running and it is broadcast over the air or on television. We are going to deal today with wholesale, dealing with the media. These are tremendously important opportunities and I think our attitude going into these situations dictate how well we will succeed in getting our story told. If you are reticent, if you are angry with the media, if you feel these guys are out to do a number on you and you stonewall them, we flat out lose. We need the media to tell our story. Eighty-five percent of the people get 100% of everything they know about current events from electronic media. If that is true, why bother with the newspapers? Well, because the electronic media gets their news from the newspapers. The newspapers still have the best news gathering network. They still are the best collectors of news. A lot of what you read nationwide has been generated by the newspapers and put on the wire. So treat the print and electronic media seriously.

One of the things that they teach in journalism school is, "if it bleeds it leads." That is the criteria. Another line that is more negative says, "never let the truth stand in the way of a good story." I reject that one because by and large, you are dealing with reporters that are very much like you and me, particularly in the heartland of the United States. They are working stiffs that are trying to do a good job. They are trying to understand what the issues are and report them fairly. One thing Mark Twain said years ago, "just because a man is an engineer doesn't mean he knows anything about engineering." What it means is that he doesn't know anything else. So, with a journalist, just because a person is a journalist, doesn't mean he/she knows anything about journalism. What it means is that he doesn't know anything about wildlife damage control so he is turning to you to explain it to him. For goodness sakes, explain it to him. One of the bad aspects of the "if it bleeds, it leads" scenario is that every newscast starts with the *news du jour*. Every headline is the today's bad news. Every news magazines starts with what's wrong with America or what's wrong in the world. We have been getting such a steady dose of bad news that it is easy to fall victim to the concept that everything is terrible. Well everything isn't terrible; everything is really pretty wonderful. I was watching the television news Tuesday night. ABC had a report on starvation in North Korea. The United States was sending 15 million dollars worth of relief to North Korea on top of the 33 million dollars that has already been sent. Food is rationed to children under three years old to seven ounces a day. In modern America we have the most abundant, diverse, safe, and economical food supply of any people in the history of humankind. Our food supply is so dependable, we take it for granted. Our food supply is so dependable, that critics find fault with how we are producing food

and the efforts we are taking to protect our food supply. Now this is where advocacy on our part is required. Rather than criticizing American agriculture, Americans should get down on their knees every day and thank God for the blessings of being born in this country and for the miracle of production agriculture. It is like running water and electric lights. You walk into a room and flip a switch -- lights. You take it for granted. No one thinks about the capital investment or marvelous engineering that went into the infrastructure that makes it possible. The same way with running water; you turn on the faucet, of course there is water. Of course it is safe to drink. We take it for granted. How quickly can it be gone? Just like that. Last weekend there was a blizzard in North Dakota -- my home state. I still have family there. It started with rain; the rain turned to ice; the ice turned to snow. They got all kinds of snow; the power lines were down; the electricity was out. Pretty serious stuff. They are also dealing with floods. I suppose locusts and fire is what is next. But you don't miss the water until the well runs dry.

So we are going to talk today about how to tell our story and I would like to start by stressing the professional attitude. I came across a definition years ago that I have always liked -- the professional attitude is the calm assurance of the individual who knows and who knows he knows. We all strive for professionalism. Professionalism is defined as someone who is engaged in an enterprise as a means of livelihood. A professor, however, is someone who professes something. I think it is contingent upon us to profess the things we believe in, to have confidence in the rightness of what it is that we are doing, and to explain that to the audiences that are available to us.

We are going to talk about the mass media markets and guidelines for crisis communications. Number one -- know the media. Know who you are dealing with.

Who is the reporter that writes on environmental and farm issues for your local newspaper? Who reports those issues for your local radio station; for your local television station? These are the people you should know. Make a list of them and what their take is on things. When a

good article appears that is on a subject in which you have some expertise, call the reporter tell him or her what a good job they did. When an article appears on a subject and they have it all wrong, call them. Tell him or her that you appreciate their taking the time to go into that subject, because it is a complex subject and that maybe they weren't aware that there were certain elements of the story that weren't accurate. If interested, you would be happy to point them out to him. Never take a confrontational approach. This is a proactive means of establishing your credibility for next time. Tell the reporter, that if something comes up, feel free to call. Set yourself up as the expert in the field so that when there is a controversy or there is a story, they call. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has several one-page fact sheets of every program in which they are involved: animal disease, plant disease, animal damage control, etc. They can quote from your fact sheet or they can quote from you because you are the expert. Don't hide the facts and never lie, even if it is painful to tell the truth. A lie will come back and bite you every time. If you are in an event where something major has gone wrong and the whole integrity of the program is under question, you have to pick one spokesperson who speaks for the program. You can't have everybody in the organization talking. If there is a major crisis of any kind, and legislative and public affairs sends one of their top people in, they will not be your spokesperson. They will set things up and take care of the technical details. The media won't want to talk to them; they want to talk to you. They want to talk to the people that are on the ground doing the work. They want to talk to the people that have day-to-day experience.

How do you prepare for the inevitable interview? First, be available. Ask what topics the reporter would like to discuss. You can tell them if you need time to pull some data together. Set a time and place where you can get together. Try to avoid doing a television interview while sitting behind your desk looking like a bureaucrat. If you are doing

field work, pick a nice setting outside. Give yourself every advantage that you can. Develop two or three primary messages about the topic. Use sound bites. Sound bites have been used since the beginning of time. "Let there be light. Man, what a sound bite! Know in advance what your message is. For example, tell me everything about the Humane Society in 25 words. Can you do it? Of course you can, but you can't do it off of the top of your head. You can do it by sitting down and identifying what's really important. Write it out and then refine it. Discard what isn't important. Say the 25 words out loud. There is a big difference in saying them out loud versus reading them to yourself. Take a few minutes to practice your message. Write notes or an outline with background information. Have your fact sheets ready to handout. Compile the technical information that may be supportive to your primary thoughts. Support the sound bites that you have developed with the fact sheets that are available. For each and every question, work in those primary thoughts. Clear your mind of distractions. Concentrate on the interview. Take a deep breath and relax. Wholesale, retail. When we talk in casual conversation, we don't need a lot of notes. If we have a conversation that 100,000 people are going to view, we should put a little more effort into preparing for the conversation. I always advise people to tell a reporter that it will take at least 15 minutes to get your thoughts organized. Take that 15 minutes to go to the bathroom, walk around the building, get yourself a soda pop or a cup of coffee. Get ready. Keep it simple. Keep your mind going. Think about what you are doing. Speak conversationally and confidently. Select and emphasize one or two key points. Give direct answers. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them, and add that you will check that out and get back to them. Always be courteous enough to find out what their deadlines are. What are the constraints they are working under?

Attention. Listen carefully to questions. Don't get ahead of the question. Don't anticipate. Pause before you speak. Think about what it is you want to say and how you are going to say it. If you

are doing an interview with radio or television and they are rolling tape, don't hesitate to say, "I don't like the way I answered that. Can I answer that again?" They are going to edit anyway. They want you to look good. They want you to do your best. If you are scared to death and you are nervous and you would rather kill yourself than do this interview, tell them. Put them on your side. They know you are not used to doing this. Don't try to be something you are not. You are not going to become Walter Cronkite in a five minute interview. Be yourself because that is what they want.

Finally, wrap it up. When you are done, you are done. Don't go on and on and on. Some of the worst instances in public relations have happened after the interview is over. Remember Jimmy Carter telling the reporter from *Playboy*, "Oh, by the way did I tell you that I lust after women in my heart?" That was the big story. The rest of the interview was lost completely. You are never off the record. Remember who you are representing. Your personal opinion does not matter -- in the media it is not going to be presented as your personal opinion. It is going to be presented as a statement for the agency or organization you are representing.

Tips for telephone interviews. With the modern press often times you will just get a quick call. That doesn't mean, however, you have to take the call at that very moment. Buy some time by responding, "You have caught me right in the middle of something. It is going to take me a few minutes to clear off my desk and devote time to this. What is your deadline? I'll call you back within 30 minutes." Take down the reporter's phone number, name and employer. Then take that time to get yourself organized; to get focused; to get rid of any other nearby distractions. Take no other calls. Make sure you ask what topic(s) will be covered. Ask who else will be interviewed. Is this just going to be a story that will feature you or is it a debate in which they are going to call others? You can ask if the call is being recorded but normally they will tell you up front. Some people recommend taping your half of the conversation. I never go to that length. I have confidence in the honesty and integrity of the media.

Review the key points you have made. Make sure you know what it is that you want to say. How much would we have to pay for a 30-second commercial on a local television station, or a minute commercial on the local radio station, or a display ad in the local newspaper? This is free advertising so it is critical for us to take full advantage of these opportunities. Ask when the interview will be played, aired, or printed. Also ask if you can get a copy. Your public affairs office will always be interested. After the interview, thank the reporter for taking interest in your part of the story. Ask if there is an opportunity to do a follow up. Offer other ideas or topics you think might be of interest. Set yourself up for another interview. Build for the future.

One of the absolutely lovely parts about this building is the Margaret Meade quotation that is displayed around the staircase, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.” Indeed it is the only thing that ever has, so go forth and change the world.