Fronting the Media – advice for managers

Delivered by Ian Tanner, Group General Manager Assets & Major Projects, Sydney Catchment Authority at the Legends of Water event held by AWA NSW Branch in November 2012.

A few pointers to assist in successful media engagements:

a) Know the detail - facts, figures – but choose which ones are the important ones to use. Don’t overuse them, it will only confuse the audience and the journalist will lose interest. It’s a balancing act between sounding knowledgeable and sounding like a geek.

b) If it’s a ‘technical’ subject, you must simplify it into normal everyday speak – no jargon, no acronyms, just plain English – convert technical terms as far as possible.

c) Prepare your Key Messages – what is the ‘Take Home’ message – it must be simple and repeated. Limit them to a couple – one is even better.

d) Prepare for tough questions - try to anticipate where the journalist may go with the interview – what else is in the media that is topical and may relate to your interview. Prepare a ‘politically correct’ answer with your Communications team. But don’t try to blame/pass responsibility to another organisation. There are a number of standard responses that can be used.

e) Practice your answers before the interview – try not to ‘Um’ or ‘Ah’ too much, nor hesitate – you will lose credibility.

f) Develop a rapport with the journalists – especially TV interviewers – you can control these interviews and suggest content and presentation and location. If you can come up with an ‘angle’ or ‘hook’ they will love you!

g) Make sure you have a great relationship with your Comms team – absolutely critical. They are the first point of contact with the Media. Hopefully they’ll establish a “can do” and “no trouble” relationship with the journalist. This puts the TV/Radio station and the journalists in a good frame of mind to start with – meaning your experience should not be unpleasant. Shock Jocks however are a different story!

h) Learn the tricks of doing different interviews: tape v’s live, TV v’s Radio.

   a) For radio interviews (taped or live): lay out your paperwork (Q&As, Fact Sheets, Media releases, Data, etc) in front of you – know where everything is – you can then easily refer and read your response BUT as if you are simply responding – don’t make it sound as if you are reading a predetermined answer.

   b) For taped radio interviews – if you don’t like the sound of something you just said (you phrased it poorly or it was wrong) simply stop and ask to start again. They don’t mind.

   c) For TV recordings, same thing. But you can control the interview and take the journalist on a ‘journey’ – tell them the whole story. They’ll decide what makes it to air. Use props (like large scale maps, photos, etc). On site is better for the story/message impact, so suggest going to site.

   i) Remember – you know MUCH more about the subject than them.

   j) Show your passion and share your knowledge.

   k) You’ll be lucky to get more than 10 seconds on Radio and 30 seconds on TV – make it count with a ‘Key Message’

   l) Relax and try to be natural.

Start off by doing ‘routine’, low risk pre-records on radio. Then TV recordings. Live Radio is the LAST challenge, especially the ‘shock jocks’, after you have gained confidence.