

Sneak Peeks and Deflections

Two Often Ignored Media Interview Techniques
Every Executive Needs to Know

Ed Barks

www.barkscomm.com

© 2023 Edward J. Barks

www.barkscomm.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the express written consent of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a critical article or review.

Every word and thought in this paper was written by a living, breathing human being. No artificial intelligence schemes were used. Remedies for violation of copyright laws by users, whether intentional or unintentional, may be pursued.

Why do media interviews sometimes go off the rails? The biggest reason may be that your executives and other spokespeople don't possess the tools needed to direct the interview on your preferred course. For instance, are they able to suggest a question by giving the reporter a peek around the corner? And can they successfully block questions they should not address?

When it comes to controlling the direction of a media interview, sources have several techniques at their disposal. This paper discusses two of them — the “sneak peek” and the “deflection”.

Technique One: A Peek Around the Bend

The **sneak peek** is a simple concept, and one that is fairly easy to implement. When you employ this tactic, you use a phrase at the conclusion of your response to tempt the reporter, offering a clue of what awaits around the corner. You need only supply the raw materials, then stand back and let the reporter use them to build the next logical question.

The sneak peek is advisable when you want to encourage a reporter to dig deeper into a key part of your message or when you want to tell a story and have the reporter think it was their question that unearthed it.

It is a straightforward matter to tag a sneak peek on the end of your answer. Here is some specific language you can use when offering a sneak peek:

- “There’s more to that story.”
- “And that’s not all.”
- “There is even more news.”
- “I can give you plenty of examples.”

In effect, you are writing the next question for the reporter. Let’s illustrate with an example. If your message centered on the value of a new program your company just initiated to bring technology into more schools, your exchange might sound like this:

Reporter: “How does your program work?”

You: “We have organized a consortium of companies committed to providing both hardware and talent to our schools nationwide. There are dozens of examples of these good works.”

What might the reporter's next question be? You guessed it: "Tell me about some of those examples."

Technique Two: Forging a Force Field

Another valuable tool in your media relations arsenal is the **deflection**. As the name implies, this technique empowers you with a verbal shield to help ward off pointed reporter queries.

Deflection can be used when the questioning gets heated. Savvy media sources regard even antagonistic or uninformed questions as added opportunities to tell their story. The trick is to remain focused, refusing to allow the reporter to draw you into a debate that does neither you nor your business any good.

Here are some sample replies when you need to put up a stop sign:

- "The fact of the matter is..."
- "Actually..."
- "In fact..."
- "In reality..."

There may be other times when you need to block a question because it is misdirected or irrelevant, touches upon proprietary information, or requires you to speculate. Briefly tell the reporter why you cannot respond, then follow that deflection right back to your message. For example:

- "That involves proprietary information, so let's look at the facts that are on the public record..."
- "The report being released today doesn't address that legislation. What it does say is..."
- "We could spend all day swapping rumors. Let us instead focus on the facts ..."

Communicate with Purpose

Deflection phrases like the ones above are critical to successful communication. If you try to stonewall the reporter by saying, "I can't talk about that" or "No comment," you will succeed only in raising suspicions. When you refuse to comment, what is likely to be the next question? In all probability, it will be a pointed, "Why not?" or, worse, "What are you trying to hide?"

If, on the other hand, you communicate with purpose using the deflection technique, your exchange might look something like this:

Reporter: “Isn’t it true that your new product has been responsible for over a dozen deaths?”

You: “The fact of the matter is rigorous studies by independent third parties have found our new product to be safe when used properly. For example...”

Note that this communications construct gets you right back where you want to be, on the familiar turf of your message. What is the reporter’s next question in this instance? It may well be “Tell me about those studies.” Doesn’t talking about supportive studies sound like more friendly ground than delving into the details of why you are refusing to comment?

Playing the Odds

It is important to recognize that techniques like the deflection and the sneak peek are not guaranteed to work every time. They are important for two reasons. First, they help you to alter the tone of the interview. You are not likely to angle it 180 degrees from wholeheartedly hostile to positively pleasant. Shifting it even a few degrees, however, gives you a bit more breathing room. Second, we are dealing in probabilities here, trying to raise your odds for success in any exchange with a reporter.

Using a sneak peek improves your odds slightly. Employing a deflection raises them slightly again. Before you know it, by using these and [other techniques](#) rigorously throughout your interviews, you have succeeded in making your interviews more message driven. Moreover, you have transformed your spokesperson roster into star media sources who benefit your company’s reputation as well as everyone’s career.

The sneak peek and the deflection not only help to guide the reporter. By making it easier for you to return to your message, they also help remind you of what you are there to talk about.

Inculcating Your Executives

The overarching issue, of course, is coaxing spokespeople to use these techniques. If you are a communications executive, heed this: First of all, you must be conversant with using these tactics yourself. This allows you to provide the necessary guidance when counseling colleagues with regard to media interviews. If you find yourself struggling with these tactics, either find someone else in your communications department capable of the job or secure a consultant with expertise in teaching executives how to conduct themselves in front of the press.

Next, encourage spokespeople to practice in a meaningful way. Communications staff will need to take the lead here because, for better or worse, everyday duties often lead

executives to ignore the part of their job that involves talking with reporters. Arrange specific times to conduct practice interviews with them, asking questions that should be answered with either the sneak peek or the deflection.

Drop by their offices every so often for snap interviews in which you ask the same type of challenging questions. Collar them in the hallway and do the same thing. Every so often, hold a [media training workshop](#) and instruct your consultant to focus part of the proceedings on these two techniques.

Guiding the direction of an interview neither begins nor ends with the sneak peek and the deflection. Other techniques, such as [bridging](#) and flagging, also play vital roles. Learn more about those techniques in [“Does Anybody Have Any Questions for My Answers: The 411 on Q&A”](#).

Practical Next Steps

Where to go from here? Let’s talk action items by concluding with three questions:

1. What are your objectives when using the sneak peek and the deflection?
 - Inject spokespeople with added confidence.
 - Encourage them to stick to their message when dealing with reporters.
 - Deliver your company’s message more broadly and consistently.
 - Empower spokespeople with tools they can use during interviews.
2. How can you measure whether your spokespeople are using these techniques successfully?
 - Assess the results of their interviews. Do their quotes appear in print or on video? And are they the quotes you want to read and hear?
 - Assess practice sessions you hold with them.
 - Gauge feedback you get from the media training consultants you work with.
3. What value do these tactics provide for you, your spokespeople, and your organization?
 - Raise the reputation of your company, your industry, and your employees.
 - Earn more positive news clips.
 - Cultivate more and better spokespeople.
 - See a more unfiltered version of your message in print, broadcast, and online.

About the Author

Author and communications strategy consultant **Ed Barks** works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need their communications strategy and messaging to deliver bottom line results. They gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business and public policy goals.

He is the **author of four business books:**

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Ed contributes to a variety of publications and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has also published numerous research reports and position papers, including [**“A Buyer’s Guide To Communications Strategy Consultants.”**](#)

More than 5700 business leaders, association executives, scientists, government officials, entertainers, and other thought leaders thank Ed for sharpening their communications edge.

According to his clients, he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his communications training workshops “two thumbs up!”

He has served as President of Barks Communications since founding it in 1997. He served a nine-year tenure on the Board of Governors of the **National Press Club** and joined the faculty of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Institute of Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the Consultants Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

An inside-the-Beltway veteran, Ed has spent more than three decades in Washington, D.C. He brings another critical perspective to his clients’ communications needs — that of a broadcaster and journalist. He knows firsthand the traits and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio broadcasting.

Ed also publishes the **C-suite Blueprint blog**. [Follow him there](#) to receive notification of each post.

