

Want More Publicity? Six Ways to Speak in Sound Bites

By Steve Harrison

How do journalists and producers decide whether to interview you or some other expert? It often depends on who provides the best sound bite.

I've been amazed at how many people take ten sentences to say what could be said in one or two. Developing the ability to speak in sound bites is easy if you know a few key techniques.

Steve's commandments on speaking in sound bites:

1. Keep it short. Say what you have to say in one to two sentences, no more.

2. Be specific and vivid. In an interview with *Business Week*, Donald Broughton, an analyst for Avondale Partners, LLC, was talking about the stocks of two railroad companies: Union Pacific and Burlington Northern. Notice the language he used to make what would otherwise be a boring statistical trend truly memorable for the journalist interviewing him:

"It's one thing if you steal dirt from my front yard, and it's another if you break into my house and take my sterling silver," Broughton said in an interview. "For six quarters, Union Pacific's been walking around Burlington Northern's house and taking as much silver, jewels and flat-screen TVs they can get their hands on."

That's speaking very specifically, and (this is another hint) vividly. It's no surprise that of all the different analysts that journalists could quote, they quoted Broughton. He knows how to speak in sound bites.

3. Express a solid opinion. Many people are afraid to voice their opinions because they fear that others will disagree with them. But people who are good at giving sound bites know that the media are looking for clearly expressed opinions. If some people don't disagree with what you're saying, you're probably not saying much.

When Warren Buffett was interviewed about a tax that President Obama wanted to levy on financial companies, he said, "Look at the damage Fannie (Mae) and Freddie (Mac) caused, and they were run by the Congress. Should they have a special tax on Congressmen because they let this thing happen to Freddie and Fannie? I don't think so."

His willingness to express a solid opinion got him quoted. But did you also notice how he made a comparison? We'll talk more about that in a minute.

Now I want to share with you some secrets I've learned by studying two sound bite masters. One is Warren Buffett, as I've already mentioned. The other is Robert Thompson, arguably the most quoted university professor in the world.

Thompson is a professor of television and pop culture at the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and the author of six books, including *Television in the Antenna Age: A Concise History*.

I discovered him by reading an article in the Associated Press by Jocelyn Noveck (dated May 14, 2007) which referred to him as "the most quoted man in America," next to the president.

He is so good at giving sound bites that he'll sometimes get 60, 70 or even 80 media calls in one day. If you just Google his name, you will see that he has been quoted virtually everywhere. He has been quoted in the *New York Times* more than 40 times in the last four years. In fact, he's been quoted so much that some newspapers even have a "moratorium" on quoting him.

"Unlike many people in his position, he almost always finds an angle or perspective that I haven't thought about," says AP television writer David Bauder.

Here are some more principles on speaking in sound bites that you can learn from Buffett and Thompson:

4. Repeat the same word. In describing Paris Hilton, Thompson said, "She's the non-story that keeps on being a non-story."

When giving advice about investing, Warren Buffett said, "Be fearful when others are greedy and greedy when others are fearful."

You can see how in both examples repeating one or two words gives the statement a memorable sound and makes the point succinctly.

5. Compare something to something else that everyone knows about. In describing Katie Couric's debut on *CBS Evening News*, Robert Thompson said that her first broadcast would be "some of the most scrutinized frame-by-frame video images since the Zapruder film" (of John F. Kennedy's assassination).

By using a comparison to an example that nearly everyone is familiar with, he was able to make his point in a memorable way.

Thompson uses this technique often. When speaking about the Grammy Awards, he commented, "With the extreme fragmentation of music, the fact that you can still put on a mainstream award show, like the Grammys, as opposed to a funky, niche show like the VMAs (the Video Music Awards), is really kind of amazing."

6. Speak in metaphors. When talking about *Fox News*, Robert Thompson says, "They want to be the David of David and Goliath, but they are the Goliath."

When speaking in this type of short metaphor, Thompson makes his point in a way that gets the media to pay attention and quote him, rather than another communications expert.

It's critically important to use sound bites when you're being interviewed by the media, when you're responding to media queries and whenever you're writing a press release.

I learned this firsthand as a painful lesson. I once sent out a press release that got picked up by a newspaper, but they didn't quote me in the story. They quoted somebody else. Why? Because I forgot to include a really good sound bite.

Don't make the same mistake. Make sure that every press release or pitch letter you send out includes at least one memorable sound bite that is so good, so pithy and memorable that they feel their story won't be nearly as good without it. They'll be grateful. And you'll be thrilled with all the media coverage you receive.

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