
4 ORAL PRESENTATION TO THE PUBLIC: THE PRESS CONFERENCE

C A Nascimento

The Press Conference is a familiar exercise used by any public relations practitioner to obtain exposure in the mass media for whatever subject, idea or product is being promoted for public acceptance or consumption.

This workshop is particularly concerned, we know, with the problem of the scientist disseminating information "to specialists, to administrators and to the general public". The Press Conference is a tool for reaching the general public, and, whether it is concerned with the dissemination of scientific information, promoting a political cause, or selling the image of an industrial complex, the techniques employed and the methodology to be pursued vary very little, if at all.

Walter Lippman once observed that "we do not first see and then define, we define first and then see". Lippman's observation points to a very fundamental problem in public communications and is germane to the successful planning of a press conference, simply that we must seek to put ourselves in the shoes of our audience before we seek to communicate and having done that then attempt to prepare what we wish to communicate.

Put another way by another renowned communicator, "the greatest problem of communications is the illusion that it has been achieved".

The Press Conference generally obtains for us exposure in the mass media, providing we have something worthwhile to say, because it conveniently assembles journalists and broadcasters in a single place and arranges for them to be placed on a face to face basis with whoever is communicating the message. It is, probably, therefore, the best way to obtain direct contact with the media. But guaranteeing exposure in the media is not guaranteeing communication with the public.

Lest there be any doubt what is meant by communication, I think we can settle here for a one-word definition: "understanding".

In essence, we are seeking to share what we have to say with our audience in a manner that is likely to attract their attention and hopefully win their assent. If we succeed in having our audience understand us and through understanding establish a common bond with them, we will have communicated.

It is important, therefore, to define our audience, and the reporters attending the press conference are not our audience, our audience is the variety of publics we wish to reach.

Our approach to a press conference, therefore, ought to be exactly the same as an approach to a total public relations exercise.

When we plan a press conference the following steps are recommended: -

1. We must define our objectives. But in order to avoid defining first and seeing afterwards, our objective must relate, not merely to the message we have in mind, but to the publics involved and the attitude changes expected.
2. Following from (1) we must validate our objectives by researching, as best we can, attitudes held and opinions expressed by the publics we wish to reach on the subjects or issues we intend to raise at the press conference. From this research, we ought to be able to arrive at the questions which are going to require answers.
3. Having done our research and interpreted it, we may wish to re-orient or modify our preliminary objectives.
4. A full-fledged, indepth discussion must then take place on the strategies to be employed at the press conference, and this must take into account such variables as the nature of the media we are dealing with, the credibility of the central figure at the press conference and the organisation which he or she represents, the nature of the original message, possible group interaction amongst journalists and broadcasters in attendance and, if appropriate, the identification of a theme or symbol for the press conference.

Even a successfully organised press conference and an accurately reported one, obtaining maximum exposure in the media is likely only to result in bringing about public awareness of the subject of the press conference, and at best, public interest and possibly public evaluation.

Trial of the idea or product and adoption or acceptance is seldom if ever achieved through the medium of a press conference. Other forms of communication utilisation and other channels will have to be organised to complete the communications process.

There are some relevant communication fundamentals that we might bear in mind when planning a press conference, and they are often forgotten by the very best public relations

practitioners.

1. First, we must beware of "media seduction". The public word printed or broadcast or filmed is not necessarily evidence of either audience exposure or acceptance, as I have already implied.

2. We need to be aware of a phenomenon in communication described as "selective perception". People will do certain things in accordance with their psychological or structural set:-

- (a) People will avoid exposure to material which is in direct conflict with entrenched attitudes.
- (b) People will distort messages they receive to adjust them to their own attitudes.
- (c) People will accept and retain only that part of the message which is readily compatible with their held attitude or a major decision which they have already taken.

3. When researching attitudes, we should know that "opinions" expressed by people are often "reflections", not necessarily "expressions" of a held attitude.

4. Rational appeals or presentations (to which the scientists in particular is attracted) do not always guarantee successful communication. False perceptions are not always rectified by straightforward exposure to facts, though communications sociologists generally hold the view that the more "intelligent" the audience, the greater the likelihood of a rational presentation or appeal succeeding.

5. In certain circumstances, presentation of the "truth" can result in outright rejection.

6. The scientist as indeed the politician, may seek to communicate matters which arouse fear. Communications which arouse fear and which provide no adequate relief or some reassurance, rather than resulting in maximum response, invariably motivates an audience to minimise the importance of the threat. Scientists dealing with impending public disasters please note.

I have mentioned credibility of the speaker at a press conference, in passing, but let us never forget that the message which seeks to persuade will be successful only to the degree that the audience is convinced that its source is reliable and trustworthy and that the persuader is generally committed to the welfare of the audience.

It is my understanding of the purpose of this workshop, that in discussing with you the press conference under the general heading of oral presentation to the public, I should not involve myself in the techniques of public speaking. However, for the scientist who finds himself in a position of

having to communicate through the medium of a press conference. it is important that he attempts to master the art of public speaking.

There are many books on public speaking, but perhaps one of the best I have read is called "Selected Readings in Public Speaking" by Jane Blakenship and Robert Wilhoit.

In their book, Blankenship and Wilhoit make, I think, a basic and very valuable observation which ought to encourage those whose profession is science to mount the public platform without too great a degree of trepidation. Their contention is, that there is not too great a difference between conversation and public speech, since "there is practically nothing true of public speaking that may not be true, at times, of conversation, and nothing true of conversation that might not be true of public speaking."

At a press conference, the closer the speaker comes to conversational delivery, the closer he is likely to come to achieving rapport with his immediate audience.

Perhaps a few observations are in order in respect to actual preparation of a press conference as opposed to planning the press conference.

Generally, people who hold press conferences often make the mistake of annoying the journalists present by making too long an opening statement. No more than five minutes is recommended.

The speaker at the press conference, unless he is exceptionally brilliant and possesses a magnificent memory, must prepare himself by rehearsing the press conference with his advisers, technical officers, etc., preferably the day before the press conference.

The rehearsal session should result in the speaker being able to anticipate every question that is likely to be asked at the press conference so that an agreed, prepared answer is available.

The best way to deal with the rehearsal is to have it minuted in detail so that the speaker can brief himself appropriately prior to the holding of the press conference.

Journalists are generally sensitive people, given to standing on their pride and the more widespread their reputation, the more "prima donna" their behaviour. Since that is the case, with few exceptions, the press conference must be scheduled, timed and programmed down to the last minute so as not to waste the time of the journalist or in any way make him or her feel used.

Invite the media representatives to be present and seated (comfortably) no more than ten minutes before the conference is due to begin, but insist on discipline. Late journalists should not be permitted to enter once the conference has begun.

A senior person, close to the speaker, should welcome the journalists, show them to their seats and seek to establish as informal an atmosphere as possible.

If the speaker is to be accompanied by advisers, they should be seated at least five minutes before the speaker himself enters the conference room.

It is advisable for the speaker to arrive about two minutes before the press conference is scheduled to start, obtain voice levels promptly, if necessary, perhaps exchange a few pleasantries with the journalists present, submit to photographs and begin the opening statement on time.

In inviting questions at the conference, the speaker should be positive about the reporter whose turn it is to ask the question and should make sure that as many reporters as possible are afforded the opportunity to ask questions within the time limit available.

If the press conference is being filmed or broadcast it is useful if each reporter identifies himself by name and his organisation prior to asking his question.

It is advisable not to allow a press conference to last longer than 45 minutes. It is traditional that journalists be informed of the intended length of the press conference and that the senior reporter present bring the press conference to an end at the appropriate time by thanking the speaker.