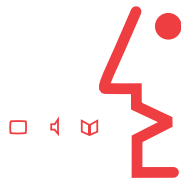


Can We Talk Off the Record?

Resolving Disagreements, Increasing Understanding Between Reporters and Public Relations Practitioners

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

There can be disagreement—sometimes strong disagreement—about how and when media sources should conduct “off the record” interviews with reporters. Some public relations practitioners see the value in this technique; others say it should never be used (with some even going so far as to claim there is no such thing as off the record).

This research was undertaken to help shed light and, to the extent possible, begin to resolve those disagreements. In addition, the report aims to increase understanding between journalists and public relations practitioners.

As a baseline, it must be acknowledged, even by those public relations practitioners antagonistic toward off the record interviews, that the practice is very real, as evidenced by its long-standing tradition as part of the media relations toolkit. Those who ignore this reality are depriving themselves and their spokespeople and clients of a potentially valuable tool.

Some of the findings are hardly surprising. For instance, there is a lack of consistent definition of off the record. Indeed, there is much blurring of lines over such journalistic terms of art as off the record, “on background,” and “not for attribution.”

An additional expected finding: Trust about the use of off the record is fragile. Public relations practitioners, for example, tell us that reporters sometimes break pledges to keep material off the record. No reporters, on the other hand, admit to violating such confidences.

The research also unearthed some rather unexpected discoveries. First, even those who argue against speaking off the record have evidently used the tactic at some point. Second, public relations practitioners with a journalistic background see far more value in utilizing off the record interviews than their colleagues who lack reporting experience. This finding may be most useful in helping to increase the understanding between journalists and public relations practitioners if those with a reporting background can be persuaded to help educate their colleagues who are inexperienced in the ways of a newsroom.

The essence of this report rests with 10 recommendations set forth in an attempt to help achieve the goals noted above. An outline of those 10 recommendations:

- 1) Keep media interviews on the record unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.
- 2) Develop and adhere to recommended standard definitions of off the record and other media relations techniques.
- 3) Distribute those definitions to reporters, public relations practitioners, and to professional organizations to which they belong in an effort to achieve greater consistency and to minimize misunderstanding.
- 4) Educate public relations practitioners, especially those with no media experience, on both the meaning and the value of conducting interviews off the record when warranted.
- 5) Enter into off the record arrangements only with trustworthy reporters and sources.
- 6) Agree to ground rules before beginning an interview.
- 7) Ensure that both parties explicitly agree to abide by the ground rules.
- 8) Confirm that both parties are empowered by their organizations to enforce the confidentiality of off the record interviews.
- 9) Negotiate ground rules before every interview, even if simply renewing the conversation after a short break.
- 10) Refrain from using such canards as “there is no such thing as off the record” or “off the record is a lie.”

It is hoped that the above recommendations will help lead to the twin purposes outlined above: 1) Begin to resolve disagreements over the use of off the record and 2) increase understanding between journalists and public relations practitioners.

About the Author

Ed Barks works with corporate and association executives who need a magnetic message and sharp communications skills, and with public affairs and public relations experts who counsel their bosses and clients.

Ed is the author of *[The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations](#)* and has written the training guides *Face the Press with Confidence: The Media Interview Companion* and *Winning at the Witness Table: 60 Tips to Terrific Testimony*. He is also the former "Speaking Sense" columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*.



His media training and presentation skills clients say 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!"

As President of Barks Communications since its founding in 1997, Ed has guided more than 3000 business leaders, association executives, government officials, non-profit leaders, physicians, athletes, entertainers, and public relations staff toward a sharper message and enhanced communications skills.

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