

## 3.2.4: Press Conferences

### Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the purpose of a press conference.
2. Discuss how to prepare and conduct a press conference.

Holding a press conference when you are unprepared can feel like standing in front of a firing squad, where all the journalists are armed so no one will carry the guilt of the winning shot. It can make you nervous, scared, and reluctant to speak at all. It can take your fear of a misquote, or a stumble, or a misstatement replayed across the Internet thousands of times in the next twenty-four hours and make you wish for a blindfold and a cigarette, but that won't help. The way to calm your nerves is to be confident in your material. This section discusses the press conference, from preparation to execution (pun intended).

A [press conference](#) is a presentation of information to the media. It normally involves a written statement that is read exactly as written and is followed by questions and answers. The press conference normally requires a seasoned representative of the company or business with established credibility and integrity. It also requires a sense of calm in the confidence that you know your material, know how to tactfully say you don't know or don't wish to comment, and a sense of humor to handle the "gotcha" questions.

Press conferences can be held for positive news like the announcement of a new hospital wing that will increase the health care services available to the community. It can also be held to clarify information regarding the CEO's trip to Chile with an alleged mistress, the recent law enforcement sting operation on the illegal sale of controlled substances from the hospital, or to announce the layoff of employees as part of a reduction in force.

Positive or negative, your role as a speaker at a press conference is to deliver the prepared message and to represent the business or organization in a professional manner. You understand that there may be moments of tension, but you also know you have a choice in how to respond. First we'll examine preparation, then discuss the actual press conference.

You should have a good reason for holding a press conference. Wasting the media's time on a frivolous issue will only set you up for challenges later on. You should also have a brief prepared statement that you will read and restate if necessary. Today's press conference messages are often drafted by someone in public relations or media, and reviewed by legal counsel when warranted. If the task falls to you, keep it short and simple, addressing the following:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- How?
- Why?

As a follow-up to why the press conference needs to occur in the first place, you need to consider the location. If it is a ribbon-cutting ceremony, the choice is obvious. If the announcement is less than positive, and you've been instructed by your supervisors or counsel to not offer additional remarks, you'll want a podium strategically located next to a stage exit. Your press release or invitation to the media will contain the time, date, and location of the press conference, and may contain a title or subject line as well as contact information for follow-up information.

As you prepare your background materials, learning as much as needed for the announcement, you may also want to consider using a moderator. Perhaps that will be your role as you introduce senior management to read the prepared statement. A moderator can serve to influence the process and redirect if questions go off topic or if a transition is needed. A moderator can also call a formal close the press conference and thank everyone for attending.

Finally, visual aids are an excellent way to reinforce and communicate your message. They need to be big, they need to be relevant (not just decorative), and (from a technical standpoint) they need to work. If they will be projected onto a screen, make sure the screen is available (not stuck), the laptop has power (as well as battery backup), the presentation or visual aid is on the laptop, and that the projector can and does project what you want it to. Don't forget sound equipment if necessary, and make sure everything works the day of the presentation.

## Holding a Press Conference

Someone should be designated as the greeter for the media. Be ready at least fifteen minutes before the scheduled time of the event. Provide each member of the media with a print copy of the actual statement that will be read before or after the event. If there is an element of surprise, you may want to hold the copies of the statement back until after the press conference has been concluded, but otherwise distributing them beforehand is standard.

The moderator opens the press conference with a welcome, indicates the purpose of the press conference and reminds everyone that there will (or will not) be an opportunity for questions following the press conference. The moderator introduces the spokesperson who will read the statement and welcomes him or her to the podium. The moderator may need to assist with sound equipment but otherwise stands back but near the speaker.

The speaker will read the statement. If there are to be no questions, the moderator will retake the podium and indicate that press kits, containing background material, fact sheets, the news release, sample photos, or related materials will be available; or simply indicate that copies of the press release are available at the back of the room. If there are questions, the moderator may still take the podium and outline ground rules for questions such as: they should pertain to the subject, be brief, and may or may not include follow-up questions. Members of the media will often ask a question and state that they have a follow-up question as a way of reserving two turns.

The moderator may indicate which member of the media is to ask a question, and typically they will stand and address the speaker directly. The speaker can take notes, but this isn't common. Instead, they should be aware that every movement is being recorded and that by maintaining eye contact, they are demonstrating that they are listening. They may reiterate the statement from the press release or refer to the background material, but should limit the scope of their response. Your team may have anticipated several questions and the speaker may have several sound bites ready to deliver. Visual media will want it visual, audio will want clarity, and print will want descriptive quotes. Meet the needs of your audience as you deliver your message.

Invariably the “gotcha” question, or the question that attempts to catch the speaker off guard, will be asked. “We’re not ready to discuss the matter at this time,” “When more information becomes available we will let you know,” “Our company has no position on that issue,” or “We’re not prepared to speculate on that issue at this time” are all common response phrases. Don’t use “I think,” “I believe,” or “I don’t know” comments as they invite speculation, and refrain from “no comment” if at all possible as it is increasingly perceived as if the company or representative is “hiding something.”

You want to appear professional, knowledgeable, and credible—not as if you are sneaking or hiding something. Don’t display a nonverbal gesture or make a face at a question, as this can also be misinterpreted. Keep your poise and balance at all times, and if you are the speaker and the question puts you off, establish eye contact with the moderator. Their role is to step in and they may move to the conclusion.

Never say anything you wouldn’t want the world to hear, as microphones are increasingly powerful, video captures lips movement, and there will be a communication professional available to analyze your nonverbal gestures on the evening news. Being cool, calm, and collected is the best policy whether you are delivering positive or negative news.

## Key Takeaway

A press conference is an important presentation of information that requires you to anticipate questions and prepare possible responses.

## Exercises

Your role as spokesperson is to write and present a prepared statement, and respond to no less than five questions. You will select one of the scenarios below based on your birth month, and prepare your statement. You are allowed to improve on facts, but should recognize that each scenario is serious and treat the assignment with professionalism.

### 1. January—Healthcare, Inc.

A hacker illegally accessed thousands of the new digital health care records on file with Healthcare, Inc. and posted them directly to the Internet in an early morning protest against invasion of privacy. The hacker has not been identified, but local law enforcement is on the scene investigating the incident and the offending Web sites have been taken offline. Your company has received hundreds of calls concerning the incident. The federal government required the conversion to digital records last year, and your company complied with the order. Your company used a government-approved vendor for a no-bid installation of hardware and software to secure the digital records. You represent Healthcare, Inc.

## 2. February—Educational Services, Inc.

Half the senior class in your private magnet high school cheated on the graduation exam, and the rest were apparently aware of the cheating, as were many of the parents. An employee, a secretary with several employee passwords, allegedly gained access to the exam before its release and provided the questions and responses to her son, who then provided it to his friends. The employee was often provided login names and passwords to facilitate records processing for several administrators when they were off site, often at conferences. Headquarters wants to minimize the publicity but cannot in good faith issue diplomas to students who cheated. The employee has been dismissed for conduct, and an investigation is underway, but graduation is next week and the evidence against the cheating seniors is clear. They won't be receiving their diplomas unless they pass an alternate version of the test that won't be ready for sixty days. You represent Educational Services, Inc.

### Exercises (cont.)

## 3. March—Software, Inc.

Your company recently released its latest version of a popular business and industry software program. Programs always have a few bugs or problems upon release, even after the most rigorous laboratory testing, but this program is apparently infested with bugs. Stories are popping up across the Internet about how the program doesn't work, or specific features don't work, and your customer service team has been responding to customer complaints. The software designers report it is an exaggeration to say "infested," and point out that in all the trial tests it has worked perfectly. Your company is working on finding and addressing the issues, and is ready to create patch programs and issue refunds if necessary, but wants to prevent a recall and a loss of consumer confidence. You represent Software, Inc.

## 4. April—Electric Company, Inc.

An employee was consuming alcohol on the job and failed to adjust the voltage regulator. The voltage was increased by a considerable amount, causing several house fires, significant loss of property (appliances) and the death of an eleven-year-old child. The local media interviewed the employee's spouse who stated the employee was working a double shift, that they had called someone to relieve them, and no one came. Your company is investigating, but has no new information. You represent Electric Company, Inc.

## 5. May—Online Market, Inc.

An online marketplace company has been accused by law enforcement of knowingly allowing users to sell stolen goods on their Web site. Since the company never handles any of the goods themselves, and simply facilitates the exchange of goods between buyer and seller via the short-term creation of a Web page with text and images provided by the seller, the company denies all responsibility. You represent Online Market, Inc.

## 6. June—ABC Engineering, Inc.

A 4.2-million-dollar, two-lane bridge recently completed collapsed into the local Blue River, taking with it three vehicles. The loss of life included four men, three women, and one unborn baby. Local media has interviewed workers who indicated they were rushed to complete the bridge to get a bonus for the construction firm. The construction firm indicates that their internal investigation points to a faulty design, but the architects, engineers, and government inspectors deny the charge. You represent ABC Engineering.

## 7. July—Package Delivery, Inc.

A class-action lawsuit has been filed in federal court against Package Delivery, Inc. A group of employees, all female, allege sexual harassment and discriminatory promotion practices against the company. They cite photos and calendars of a sexual nature hung in the workplace and allege that male colleagues with less seniority were promoted ahead of the female workers. You represent Package Delivery, Inc.

## 8. August—Hamburgers, Inc.

Hamburgers, Inc. is pleased to announce a new menu practice where the nutritional information and the calorie counts will be prominently displayed, helping consumers make healthy choices from the menu. Your supervisors have heard that there may be representatives of the Cow Liberation Group (which advocates vegetarianism) and several nutritionists (who perceive the company has not done enough to improve its products) at the press conference. You represent Hamburgers, Inc.

## 9. September—Headache Pills, Inc.

A person in New York died of cyanide poisoning, supposedly after taking a 200-mg Headache Pill made by your company. Your headache pills come in sealed, tamper-resistant packaging with child-proof protective caps. Some stores are voluntarily taking your product off the market. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has announced an investigation, and the family of the person who died has threatened to sue. You represent Headache Pills, Inc.

10. October—Maisy Mayflower, Star Actress

You represent Maisy Mayflower as her spokesperson. She has recently returned from Bolivia where she adopted a two-year-old child. She already has three adopted children representing several countries. She is not married. Upon her return, a man claiming to be the child's father came forward to the media in La Paz, Bolivia protesting the adoption, and the U.S. media has picked up on it. It is all over the Internet. The Bolivian government issued a statement that while they cannot confirm the legitimacy of his claim, the father of the child did not present himself at court during the announced hearing, nor did he present himself in the six months preceding the adoption. The child was legally declared abandoned, and legally adopted. You represent Maisy Mayflower.

11. November—Fast Food Restaurants, Inc.

A customer reported finding a severed human fingertip in soup purchased from Fast Food Restaurants, Inc. The soup and sandwich package was purchased at a Fast Food Restaurant as a take-out order. Your company has several quality controls in place to prevent accidents like this. Local law enforcement is investigating. The customer has taken pictures and posted them all over the Web, and made both libelous and slanderous comments against your company in media interviews and blogs. The customer has never been an employee of Fast Food Restaurants or its affiliates. You represent Fast Food Restaurants, Inc.

12. December—Congressman “Honest” Abe Johnson.

The honorable Congressman from the State of Denial was apprehended in Ecuador for solicitation of a minor. The local media reports that a young girl approached him when he was with his traveling group and he offered to take a picture of her. The mother appeared, spoke to him, and slapped him in the face. She says the congressman offered her money for time alone with her daughter. The congressman stated to local law enforcement, according to a conversation with his spouse from jail, that all he did was compliment her on her daughter, something like “what a fine daughter you have,” in his best Spanish. You represent the Congressman.

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