I. Credibility and Your Audience

A core goal of media relations is persuasively conveying a message with integrity and authority to an audience. There are other goals, to be sure, which will be addressed, but the preeminence of this goal is unsurpassed. Since the essence of media relations is persuasively communicating a message, it is helpful to draw upon Aristotle’s three appeals or modes of persuasion stated in his Rhetoric—ethos, logos and pathos—to give insight and awareness into the persuasion process.

Logos, Greek for ‘word,’ refers to the facts, the content, the internal consistency of the message, the statement itself. Logic, reason and evidence are, in theory but not always, the basis for the appeal to an audience.

Pathos, meaning suffering or experience, is often connoted as an emotional appeal to an audience, but the concept of emotion is too limited. Pathos incorporates concepts of empathy, sympathy, imagination, and bias, prejudice and similar characteristics. Pathos creates a binding or sympathetic feeling with the audience that logic and reason alone would not achieve. Nazi propaganda and the image of the Volk are classic examples of pathos, as are appeals based on racial or economic stereotypes.

Ethos, Greek for ‘character,’ is the third of Aristotle’s appeals or modes of persuasion. Ethos refers to the trustworthiness or credibility of the speaker. Ethos dictates the composition of the speaker’s logos and pathos. What the speakers accepts as facts or rejects as facts in the logos or how information is communicated through pathos directly determines the character, the credibility, indeed, the ethical content, of the speaker. Thus, every athlete should understand that ethos is you: what you stand for; what kind of arguments you make and what kind of arguments you refuse to make. I assert that ethos is the most critical appeal in the public relations context.

The prudent athlete will use Aristotle’s three appeals for persuasion to enhance self-evaluation regarding his or her words—what should be said and what should not be said—just as the athlete critically evaluates every aspect of his or her shooting mechanics and mental training.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS IS A UNIQUE HUMAN CHARACTERISTIC, motivated and compelled by forces embedded deep within one’s character, world view and soul. Answering questions illuminates how we interact with the world. In the movie of that name, Shrek pointed out that ogres have layers. So does answering questions. The process incorporates complex layers of skill, including the capacity for factual analysis, moral reasoning, humility, discipline, knowledge and wisdom.

This three-part article presents several skills and perspectives in the context of media relations relating to athletes in the shooting sports. I emphasize, however, that the article’s themes and methods transcend media relations and are transferable to every interaction in life.
In media relations, knowing your audience is imperative. You must be astute and analytical: the reporter from Clay Shooting USA asking about the people who were influential in your shooting success represents an audience different from a hostile reporter who tries to get you to concede that civilians do not need assault rifles.

Note that the different topics of the above two questions will likely justify different applications of the three modes of persuasion in order to be credible to the audiences. To be credible in the first example, you may be inclined toward openness and identification and a desire to share knowledge and history. However, due to an array of factors, in the second example your answer may be very circumspect or you might elect not to answer the question at all. It is crucial to understand that your integrity and character are more important than persuading anyone regarding the merits of your opinions.

The accurate identification of the audience is critical for determining trust, solidifying an existing relationship or creating a new one. Keep in mind that the person asking the question is not your audience. Your audience is the readership of the publication, the Internet, the readers of tweets and Facebook posts and so on. As elite competitive shooters, you also have other audiences: your team; your sport; your shooting programs such as the Olympic shooting programs and, indeed, your country. That’s a lot of weight, and increasing the tonnage on your backs is the reality that your sport is viewed with a frown by segments of the public.

Be aware of this significant point: you have control over your words and actions but you have no control over how the media will communicate your words and actions. The media can edit, distort and unethically omit facts and present you in a deceiving context. Think of Winston Churchill’s quip that a lie will have traveled around the world before the truth gets out of bed. Control can be increased, however, by prudent selectivity in the information you give to each audience.

II. Know Your Goals and Purposes

It is fundamental that engaging credibly with the media requires clarity of purposes and goals. Extending beyond your purposes and having unfocused or unrealistic goals are paths to losing your credibility. In the movie Magnum Force, the iconic Harry “Dirty Harry” Callahan stated, “A man’s got to know his limitations.” That’s good advice for all of us and it is particularly good advice for dealing with the media. Goals and purposes should have boundaries. Ascertainment of limitations on those boundaries demands introspection, humility and force of will.

I share an example of how behavior and media relations are influenced by knowing the limitations of one’s goals and purposes. A high profile competitive shooter was invited to speak at a gun show. The show’s promoters banned participation from companies that produced or sold assault weapons. Pressure was placed on the competitor to refuse to appear at the gun show.

What to do? My analysis of this situation is intended to illustrate a structure for thinking rather than providing a specific answer. The example will, hopefully, inspire the reader to do what Daniel Wegner calls ‘metacognition,’ which means thinking about thinking. Approach your words with the same precise analysis you give to your targets. Your goal is to transform your mental toughness into rhetorical toughness.

The competitor’s first level of analysis should be clarification of goals and purposes. They are, or should be, the advancement of the shooting sports and providing insight into becoming a champion. None of these goals or purposes is relevant to the assault rifle controversy. Also note that the competitor’s audience encompasses more than those engaged in the assault weapon controversy. The interests of those two audiences, although perhaps overlapping in part, are unlikely to be the same. With preparation, skill and confidence, the competitor can, consistent with the competitor’s purposes and goals, credibly deal with any questions the media may ask regarding assault weapons.

The goals and purposes of the competitor do not include making friends with the media or persuading any or all of the media or any part of the audience that his views should be adopted. It is not the goal of the competitor to opine on all matters relating to firearms. The goals do demand, however, that the speaker act in a way that commands respect, which is significantly different from being liked. To accomplish that goal, the competitor must stay focused sand be credible, respectful and confident.

III. Listen

Just as you cannot hit a target unless you focus on it, you cannot competently engage with the media unless you listen to the questions posed to you. The instruction to listen may sound obvious to the point of silliness, but the skill of listening is one of the most often ignored and undervalued any communicator can possess. Any trial court judge will tell you that one of the greatest deficiencies in lawyers is their inability to listen.
Lawyers tend to be so focused on the next question, the next theme, the next line of attack, that they do not listen to and thereby fail to absorb the impact of the answers given to their questions. Thus they do not make adjustments in their questions that would lead to extracting more productive information.

Listening is a difficult skill. Listening, as opposed to merely hearing, requires focus, analysis, preparation, self-control, knowledge, an agile intellect and a sense of where you want to go. Useful listening requires goals and purposes. Listening is analogous to the distinction made by clay target shooters between seeing and vision. Seeing is a sensory impulse where the brain acknowledges something is noticed: take a look—the target is by the tree!

Vision, on the other hand, is the integration of many stimuli analyzed by the brain: where the target is going; its flight path, velocity, distance and where the target is most susceptible to being hit. Just as the brain integrates data through vision, the mind must integrate data by listening.

Listening can disclose the tone, the values, the biases, the assumptions and the traps to be set, if any, by the person asking the question. The question “when did you take up target shooting?” is different in ideology and values from the question “when did you begin using weapons?”

Careful analysis from listening can disclose opportunities to elaborate or enhance your message. For example, assume you are asked, “Did you suffer a loss of confidence when your gun was stolen and you had to borrow a gun?” If you listen superficially and deductively, you might give this answer: “No, not really. The borrowed gun fit the same.”

But if you listen analytically and with imagination, you will be aware that the simplistic question actually incorporates complex issues regarding the foundation for confidence and your ability to sustain confidence under adverse circumstances. This recognition opens the door to an answer richly endowed with facts and emotions that will enhance your persuasiveness. Thus, you might reply: “No loss of confidence occurred. I trained every day; I shot under difficult circumstances; I worked on my mechanics and my mental game. I visualized, weight-lifted and prepared. So, no, using a different gun did not shake my confidence at all.”

It is fundamental that engaging credibly with the media requires clarity of purposes and goals. Extending beyond your purposes and having unfocused or unrealistic goals are paths to losing your credibility.
These dramatically different answers to the same question will impact differently an audience’s perception of your ethos, logos and pathos. While both answers are accurate, the second will greatly enhance your credibility and elevate your stature with the media.

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Following is an excerpt from Michael Sabbeth’s book, “The Good, The Bad & The Difference. How to talk With Children about Values” –

As they further ponder the values that underlie their selections, children say they respect people that impacted them directly, such as a doctor that saved their life or the life of a friend or family member. As the minutes in class tick by, children increasingly acknowledge that the people they respect the most and view as heroes are the people that help them every day, their parents.

Parents are the folks that sacrifice for them, devote so much of their lives and resources caring for them, feeding them, clothing them, taking them to soccer practice and music lessons and generally instructing them to be responsible participants in society. “I know they could have more stuff if they didn’t have to raise me,” many a child has said.

But of all the reasons they respect their parents, the most honored is that parents help them become stronger, better people. “They have more experience,” Tulley explained. “They may have made mistakes so they can give advice to help us avoid them.” But it was Samantha, a second grader, who described parents’ highest virtue. “Parents teach us how to live right.”
Be judicious in choosing the most effective response or presentation under the circumstances.

Be Aware Of How An Issue Is Framed

You’ve heard, no doubt, the cynical question, “Are you still beating your wife?” Note the framing of the issue: it makes the assumption that the person beat his wife in the past. Framing issues is one of the most powerful tools or skills in communications, including media relations.

Framing issues is a function of rhetoric and linguistic strategy. As a general proposition, the person who frames the issue controls the language and the person who controls the language usually is most persuasive and usually wins the argument. A shooter at the Olympic Center posed this intriguing question to me: How can a competitor deal with the accusation of or suggestion of choking? An accusatory question might be phrased this way: “You were ahead by three targets going into the last station, and then you dropped four and lost. How do you explain that?”

Choking is not considered a virtue. The accusation is a slight, indeed, an insult. How should you, in the context of media relations, deal with such an aggressive accusation? Handling an allegation of choking or some similar charge begins with analyzing the framing of the question, which means the question’s assumptions, values and judgments. The pre-condition for this analysis, is, of course, critical

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listening.

The framing of the question assumes that the failure to win or to sustain a lead is the consequence of a physical and or mental failure and that additionally, the failure could have been avoided had the competitor been more focused or disciplined. The accusation equates imperfection with a mental or physical defect.

The athlete should be aware that the demeaning question is not intended to elevate her stature or to honor the accomplishments that enabled her to be in the position to win in the first place. You can’t ‘choke’ if you’re sitting in the bleachers. The question is cheap rhetoric, most likely made by a person of trivial achievement who, in Teddy Roosevelt’s words in his “The Battle of Life,” is one of those “cold and timid souls who have tasted neither victory nor defeat.”

The overarching rule in dealing with an accusation of this ilk is never allow anyone to hurt or demean you. Never. Several skills are available to deflect the offensive question. You can assert analogies that demonstrate the absurdity of the question. For example, did quarterbacks Tom Brady or Peyton Manning ‘choke’ in the 2013 NFL playoffs because they didn’t win ‘the big one?’ The absurdity of the question is self-evident. Another skill is to appeal to facts, the logos, that will undermine the implication. At your level of competition, the concept of ‘choking’ is self-refuting.

Just being in the competition is conclusive evidence of such extraordinary skill and discipline that the charge is rightly viewed as nonsensical. In my example, the winner hit one target more than the person being questioned. Does that mean the winner also choked but only one less time? That response reduces the accusation to silliness. Deflection is another technique for constructing a response. The interviewee can reply: “The winner is an outstanding competitor and today was his / her day.”

The larger point the reader should grasp is that even if ‘choking’ exists and even if you did it, allowing someone to tattoo you with that charge does not advance your interests. Worse, it transfers undeserved power to the person asking the question: the power to cause you to be seen in unflattering terms. Don’t let it happen.

Give The Best Available Of All Answers

Aristotle asserts in his Rhetoric that a speaker should make the best of all available arguments. That means the speaker should be aware of the many arguments that could be made but selects the best one in the context of the facts, the biases and prejudices of the audience and the speaker’s skill, character and reputation. The same principles apply in media relations: be ju-
When the media interaction tip toes beyond your focus and purpose, limiting the scope of your answer is justified. This is the classic example where less is more. You have no obligation to share your thoughts on every topic or on any topic. The transcendent lesson is that you must maintain control of the interaction. Say what is minimally appropriate and no more.

The prudent person engaged with the media knows that all media depends almost entirely on text messaging, brief and often poorly crafted Internet blogs and selective sound bites. You are advised, therefore, to think beyond your words and train yourself to continuously think how your words might be interpreted and misinterpreted. Remember, your words are you! They illuminate your character. Be judicious and be skilled.

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Be Strategic

We all fight wars - in our work, within our families and abroad in the wider world. Each of us struggles every day to define and defend our sense of purpose and integrity, to justify our existence on the planet and to understand, if only with in our own hearts, who we are and what we believe in.

“The Warrior Ethos,” Steven Pressfield

You must be strategic in your media interactions. Being strategic requires a state of mind that focuses every word and action on achieving your goals. Strategies are results oriented. Being strategic involves, most significantly, developing a positive perception of yourself and mastering the verbal and behavior skills that persuasively project that perception which is actualized through your character, intellect and achievement. You project your qualities through a combination of attitudes, purposes, self-discipline and by choices made and by choices rejected.

Strategy is, first of all, a state of mind, because a strategist is relentlessly results oriented. Think of your strategy as a driving force that establishes your brand. Your media strategy, as do your competition strategies, should, thus, organize, energize, give direction to and advance your personal brand. You want your media experience to add value to you and to your sport. You want to establish yourself as a thoughtful person who takes issues seriously and who takes yourself seriously.

Be Ruthlessly Analytical

Excellent media relations demand that you be ruthlessly analytical of yourself and of the topics under discussion. The great athlete is intensely self-critical of his or her performance, training and improvement. Every aspect of the shotgun competitor’s mechanics, for example, must be scrupulously examined, evaluated and, if necessary, amended or eliminated.

As success is achieved through the self-examination of your shooting techniques and mental training, your ability to analyze your words will determine the success of your media experience. Every word and phrase must be critically examined in terms of advancing your message, brand and character.

Here’s an example of a question that can be handled effectively or incompetently depending on how it is analyzed and how that analysis contours your response. I offer this example because this type of question is quite common—listen to political pundit interviews and the White House press corps—and it pro-
vides an opportunity to usefully apply several important media skills.

Assume you are asked: “Are you concerned about the negative image guns can have?” Remember your goal to be strategic in your answer requires that you carefully analyze the question and that you be painstakingly analytical in crafting your answer.

Let’s examine and deconstruct this question. It asks if you are concerned about something. We first note that being concerned is a vacuous and useless criteria for evaluating human behavior. Being ‘concerned’ is cheap sentiment that has no cost. Nothing has ever been accomplished just because someone was ‘concerned.’ Thus it is both stunning and lamentable that so many media people ask that type of foolish question. Nevertheless, you have to reply, so what are you going to say?

You must repel the powerful tendency to offer a complex answer to a silly or empty question. Be strategic and analytical. One appropriate answer is, “Yes, I am concerned.” No doubt you realize that such an answer is as vacuous as the question and does not advance your strategic purpose of supplying useful information. Moreover, the answer does not advance the ethics and character of the shooting sports because it affirms your concern about their negative attributes.

If you can discipline yourself to be strategic and analytical, you can lucidly see that this moronic question provides an opportunity for you to shine like a rock star because you can counteract the negative part of the question and weave into your answer the many uplifting virtues of your sport. You can talk about the virtuous behavior of preparing to excel, for example. Rather than allowing the question to place you on the defensive, use the question to address the positive attributes of the shooting disciplines.

Here are suggested answers that are entirely responsive and appropriate, and illustrate how you take control of the issue and you define the terms of the communication. You can say something like: “I am not concerned with whatever negative images guns might have. Negative images are a superficial point of view. I am concerned about how the manipulation of gun issues undermines people’s abilities to enjoy the shooting sports inhibits people from learning about self-defense.”

I’m not saying my answer is perfect, but I am confident you get the point. In this way, in a kind of verbal judo, you have transformed a silly attacking question into an opportunity to affirm positive aspects of the shooting sports.

Apply to Media the Skills That Brought Your Shooting Success

“The most powerful person is he who has himself in his own power.” Seneca (5BC-65 AD)

You know what it took to get you onto the winner’s podium or to bring about your improvement. Apply those same skills to your engagement with the media. Here are a few skills and, as you think about them, I am confident other skills will come to mind.

Be prepared. Just as you clean your shotgun and study the flight patterns of targets, think about questions you likely will be asked. Anticipate questions, just as you anticipate targets. Visualize your answers to all kinds of questions. Imagine how you will phrase answers and comments. Practice your answers, particularly if you anticipate a hostile environment.

If you think you don’t know what you would say when asked a specific question, then your default position is chaos and disorganization. Study other media events to familiarize yourself with what you are likely to experience. Talk to your colleagues; read interviews of your peers; think actively in terms of what you want to say to your audiences rather than seeing yourself as a passive respondent to someone else’s desires, strategies and agendas.

A Few General Rules

“In life, as in dance, grace glides on blistered feet.”

Alice Abrams

Don’t get into debates. Extraordinary skill is required to be an effective debater. It is easy to yell and call names, but to identify the fallacies in an opponent’s argument and to persuade people to your side is, frankly, difficult. Possessing an encyclopedic memory, thorough preparation, the ability to instantly draw upon vast amounts of data from memory and having an exquisitely nimble and agile intellect are the minimum requirements for successfully winning an argument. Few folks have these skills. Even millionaire TV pundits do not, by and large, possess them. Do not engage in a debate or argument unless you are confident you can decimate your opponent in the minds of the relevant audience.

Don’t be sarcastic and, except in the rarest instances, don’t try to be funny. I’ve interviewed dozens of judges in prep-
aration for my presentations on ethics and rhetoric. One point all judges made is that lawyers rarely are able to employ humor or sarcasm to positive effect. Most times they hurt themselves and their clients. These people are trained speakers and they can’t do it. You should not either, unless you know you have the skill to do so in the context of the appropriate audience.

**Damage Control**

In the James Bond movie *The World Is Not Enough*, Q departs by dramatically descending through a gap in the floor as he turns his job over to R. As Q disappears, he says poignantly, “Remember what I’ve taught you, 007. Never let them see you bleed.”

Q’s advice is relevant for all of us. We can stumble, say unartful words, make mistakes and say words we later regret. That is human and unavoidable. What we do after the mistakes and unartful words, however, is a matter of skill, mental toughness and practice. Don’t let your audience, particularly any opponents, ever see you bleed.

One way to minimize an error is... drumroll... admit you made an error. The phrase “I shouldn’t have said that.” can offset a lot of harm. You can explain your misstatement: “I didn’t have all the information.” “I emphasized one fact more than I should have.” “I did not give sufficient attention to this variable.” You can say that you are now more informed on the topic and have presently a more nuanced opinion. And so on. Admitting an error isn’t ‘bleeding;’ it’s showing that you are strong and a person of judgment and character. Do not fall apart and dissemble if you make a media error. Don’t look back. Look to the future and the positive opportunities it presents for you.

Always be respectful and poised. If you cannot be both, then be quiet. Silence will not hurt you; disrespect and lack of self-control can plague your entire career.

There is no shame in not knowing. If you don’t know something, say you don’t know. Don’t falsify or fill in the blanks with guesses and speculation. You can offer the honorable response, “I don’t have enough information to speak knowledgeably on that matter,” or say “No comment.”

Be confident. In every engagement with the media, and, for that matter, with any audience, be confident. Cultivate an air of authority. Always keep in mind that you are being interviewed because of your achievement. You earned the spotlight. Confidence in your words and presentation of yourself develop the same way your confidence as a competitive athlete develops; by focusing on achievement, awareness of your hard work and the aura that you take yourself seriously.

Confidence is manifested, in part, by the firmness and commitment to your beliefs. Don’t be wishy-washy or a squish, which are not a technical terms but have practical value. Also keep in mind that confidence tends to keep the bullies at bay and silences critics who count on insecure people being unable to stand up for their principles.

The media experience offers another venue for you to present yourself in an honorable positive way. Now you can be outstanding through your words, your poise and your wisdom. I wish you well.

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