

# BP'S VERBAL BLUNDERS

Secrets Behind Their Mistakes and How You Can Avoid Being Caught in the Same Trap

by Gerard Braud

**T**HE BP OIL SPILL IN THE Gulf of Mexico should serve as a reason why every executive should consider and re-consider who in their organization should act as a spokesperson. Furthermore, the performance of Tony “I’d like my life back” Hayward, should send every executive and spokesperson rushing out to schedule a media training class. It should, but probably won’t, and here is why...

Denial is one of the strongest of all human emotions. While executives know they may eventually have to talk to the media, they are more comfortable assuming they’ll be okay on the day they have to step up to the microphones. In the world of daily priorities, spending 4-6 hours once a year with a media training coach isn’t even on their radar, although it should be.

**So let’s look at the sins of BP, the long list of verbal blunders by their spokespeople, and how you can avoid making the same mistakes.**

The examination should begin with the question, does the CEO need to be the lead spokesperson in a crisis? A friend of mine in media training circles always says, “the top dog barks first.” I’ve always said no for three reasons.

- 1 First, if the CEO doesn’t have strong verbal skills, they shouldn’t act as the spokesperson.
- 2 Secondly, I would rather see the CEO in the crisis command center managing the crisis team and the company.
- 3 Third, if the CEO misspeaks, there is no one to come behind him or her to clean up their statements, whereas if a lower ranking executive misspeaks, it leaves

room for the CEO to clean up the verbal mess.

Who should serve as the spokesperson in a crisis? In the earliest hours of a crisis, a well trained public relations person should take the lead while the crisis management team moves into place. The next person in line to speak should be a subject matter expert who has been properly media trained and proven to have the verbal skills to communicate effectively and answer negative questions flawlessly.

Should the CEO ever act as spokesperson? Yes. In a short lived crisis, the CEO is my choice for the final news briefing to wrap things up. In a long lived crisis, the CEO can make appearances, but should not try to carry the full burden of being the lead spokesperson. While the media may want the CEO as their live guest, resist the urge to comply. The media mistakenly think the CEO knows everything, can answer every question and is the ultimate authority. While the CEO may ultimately be responsible for the event, that doesn’t mean he or she has complete control of the facts or the ability to communicate those facts effectively. A more effective use of their skills is to oversee the crisis team and manage the parts of the company that are still up and running.

In the case of Tony Hayward, his excessive television appearances were causing serious fatigue. He clearly could not manage the crisis, run the global company and act as the lead spokesperson. That fatigue played out in sloppy comments before the TV cameras, not the least of which was his infamous, “I’d like my life back” comment.

Many companies mistakenly think that spokesperson duties should be doled out sparingly, like handing out keys to the executive washroom. I disagree and suggest spokesperson duties should be more like an NFL team. You should have a first string of super stars, with a

bench full of second string players who can step up at a moment's notice. And while we're on sports analogies, executives should treat media training as athletes approach their sport. The best players and spokespeople are the ones who practice often and have a great coach that they trust. Unfortunately, most executives treat media training like a bucket list. They do it once

Seilhan. The problem with all of BP's commercials is the lack of congruency between the commercial's script and the company's actions. While the commercials say every time oil is reported, crews are dispatched to clean it up, my daily newscasts in New Orleans show local and state officials constantly pointing out areas that have been oiled for days, with no BP crews around.



and then check it off as completed without devotion to developing their skills. Executives have many responsibilities including not just being a good, but a great communicator.

BP has used six people as key spokespeople. CEO Tony Hayward took the lead and performed dismally, resulting in verbal blunders that sent him packing back to England and eventually cost him his job. He clearly failed to realize his skills before the media were lacking.

Next came U.S. CEO Bob Dudley, who strikes me as perhaps too much of an introvert, perhaps too technical, and trying very hard not to say the wrong thing, which results in him looking very uncomfortable every time he is on camera. To his credit, unlike Hayward, he has no major verbal gaffs to his credit.

**I'd like my life back.**

**Tony Hayward**  
May 30, 2010

BP Chairman Carl Henric Swanberg joined Hayward as BP was taken to the U.S. woodshed, otherwise known as the White House. Swanberg told the national media that Hayward was being sent back to Great Britain, in part because of his verbal mistakes. Swanberg then went on to commit his own monumental "lost in translation" gaff by saying BP wants to help the "small people." Like Hayward, he later apologized, but the apology meant little to the people suffering from the spill.

COO Doug Suttles has been BP's only first string spokesperson. He's confident, has great verbal skills, and simplifies complicated issues. He also uses what I often describe as a simple 1-2-3 A-B-C approach to his answers. And, he always adds great perspective.

BP also made an old school, failed attempt to advertise its way out of the crisis, putting Hayward on camera as the key spokesperson. Even President Obama called out BP for wasting money on advertising when those dollars could be spent helping the people of the Gulf.

After the negative feedback, Hayward's commercial was pulled and a new commercial introduced featuring a Gulf Coast native and claims processor Daryl Willis. The commercial is more palatable, but still draws the ire of skeptics.

A second set of commercials feature BP local Keith

### What lessons should executives understand the most?

**Rule 1:** Don't talk to the media; talk to the media's audience. That means dropping the jargon, acronyms and technical terminology. Everything you say needs to be simplified to an 8th grade reading level. Be inclusive of everyone in your audience.

**Rule 2:** The Big IF – If you could attach a dollar to every word you say, would you make money or lose money? What you say to the media affects your bottom line positively or negatively.

**Rule 3:** Talk the way reporters write: Start with the headline, follow with a great quote, then add facts sparingly. Your headline and quote will dictate more of the story's content than all of those facts. If the average TV story is 90 seconds long and the average print story has 36 sentences, why overwhelm the media with facts and figures they'll never use.

**Rule 4:** Know your personality type. Analytical types like engineers, doctors and accountants give too many facts and figures. Introverts are too shy. Emotional types may get off topic.

**Rule 5:** The adage that practice makes perfect is true. Spokespeople should set aside at least one day a year for intense media training and practice. If serving as spokesperson is part of your job description, do it as well as your other duties and find a coach you are comfortable with. Plus, every time, before you walk out to the media, spend time back stage practicing before you address the media, even if you only have 5 minutes.

Your company's reputation, its profits, and your career are on the line when you talk to the media. Will you be better or worse than Tony Hayward? ■

About the Author: Gulf Coast native **Gerard Braud** (Jared Bro) is a world class media training coach, crisis expert and keynote speaker who has improved communications skills for companies on 5 continents. He is the author of "**Don't Talk to the Media: 29 Secrets You Need to Know Before You Open Your Mouth to a Reporter.**" Learn more at: [www.BraudCommunications.com](http://www.BraudCommunications.com)

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