

Who let the dogs out? What they don't teach you about running a news conference

By Lynne Friedmann, APR

The speakers and their companions climbed four polished steps onto an auditorium stage when one suddenly tripped. Reminiscent of a Looney Tunes cartoon, feet became a whirlwind blur in an attempt to regain balance. But the effort failed and the Weimaraner did a face plant on the stairs. Fortunately it wasn't badly hurt.

What on earth was I doing on-stage with a pack of dogs?

The answer: conducting a news briefing on dog genetics, one of more than 300 briefings I presided over in the course of 10 years as a consultant to the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

While there are numerous guidelines available on the nuts and bolts of scheduling a news briefing or press conference, there's little advice on the role of the moderator. Here are some



Lynne Friedmann, APR, opens the floor to reporter questions during a news briefing of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

tried-and-true tips:

Focus speaker attention

Calm speaker jitters by anticipating their concerns and questions. Arrange to meet speaker(s) in a quiet, secluded room 15 to 20 minutes prior to the briefing to instruct them on the route to and from the briefing room, explain any idiosyncrasies of the microphones, determine speaker order if it's a panel discussion and outline the manner in which reporter questions will be handled.

Let them know what materials (water, paper tablets, pens, etc.) are on the speaker table. Remind them that live microphones pick up extraneous sounds such as drumming fingers or clicking pens. By assuring speakers that small and large details are under control, they'll feel under control.

Keep clutter out of the briefing

Encourage speakers to leave briefcases, overcoats and other bulky items in the pre-briefing room (arrange a guard or other security measures). If speakers carry all their gear into the briefing room it takes extra time to organize onstage, looks unsightly, will double or triple the time to escort them from the room at the briefing's conclusion and often creates a tripping hazard.

Invent your own sign language

Speakers often lose track of time during a news briefing. Alert them in advance what discrete signals you'll use if they're running long. I favor sitting just below the stage and within their line of sight.

Simply stand up when a speaker

drones on. If this doesn't do the trick, inch toward the speaker table and make eye contact. They'll get the message. When things are back on course, return to your seat just in case you need to repeat the drill with the next speaker.

Challenges with celebrities

Celebrities add additional challenges, not because they're demanding, but because people are starstruck. I once moderated a news briefing with author Michael Crichton. An AAAS official — who heretofore had never played a role in a news briefing — pulled rank and announced he would escort Crichton out of the briefing room.

I smiled inwardly and thought, "Good luck." As the Q-&-A concluded, I stepped to the side of the room and watched as reporters mobbed Crichton while the hapless interloper's entreaties to clear a path to the door were ignored. Finally, in a huff, he stomped toward me and snapped, "It's your room. You get him out!"

Without a word, I stood next to Crichton, raised my left arm, and tapped the face of my watch. Conversation ceased, the journalists respectfully stepped back, and I escorted Crichton from the room past the dumbstruck AAAS official. The lesson here is to quietly step aside when a superior muscles in on your territory, but stay close by to rescue the situation before it gets completely out of hand.

Have an escape route

High-profile speakers or those discussing controversial topics hold the potential of being mobbed by

reporters. Therefore, work out in advance alternate routes that allow the speaker to quickly enter and exit the briefing room. Sometimes this means going through a hotel kitchen or a dark service corridor. Watch for tripping hazards in reduced lighting.

Use a clipboard

A clipboard keeps papers organized and serves the dual purpose as an unofficial badge of office. When I stand up, face reporters, and hold my clipboard in front of me, they know the briefing is concluding. It's sometimes helpful to hold it over your head if leading speakers through a crowded hallway.

Guard your health

During the AAAS annual meeting, I shake upwards of 100 hands a day. On top of this, the meeting is held in winter and it seems everybody has the sniffles. Get an annual flu shot. I swear by them. Also be a fanatic about washing your hands throughout the day.

Wardrobe considerations

What you wear is just as important as what speakers wear. Present a polished, professional look that conveys your role and authority representing a company or organization. I favor bright, solid colors. That way, speakers can easily spot me if I have to lead them through a reporter gauntlet in the hallway. Male moderators can achieve the same effect by wearing a brightly colored necktie and turning often to make sure speakers see it. Keep jewelry to a minimum. It reflects light and, in the case of a chunky bracelet or large cufflinks, can create unintended noise banging against the microphone or lectern.

If the shoe fits

You'll walk and stand more than you sit, so invest in comfortable shoes. A dancer once shared her secret for avoiding sore feet and aching leg muscles — change into a different pair of shoes every two hours. It works. Try it. **T**



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