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of AIR SAFETYINVESTIGATORS  
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SEMINAR**

**THE MEDIA ARE NOT THE ENEMY**

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Good morning everyone.

The alternative title was “when things go bump in the night”. Because when they do, and you’re up to your armpits in warm metal, and the media start climbing the fence, it’s a little late to start planning your media profile. What we’re going to conclude by the end of this presentation is what the actress concluded about the bishop – you need help. What I am here to talk about, is why **you** need that help and what help you need.

The first thing is that the media are not the enemy. They are just incredibly ignorant. They don’t know what you do. **When** you think of the media think of a ferret. I don’t mean they ferret out facts, but that they act without thought of consequence . Ferrets hunt, they kill, they don’t know why they hunt and kill. The ferret doesn’t care it just killed the last spotted kiwi. Reporters believe they are acting in the public interest. But in **reality** they see the fly speck on the window, they cannot see the glass or the wider view beyond They don’t understand their stories have consequences. And that myopic stunned ferret is what you have to deal with.

We deal with the media as best we can because it makes life easier for us in the long term, it is part of our essential accountability process, it is a performance driver, and because we have nothing to hide. And if we don’t deal with the media then **they will** find someone else to “say a few words” and they have no skills in **determining** the **veracity** of such statements.

Your ability to do your job, your reputation, and the reputation of the entire aviation industry, will rest on you how you front up to the camera. The best solution is to provide media training wherever it could be needed, to have at least one person who is highly skilled with media as your commentator, and to be well rehearsed in the message you want to get across.

There are a number of phases where you will be in contact with the media:

Phase one: the plane has just crashed and you will be asked “what happened?” and “how long will the investigation take?”. Then there’s “how many other accidents involved these aircraft?” followed by “ aren’t these dangerous?” followed by “when will you ground them?”.

Phase two: On site. You’re trying to find bits meanwhile there’s a **tv** camera crew hovering overhead blowing away these bits and another crew has just climbed the fence – you’ll spend six months trying to work out why a bit of metal is bent till you find the curve matches the camera operator’s boot - while a third has it’s camera an inch from **your** face saying “what happened?” meanwhile another camera crew is filming a witness saying “I thought I was going to die...” or “sources who could not be identified said this was an accident waiting to happen...” Be alert to “have you eliminated bogus parts?”. This is like “have you stopped beating your wife?” The story will be that bogus parts are fundamental to the inquiry.

Phase three: aftermath. It is not your job to defend the aviation industry, but you can use your neutral position to be authoritative, helpful and put things in perspective - until you get: “**Why** does a report takes six months? Are you under **resourced?**”.

Phase four: the final report. Now things will really get tough. Your report could be challenged by the airline or other parties particularly the relatives of the deceased You may have to defend those conclusions to the media, or a court. Explaining it to the media is far harder than a court because unlike a judge they have no brief to give you a fair go.

Each of these phases have demands and you **will** need to cope with this attention.

We get attention because aviation accidents are rare, because people have a **very real** expectation that they **will** be safe, that there's nothing they can do to save themselves, and because they are entering a world they know nothing about. **What's** more, stories about air crashes scratch the phobias of the most important people on the entire planet – the news editors. And they don't know one end of a plane from another. I recently had a reporter ask me "what is this Piper thing? Is it some kind of Cessna?"

It is also, always, an SEP – Someone Else's Problem. If you castigate drivers you castigate your brother, your mother and the girl next door. If you castigate airlines you're castigating rip off merchants. Very few news editors have airline executives living next door. And they just love "We plunged into an air pocket. I thought I was going to die." **If you** and I are in a car accident and climb out of the smoking wreckage and say to a camera "I thought I was going to die..." the reporter **will** say, "So?". Say it after the most minor aviation event and you've got prime **time**. Every passenger knows this. It must be on the ticket.

A while ago a taxiing Air New Zealand 747 caught its **winglet** on the tail of a parked Continental 747 at Los Angeles. They unbolted the other **winglet** and flew it home. Radio New Zealand had reporters at Auckland airport at one in the morning to interview the passengers about their ordeal. They would have had bigger threats driving home.

We recently had an accident in which the pilot was 8 1. How could we allow an 8 1 year old to fly? This guy had just bought a brand new five litre V8. Nobody worried about allowing **8 1 year olds** to drive such a car. And if he had killed the same people in the car as he did in his Cherokee he'd have made an inside page. Maybe.

We are cursed because of ignorance of what we do, because there is always someone around who will say you're wrong, that someone's going to die, that this was an accident waiting to happen. Sometimes the biggest media threat to aviation is from practitioners of aviation.

Ansett 703 on June 9, 1995. The "anonymous pilot". The approach.

Some researcher counted the number of front page stories per 1000 subject fatalities over a ten year period in that august newspaper, the New York Times. Hardly a scandal rag. Note, not the column centimetres or the number of photographs or the weight of material – just the number of front page stories per 1000 **fatalities**. They found: cancer got 0.04 stories per 1000 deaths – that's four stories for every 100,000 deaths. Car crashes got 0.08 stories per 1000 deaths. Murder got double that - 1.7 stories per 1000 deaths. But wait – airliner crashes got 138.2 stories per 1000 deaths. What a way to scare the hell out of airline executives.

What we're saying here, is that you cannot escape attention. If you don't use the media, and if you don't say anything, the media **will** find some other way of fiig their 30 second slot. The words they use may as well be yours rather than the **dickhead** who says "this was an accident waiting to happen and I thought I was going to die".

What is important, is how you manage this attention, and how you manage it starts right now and not when you face disaster.

Managing the media is a like painting the house. You may not agree on colour. You may miss a bit. But the longer you leave it the more effort is required. Left unattended, your house will rot away. **Effort** in advance of a disaster pays off dividends in the wake of tragedy, and trying to build media links after the accident is too late.

We cannot prevent the media coming over the fence at a crash site but we can prevent media putting words in your mouth that destroy your reputation and **which** will make your investigative task near impossible. Media mishandling can set back your work and relationships. Conversely, your work can be assisted if you use all opportunities at all times to present yourself as *the* authority on aviation safety issues and *the* pre-eminent aviation safety investigator. By doing so, it enhances the possibilities of positive influences on the aviation industry and on the public at large. My point, is that good media relationships are no accident.

So what do we do:

First, develop a media policy. Then stick to it and become known for acting on it. The CAA's policy is: "As a state agency, we should be open with the media wherever that coincides with the public interest in aviation safety and accountability. Our aims are to inform the public and enhance aviation safety while strictly minimising the risks arising from media practices."

The CAA in the past five years has moved from obscurity to being the touchstone for the media on aviation issues. They know I will tell them what I can when I can, and I will tell them fast and accurately. We will meet their deadlines. We will act proactively. We will put not just a PR man in front of the cameras, we provide the Director. We won't just give them what they asked for, we will give them what they need. The result is we have a damn good media relationship and if I say "no, I can't tell you/won't tell you yet" it is generally accepted. If you are known as trustworthy, open, and authoritative it will save you pain.

Secondly, you cannot educate the media about aviation, so educate your aviation experts about the media. Provide media training for all front-line staff and the executives who may find themselves in front of the camera. There are profound advantages to tuned media training for anyone likely to need it. This training is not aimed at obfuscation, but at doing the right things the right way to give the media what they need without blowing your foot off. You have something to say, and this training will enable you to say it.

Thirdly, preplan your messages – stick to them Keep it simple. Your message may be that "We've just arrived on site, we're just making our initial search now, and it's far too early to speculate on any cause. It could take some time to piece everything together. There's nothing more I can say at the moment." You could add: "If you need more, give the office a call." And if you don't know, say so. Don't wing it. Everything you say will be taken down and will come back to haunt you. Before you say anything, think about it. Use the judicial pause.

Fourth: ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH.

And again: Remember your message and **STICK TO THE MESSAGE**.

And let's look at what **NOT** to do:

Don't lie.

Don't forget your message.

Don't say no comment. "No comment" won't help you and could **crucify** you. "It was an accident waiting to happen – no comment." "No comment" wastes opportunities to present your message, your side of the story, your chance to show yourself as capable, experienced, and dedicated and working on behalf of aviation safety and the travelling public. You can't complain about being mistreated by the media if you brushed them off with "**no** comment".

Instead of saying “no **comment**” say “I’m just an investigator, I can’t answer that. See our head office, they’ll have all those details”. Also, your average reporter needs words, details, opinions. If you, the expert, doesn’t provide them – who will? Will that be to your advantage? Will they say nice things about you? So **fill** their need.

And help your people in the field They are highly trained accident investigators with the barest of media training. We know they will be approached on site by the media right when their mind is full of other things – so we give ours cards to help them **remember** some messages and the direct, home, and mobile telephone numbers of the CAA’s media staff.

Remember also that the media can be used to your advantage. They can get your message across to industry and the public. They can also provide highly practical assistance in that they can help find witnesses.

Is this the perfect defence? No. But the chances of getting screwed will be greatly reduced.

So let’s summarise.

- Never underestimate media interest – all it needs is one person to say “I **thought** I was going to die” or “This was an accident waiting to happen.. .” This is because of ignorance and myopia.
- Good media relations are no accident. You have to work on it, starting now. This is not PR garbage, it is getting the media what they need in a way that also fulfils your need. The media needs authoritative comment from an authority figure that is non-speculative but , presents clearly all the issues facing the investigator.
- What is your message? What are you going to say? Prepare a list of facts. What happened, who did it happen to, what is the effect of this happening? What are you going to do now? What is the perception you want the media to leave with? Who will speak on your behalf? Your CEO may not be the best person. Stick to the message.
- Never say no comment. You can’t complain if you ain’t done your bit. But more importantly, you are missing an **opportunity** to present your message.
- Fifth: Never – ever- lie. It will come back and bite you Basically, if something’s gone wrong, say so. Then say what you’re going to do about it. (fuselage swap)
- And last, but not least, remember the bishop. Get help. Never think it won’t happen to you Do not expect it to go away. You will not sweep it under the carpet. It is your problem and you must deal with it. You need training and specialist help.

And remember.. . **the** media is not the enemy. They just don’t know our business. They want to do their job as best as possible. The answer must be to assist by being prepared, and by spreading your message.

**Thank you.**