

LINDSTROM'S LAWS FOR DEALING WITH THE PRESS AND NOT SOUNDING LIKE A FOOL.

Politics and the press are mutual hosts and parasites. Both need each other, but politicians need the press far more than the press needs politicians.

With that, here listed first are the laws – built from working for 40 years with politicians at every level of American government -- that will allow you to work professionally with reporters along with ensuring the public gets the best chance to get the most complete message from you. The explanations for each law follow this list:

1. KNOW THE REPORTERS
2. ESTABLISH THE BASIS OF THE INTERVIEW.
3. THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK.
4. BE SIMPLE, DIRECT AND CLEAR.
5. BE SURE OF YOUR FACTS
6. BE HONEST.
7. EMPHASIZE WHAT YOU THINK IS IMPORTANT
8. IF YOU USE TALKING POINTS, YOU SOUND STUPID.
9. ANSWER THE QUESTION.
10. ANSWER THE QUESTION YOU ARE ASKED.
11. USE REAL WORDS
12. SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT YOUR FRIEND
13. ONLY STUPID PEOPLE SHOUT.
14. KNOW THE ISSUES.
15. GET BACK TO REPORTERS.
16. YOU DON'T OWN THE STORY.
17. YOU DON'T CONTROL THE QUESTIONS.
18. ONLY THE MORALLY DEPRAVED USE "IMPACT" AS AN ACTIVE VERB.
19. YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM THE PRESS.
20. IF THERE IS A PROBLEM, GET IT FIXED, PART 1
21. IF THERE IS A PROBLEM, GET IT FIXED, PART 2.
22. ONLY BLAME THE PRESS IF THE PRESS IS TO BLAME.
23. DON'T DO ANYTHING THAT WOULD SHAME YOUR MOTHER.

THE EXPLANATIONS

No little kid stands on a street corner today shouting, "Extra!"

The press today is unrecognizable not just from the press of a century ago but from the press of a decade ago. It has been permanently changed, wrenched by economic, sociological and technological forces we are still trying to understand and adapt to.

But the reason people flocked to the kid shouting "Extra!" has not changed. We have an innate need to know.

Also, what has not changed are the basic elements of reporting and getting a story. That means you, as a politician, as a policy developer and enactor, need to know what to expect when talking to reporters. Because you **will** talk to reporters, you need to understand the process they follow.

The essential human desire and need for information, which is part of our evolutionary basis, using information for protection, whether from predators or to find food, has evolved. It has changed to meet our changing sense of need – from where to get food, what roads to avoid, who

won the game and who wore what on the red carpet and who has the best kitty videos— but it exists because we exist with needs. Journalism in its many forms provides the information to fulfill those needs.

What information people get, and how they get it, as well as how reliable, accurate, objective, truthful or even how recent that information may be, is always critical and with technology can be questionable.

More than ever, technology allows elaborately created lies – what some would call fake news -- to be circulated in an instant. And sadly, because of our animalistic tendency to be on guard and open to danger, people generally believe them. Reporters are always fighting against this trend.

Your task is to provide information to reporters who then distribute it.

Remember this: people say they hate the press. Politicians especially hate the press (even though every politician relies on the press). Reporters know everyone hates us, and basically we don't give a damn. We have a job we have to do.

Follow these laws, you still may hate reporters, but because you will now communicate more effectively you will be a better politician and public servant.

Now to the essentials of Lindstrom's Laws:

1. **KNOW THE REPORTERS.** Introduce yourself, either in person or by phone, especially when starting a campaign. Know all the reporters you will deal with, whom they work for, and specific requirements they have, especially deadlines. **DO NOT LOB THIS JOB ONTO CAMPAIGN OR OFFICE STAFF, YOU NEED TO KNOW THE REPORTERS. Remember** it is not unusual for reporters to switch on you. Journalists are not paid well, and those working in the smallest communities are paid the worst. As a consequence, most journalists are on the lookout for a better job. Even if your local paper or TV station sends a dozen different reporters your way, try to develop a minimum of contact with each of them.

2. **ESTABLISH THE BASIS OF THE INTERVIEW.** Any time you talk to a reporter, which means every time you open your mouth to a reporter, even for just a minute, you are conducting an interview. You have the right to, and should always, establish the basis of that interview. **IF YOU PAY ATTENTION TO NOTHING ELSE, PAY ATTENTION TO THIS: YOU HAVE TO ESTABLISH THE BASIS OF THE INTERVIEW. YOU** have to establish the basis of the interview. If you say nothing, then the interview is **automatically** on the record.

These are three principles of interviews you must remember and use: on the record, on background and off the record. **On the record** means **anything you say can be quoted and your name attributed.** **On background** means what you say can be quoted, but you cannot be identified. **Off the record** means nothing you say can be quoted and you cannot be identified. **TWO VERY IMPORTANT POINTS:** 1. In recent years some reporters have used “on background” and “off the record” interchangeably. If you are going to tell a reporter something that has to stay completely out of the public purview, then **you must be clear** this is material that cannot be released under any circumstances. 2. **You cannot take matters off the record retroactively.** In other words, if you tell a reporter something on the record, then realize you screwed up and released something you should not have, you cannot then take the matter off the record. Once spoken on the record the item is completely open to the public.

(THE CAVEAT: For this system to work, both you and the reporter have to be honorable. You cannot tell a reporter something off the record, and then go into a meeting and announce to everyone there what you had just told the reporter was off the record. In such a situation, a reporter not only has a right, he/she has a duty to report on what you said because clearly it was not off the record. Also, you have a right to expect the reporter to honor the agreement on

keeping an item off the record or on background. But, if you disclose something that could implicate public safety or affect the livelihoods of whole populations, again a reporter has a duty to report that. The reporter also has a duty to convince you to put the item on background, but the most critical factor in such a case is the potential import of the story.)

3. **THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK.** Think before you speak. Think before you speak. . **THINK...BEFORE...YOU...SPEAK.** Remember, in print or on the air (and especially over the Internet) something you say and think is clear, concise and even witty can come off as stupid or offensive. Be candid when answering questions, but take a few seconds to consider and frame an answer. **WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU SAY SOMETHING STUPID**, because you will: Just acknowledge it, acknowledge it was stupid, and acknowledge it every time you are confronted with it. Because with technology, you will be confronted with it to your dying day.

4. **BE SIMPLE, DIRECT AND CLEAR.** If you naturally use sesquipedalian, jargogle, kench, scumble, sanguinolency as part of your everyday speech, fine. If not, don't try. Eloquence does not rely on complex, arcane and confusing vocabulary, but in clearly conveying your thoughts, no matter how plain your speech.

5. **BE SURE OF YOUR FACTS:** Be like a reporter, check things out, seek out multiple sources, be wary of sources that cite only facts that favor their side. When you cite something, expect to be challenged, and don't be surprised if the reporter knows more than you do. You can only counter arguments effectively if you know your facts and can build argument from those facts.

6. **BE HONEST.** Being honest means more than don't lie ('cause you won't get away with lying and it destroys your credibility instantly). Being honest also means 'fess up if you don't understand a question or you don't know the subject. If you don't understand the question, ask that the question be repeated. If you don't know how to answer, say so and say you will get back to the reporter when you do have the answer.

7. **EMPHASIZE WHAT YOU THINK IS IMPORTANT.** If there is a point in the interview that you feel is particular important – what reporters would call the nut graph or nut quote – make sure you tell the reporter this is the point you think is particularly important. You'll still get questioned or challenged on it, but that also clues the reporter into what you are trying to say.

8. **IF YOU USE TALKING POINTS, YOU SOUND STUPID.** Talking points are artificial. They are an attempt to regiment thought, and by using them you sound forced, contrived and frankly stupid. Because everyone uses the SAME talking points, everyone says the SAME damn thing and everyone sounds phony. Candidly, talking points are unbelievable to anyone who isn't already sold on your point of view. Talking points fail to convince those you hope to convince because they sound and are forced and artificial. **They are not your thoughts; they do not tell anyone what you feel in your own words.** They are a sign of intellectual laziness. And they are more addictive than crack.

AND reporters have no interest in you if all you do is babble talking points. If you speak to reporters in talking points, then just hand out the talking points. Why would reporters want to waste time talking to you when they can read the sheet? Your job is to know the issues, and formulate the reasons why you support a position and why that position would be good for your community. Why run for office if your service is defined and controlled by talking points?

9. **ANSWER THE QUESTION.** When asked a question, answer it. Just answer it. Don't waffle. Take a breath, think for a second, and answer the question. What's so bloody hard about that?

10. **ANSWER THE QUESTION YOU ARE ASKED.** Ever since Cain tried to finesse God on that Where-is-Abel-thing, politicians have been counseled to try to turn questions asked into what they want to answer. When you do that, **you sound evasive and dishonest.** No one is fooled, least of all the people you try to fool. A good reporter will continue to ask the same question until the politician does answer it, so answer the question asked.

11. USE REAL WORDS. Believe it or not, politicians try to answer questions by grunting, sniffing, coughing, squealing, sighing and making sounds as if they are really badly constipated. USE WORDS. SPEAK IN COMPLETE SENTENCES. And speak plainly. If you have an outstanding vocabulary, then you will know how to use complicated and unusual words in a way that conveys meaning. Don't try to be mellifluous if you aren't naturally so. Plain speaking can be as eloquent as Shakespeare.

12. SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT YOUR FRIEND. Remember that thing about thinking before you speak? Think five times as long before your tweet, post something on Facebook, comment on anyone's post, share a photo or share a meme you agree with. Because social media has become the required method of communication and it is essentially public, reporters track it and so do thousands of other people who will make sure reporters see your screwup. Careers have been destroyed because of an instant's stupidity on social media. Presume a meme is a lie, even if you happen to agree with it, or at least assume it was created by a 500-pound Russian hacker sitting on his bed eating borscht making mischief. Just make it a rule never to spread a meme.

13. ONLY STUPID PEOPLE SHOUT. The only circumstances where it is understandable and acceptable for an interview subject to be angry or shout is when they are in anguish. Politics is serious business, and people get upset at times, but we are supposed to lead by intelligence and consensus and not anger. Keep yourself in check with a reporter, even when the reporter is dealing with upsetting issues. If you shout or get angry just for answering questions, you will get attention the same way a clown does. You want to be seen seriously, not as entertainment.

14. KNOW THE ISSUES: Talking points presume you are not smart enough to know the issue on your own, and, frankly, relieve you of that responsibility. Know the issues, and the best way to do that is to play reporter: read everything you can, talk to as many people as you can to get facts. Be prepared to answer a question on virtually anything. Never let your lack of knowledge be an excuse to using talking points.

15. GET BACK TO REPORTERS. When a reporter calls, get back to them. If you told a reporter you would get to him/her, get back to him/her. Ask about deadlines and meet them. If you cannot get back to a reporter, have someone else get back to the reporter to say you are out of pocket. See if there is someone else you can suggest the reporter talk to. Never leave a reporter hanging; you may rarely get a chance to talk to that reporter again. DON'T TRY TO DODGE QUESTIONS BY RESPONDING WITH EMAILS. EMAILS ARE NOT ACCEPTABLE. TALK TO THE REPORTER.

16. **YOU DON'T OWN THE STORY.** News does not convey property rights. Unless you make some special arrangement with People Magazine over the photographs of your children, news is an open, accessible asset, and you do not have the right to dictate how or when or if a story will be written or broadcast, or how much of an interview you conduct will be included in that story. You can always refuse to talk to reporters, but then you are guaranteed no access on a story. **And don't think that because you refuse to talk to a reporter the story won't be done. There is no situation where a story can't be done with or without your input.**

17. YOU DON'T CONTROL THE QUESTIONS YOU ARE ASKED. The press exists to get news, not to help you win your campaign or make you look good. If you ask for a list of questions up front, expect to be laughed at. At best, you will get a general notion of the subjects, but not the questions. If you don't like this arrangement, you can refuse to do an interview but will have to deal with the image of ducking the press.

18. ONLY THE MORALLY DEPRAVED USE "IMPACT" AS AN ACTIVE VERB. So stop doing it, Goddammit.

19. **YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM THE PRESS:** Even if you don't want to talk to reporters, others will. Even if you think you are in a completely confidential setting, what you say will get out one way or the other and reporters will find out about it. The only way you can get your side of the story out is to talk to reporters.

20. **IF THERE IS A PROBLEM, GET IT FIXED, PART 1.** Reporters, good ones, report accurately, but errors occur. If you know something is incorrect, for God's sake let the reporter know. The first time an error is made it is the reporter's fault; if you know it is an error and do nothing and the error is repeated, it is your fault. Keep in mind you want a correction, not a retraction; there is a distinct, legal difference between the two. There are times in libel and slander cases where a retraction is the proper, but 99.9 percent of the time a correction suffices.

21. **IF THERE IS A PROBLEM, GET IT FIXED, PART 2.** There are occurrences where politicians and reporters simply do not get along, or where a politician thinks a reporter has it in for him/her. If there appears to be a legitimate problem, try to get it fixed. Try to talk to the reporter directly, unemotionally, on an off-the-record basis to establish what's wrong and how you think you have been mishandled. If the reporter does not want to meet, or continues to pursue what you feel is an unfair course, seek a meeting with the reporter and the reporter's superior. Frankly, you may never feel that you have resolved the situation to your satisfaction, but you have to make an effort if only for your own peace of mind.

22. **ONLY BLAME THE PRESS IF THE PRESS IS TO BLAME.** The press didn't lose your election, you did. The source of 99.9 percent of your problems...is you. There are times, as has been alluded to, where the press gets it wrong. But the press is not to blame if your campaign is badly organized or underfunded or if you mess up in debate or when dealing with a constituent or you vote for a stupid law or you get picked up for whatever you get picked up for. Which leads to the last, and most important of Lindstrom's Laws:

23. **DON'T DO ANYTHING THAT WOULD SHAME YOUR MOTHER..** You screw up, you will get found out, it will be public and you have only yourself to blame. If you think mama is okay with you committing any of a number of mortal and venal sins, okay, but don't complain when the story gets out. If your mama isn't going to be happy about you violating the laws of God, man and nature, then don't blame the reporters when you get caught violating the laws of God, man and nature.

I hope these basic, common-sense guidelines will prove helpful to you during your political careers. Any other questions, do not hesitate to get in touch with me either at 517-482-3500 or at jwlindstrom@gongwer.com.