

# Are you a credible spokesperson?

 By [Marion Scher](#)

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Not a day goes by in South Africa when we don't hear from one government or corporate spokesperson or another. Whether it's the Office of the President defending one or another of his gaffes or a union official explaining how his members, who wreaked havoc on a city's streets were protesting peacefully, we generally shrug our shoulders and say 'really...?'

Then we have our police spokespeople and when I say spokespeople perhaps I should say unspokespeople (see that, I just invented a new word). You only have to look at the appalling case of Mido Macia, the Mozambican taxi driver who died in police custody after being dragged through the streets of Daveyton in Gauteng, handcuffed to a police van in February 2013. The following April the statement came that its officers were not responsible for the man's death. And this was said with some arrogance.

Today there is irrefutable evidence pointing to the contrary and Macia's family has also lodged a civil claim for R6.5m. Above all, this arrogance and dismissiveness from our public servants has once again driven a wedge between the police service and the public whom it serves.

The same goes for corporate South Africa. Remember a spokesperson doesn't always have to be the CEO. Look around your company and find the person who meets the criteria below. I've often been called in to companies to train their top executives to speak to the media, only to find someone on a lower level is the better spokesperson.

A good example of this was the chief financial officer of a government organisation who was about to announce their wonderful annual financial results of which she was very proud. The only problem was that this particular organisation was one that the South African public felt highly ripped off by (and for good reason). She'd never faced the media before but as she was the CFO they felt she should be the one to deliver these results.

We put her on camera and asked the simple question 'How can she justify them showing such a huge profit when we're paying so much for their particular service - way above world rates in this area?' Her response was to get angry about the question and go into defence mode. Needless to say the organisation didn't use her but rather their CEO who was able to handle the situation really well and diplomatically.

## So what should a good spokesperson do?

- Firstly they should have answers. And yes, I know when a crisis happens these often take some time to find, but then ask the media respectfully to give you a half hour, an hour, to find more information - assuring them you'll get

back to them quickly.

- Give answers. If you genuinely have these and don't give them that's organisational suicide. Because if you don't give the media the answers they'll find them out themselves.
  - Be able to talk honestly and openly - and be understandable. I've never worked out why organisations would choose someone who is not easily understood, and here I'm not talking about whether the person has English as a first language, but rather whether they come across clearly and believably.
  - Don't spin the story. Tell the truth - and tell it fast. Again if you don't, someone else will - with often dire results.
  - Don't be defensive. That automatically smacks of guilt.
  - Stay calm - even when the temperature gets hot and tempers flared.
  - Talk from the heart - don't sound rehearsed. Even though I do recommend rehearsing.
  - Don't be frightened to show emotion - if the scenario is an emotional one. This just makes you appear human and not simply a mouthpiece.
  - Don't try and justify the outrageous - such as a swimming pool disguised as a fire pool...
- If your organisation has stuffed up admit it and tell people what you're doing to make sure it won't ever happen again.

Remember these stories of dishonesty leave a very deep stamp on the name of your organisation.

## ABOUT MARION SCHER

Marion Scher ([www.mediaentors.co.za](http://www.mediaentors.co.za)) is an award-winning journalist, lecturer, media trainer and consultant with 25 years' experience in the industry. For more of her writing, go to her Bizcommunity profile or to Twitter @marionscher.

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