

RICK HALL PR

FOURTH ESTATE

A multi-part series on what every client should know about the media

Better know the press

Part 8: Andrew Bell

*Co-Host, "The Close", Business News Network
Television (BNN TV)*

WHAT IS YOUR KEY AUDIENCE AT BUSINESS NEWS NETWORK?

Our key audience is investors, and they want news about individual stocks and the stock market. This is our main focus, because that's the topic of most interest to our viewers. Less of an interest is mutual funds since, by definition, this type of investor just wants to buy something they can hold and forget about.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE KINDS OF STORIES YOU ARE MOST INTERESTED IN?

A good chunk of our audience consists of professionals working from Bay Street, and the financial hub of Toronto, but we do try to avoid making the program too jargon-filled, or insider based. It's always a dilemma for us to decide how technical to be in our broadcast discussions, but in the interest of our audience we try to provide a wide variety of content and cover a wide variety of topics, and levels of depth. Some of the discussion is quite complicated and arcane, but sometimes also it is very basic – What's an RRSP? What's a REIT? For the most part, we're interested in "investable" stories, meaning information viewers can act on, and stocks people can buy. That's what our viewers want. They want investing ideas. They want to discuss news and developments from which they can make money – or avoid losing money.

If the story does not involve a public company or public entity, and an investable opportunity, it needs to be pretty interesting for us to cover. In that case it likely needs to have a human dimension or dilemma involved, or some aspect people haven't heard about. If it's just a start-up company we're just not interested

unless it's very unusual, like "kidney surgery for dogs out of a mobile van." Even if it is a public company, it has to be a fairly substantial one. We generally avoid Venture Exchange companies in addition, because they're so speculative.

Beyond that basic framework, we want to find out the personality of the person we're interviewing; we try to draw out a sense of who they are. Of course a lot of people come on the program, and try to present a certain front, where everything at their corporation and in their industry is wonderful and every individual "on the team" is giving 110%. Our rule, and what our viewers want, is the company CEO or CFO on the program, and we're not really interested in anyone else, unless they have a very compelling story to tell. But a lot of these senior people have been media-trained to the point they have lost their spontaneity and personality.

People pitch my co-host Kim Parlee and myself stories all the time without thinking how we are going to pitch it to our editor. They'll bring us a story about how, say, someone has written this book on the mistakes investors make, or something similar, but unless the book is pretty radical, has some fresh information or perspective, how am I going to pitch that to my editors? Why would we have these people on the program? Or another example is a small software company; generally the company has to be interesting enough that you'd be in a coffee shop with a friend and you'd say "I talked to this company today and they've cracked the code, and are the only ones to make this (something)." That's interesting, but a firm that makes software to help you run your business – that's uninteresting for our show.

So we're looking for something novel, particularly about the person in charge. Say the CEO has surmounted a barrier – business, physical – to build a successful business, that's interesting.

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YOU SAY YOU PREFER TO PROFILE COMPANIES WHO HAVE AN INTERESTING CEO. HOW IMPORTANT A FACTOR IS THAT IN DISCUSSING HOW WELL A COMPANY IS DOING, HOW MUCH MONEY IT MAKES FOR SHAREHOLDERS, EITHER CURRENTLY OR POTENTIALLY?

If the person has an interesting personality, we can relate to that in covering the company's financial performance; it's a bonus. Say the fellow is an ex-convict or someone who's overcome adversity, or someone who's been through serial start-ups and has gone on to sell them at a big profit – that implies he'll do the same with this company as well.

Generally, on our show, we focus on "Tell us why we should buy your stock. Pitch us why we should buy your stock." We're trying to look for something we can throw at the interviewee, as a gauge of the person. Broker sell reports or the latest stock target price makes us ask: "How are you dealing with this problem? How are you dealing with that problem?"

I generally find that when I ask an executive CEO "why should I buy your stock," I get a pretty good answer in reply. We want a company to come on the program not to tell us how great they are, but to give us reason to buy the stock – are they going to be paying dividends, or growing the net assets, or what else?

YOU'VE TOUCHED ON PEOPLE COMING ON THE PROGRAM AND HAVING A WELL-POLISHED FRONT. TELEVISION MOVES EXTREMELY FAST, AND IF YOU HAVE A 5-MINUTE INTERVIEW WITH SOMEONE, THAT'S NOT A HUGE AMOUNT OF TIME TO COVER A LOT OF TERRITORY. HOW DOES THIS TIME FACTOR ENTER IN HOW YOU GO ABOUT DOING YOUR JOB?

People will come on the program with a big pre-digested spiel and the problem is it can take all the time we have available. They come in and give us a presentation about the five industry sectors they're active in, but that can take most of the interview, before we start a dialog, and asking questions.

We prefer that they come in ready to answer the questions we want to ask, or at least give a very concise presentation of what they're all about. It's helpful to us if they could send over corporate information and story ideas for graphical material that can be displayed during the interview. Not just information showing their sales rising, but something interpretative and meaningful like their margins

compared with competitors. It is very useful if they can send us visuals, or some kind of stock footage we can run, because television is a visual medium.

If it is a smaller company trying to get on BNN, I think their pitch to us should indicate what is unusual about them, quirky, something that makes their company different from all the others, even if they offered, "come and see us make our chocolates, or come and see us pump propane." We're interested in that too, and we can send a camera out.

SO HOW DO YOU MESH WHAT PEOPLE COMING ON THE PROGRAM WANT TO SAY, WITH YOUR AUDIENCE THAT RUNS THE GAMUT FROM BAY STREET TYPES TO THE SOPHISTICATED RETAIL INVESTOR, TO RETIREES MANAGING THEIR OWN PORTFOLIO? HOW DO YOU MAKE THE LINK BETWEEN YOUR AUDIENCE TYPES, YOUR GUEST, AND THE INFORMATION YOU'RE TRYING TO FIND OUT?

People don't want to hear the CEO come on and give a sales pitch. If they want the sales pitch, they'll go to the website. What they would prefer to hear is how the CEO is dealing with problems the company or industry may be facing. What are the company's concrete plans going toward? How is the CEO going to grow the revenues, grow the profits? How to deal with the challenges is of particular interest; we're looking for negative commentary – "reality check" – as well. We're really intrigued if a company was to come to us and say, "Look, we've had this problem and this is how we're overcoming it." That level of candour is really appreciated, and it's probably going to get you more sympathetic treatment. But I think a lot of companies don't trust that we wouldn't seize on it, so they feel that they have to make everything shiny.

YOU HAVE A PRINT BACKGROUND; HOW MUCH OF THE JOURNALIST'S "FIVE W'S AND HOW" QUESTIONS DO YOU USE IN THIS BROADCAST SETTING?

Kim Parlee and I try to chat into our segments, as a way to inform the viewer why the next interviewee, or guest, is of interest, and why we should care what this person has to say. So we're using a version of the "Five W's." Giving the viewer this bit of context means that when we start to interview the CEO, we don't have to again have him or her explain what their company does, and go back to square one. We've already explained that this company is a reseller

of data time or something, so we go straight in and say to the CEO "Well, we're in for a recession, demand for data services is down. What are you doing about it?"

HOW HAS THE SUDDEN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN AFFECTED HOW YOU SELECT YOUR STORY IDEAS?

I think we've almost become more theoretical right now. We have a lot of economists and analysts as guests, as well as academics, discussing the economic system, trying to work out what exactly is going on in the economy. It's not just interest rates variations, but what should now be the role of the government? Central banks, for instance, are taking on a far more proactive role than in the past.

And of course the stock market itself has become so volatile. It's almost like normal analysis doesn't work any more because, for example, people will say "well, stocks are trading at very low, multiple earnings" but obviously those earnings are in question, so the standard ratios of the past no longer bear merit. Especially if a stock is not going to make money for the foreseeable future, or at least the next year or two. Everybody's at sea right now.

But because of that, it's a fascinating time to be hosting "The Close." In doing it, sometimes we're too tied to the news of the day, and don't provide our viewers with enough context. That's a complaint against the newspapers as well. If possible, I'd like, once a week for example, to take one of the TSX Top 60, and have a good, clear look at that company, what's special about it. Then our viewers would know and understand more what they're going to be dealing with that next week. It would be a step out of the news flow, and "Oh, Loblaw's is reporting earnings today, let's focus in on them."

WHY DID ORDINARY PEOPLE START TAKING SUCH A GREAT INTEREST IN WATCHING BUSINESS NEWS PROGRAMS?

Well, from 1982-1999, there was an incredible bull market, with the downturn in 1987 just a blip, in retrospect. If you look at an inflation-adjusted chart for the Dow Jones, you can see that from the 1960's through the 70's, stock markets stagnated, and then the recession of 1980 hit.

Then in 1982 a massive stock market run up started, which lasted for 17 years. It spawned the establishment of BNN TV in 1999; CNBC rose to prominence, and all the leading newspapers sprouted business sections. At the same time, demographically speaking, boomers and older people have a vast amount of money and equity – partially courtesy of the effect of compound interest! So there is an awful lot of dough out there, looking for an investment home.

YOU'VE TALKED A LITTLE BIT ABOUT NEWS SOURCES AND WHAT YOU NEED FROM THEM; WHAT FOR YOU MAKES A GOOD NEWS SOURCE?

Obviously, someone who is available. We like it if guests will come into the BNN studio, located at King and Bathurst Streets, because then you can sit down with them, see the body language and make better contact, but we'll accept a phone interview if necessary.

In general, I think we like people that say something new, and that we haven't heard from before. I don't need to hear another person say "demand for Canadian meat exports will be strong because the Chinese are eating more protein." I want to hear somebody say something new, that's fresh, that's just something novel, original. I also like our interviewees to have personality, and it's OK if they're bit of a character as well.

We also like a source to be reliable. We do hate it when people cancel on us, obviously. The old bait and switch is also terrible – "we'll give you the CEO" – and then the interviewee turns out to be one of a dozen company vice presidents. That's the worst thing. Finally, again this being television, any kind of physical demonstration is good, if a person can bring in a device or gizmo, for instance.

HOW DO YOU SOURCE YOUR NEWS IDEAS? ON WHAT BASIS DO YOU DECIDE WHICH TOPICS AND STORIES TO PURSUE, AND WHICH NOT TO?

I don't try to follow everything, I must admit, because I know I can't. I just say this stock's moving, I'll look at that. I have a terrible weakness for the world wide web, even bizarre stories from anywhere on the Internet. But I don't try to keep up with everything, as it is simply impossible. I try to keep up with the world market, but that doesn't interest me as much as specific companies.

NOW THAT WE'RE IN A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY, WHERE DO YOU THINK BUSINESS NEWS MAY BE HEADED?

We've learned the business media, and everybody really, have feet of clay. The central bankers, the banks, they had no idea what was going on. And I think we've been lazy, we could have done more, and we should have questioned more – the market for derivatives of subprime loans, for instance. We didn't question them, and we could have been more critical.

HOW HAS RECENT EVENTS CHANGED YOUR JOURNALIST METHODS?

I think a golden age may come now as the boomers, who have these millions and serious investment portfolios, may become much more critical on what they are being sold. Mutual funds may be in trouble because they're overpriced and their performance is mediocre. I think we may be entering an era of more investigative, more critical, consumer financial journalism.

IS MEDIA LIKE BNN THE INDEPENDENT INFORMATION SOURCES CONSUMERS SHOULD DRAW ON?

To some extent we are critical, but we're not critical enough, as we don't always have enough time. It is an exciting time though, to be in financial media, as there's a huge, eager audience out there, a very sophisticated and wealthy audience. I think people are very disillusioned with their stocks down 30, 40% in value – what can they do, what other investments should they make?

The boomers are going to live to be 90, a lot of them, and they're going to need the market to fund their retirement expenses. It's going to be an interesting period because for a long time it was easy to make money in the stock market, but not now.

WHAT'S THE VIEWER FEEDBACK YOU GET FOR YOUR PROGRAM? WHAT SHOWS OR GUESTS GENERATE THE MOST COMMENTS?

People love humour, they do like lightness. They like any kind of humour or any sort of bizarre stuff, they really enjoy that. It leavens our content because we're

rather dry. People are very interested in politics. We get a lot of feedback on that. Viewers are also very well informed, and have a lot of impressive ideas; it's frightening sometimes, a viewer will send me an e-mail following a program, and I'll realize this person knows a lot more about the topic than me.

AS A FINAL WORD FROM YOU ANDREW, WHAT MAKES A GREAT STORY, WHEN YOU COME AWAY FROM THE INTERVIEW OR SEGMENT AND YOU'RE REALLY PLEASED WITH WHAT HAPPENED?

It's the personality of the person. We like to interview personalities, people who are unusual or doing something out of the ordinary. We did a story at Halloween about an author who had just come out with a book about the time he worked in a graveyard. So we went underground, guerilla filming, and it was great fun. Or we went to the Boat Show and deliberately fell out of a boat.

People do come into TV thinking they do have to present this façade and it just makes for boring television. If you can be out there doing something and not just in a corny way, it makes for good TV – even when talking about money!



ANDREW BELL A native of Dublin, Ireland, Andrew Bell worked as an investment reporter and editor with *The Globe and Mail* for 12 years prior to joining BNN. Bell is a keen student of investing idiocy and corporate blunders, relishing the opportunity to examine stocks and mutual funds. Bell gives his blunt, well-researched assessment on the hot stocks of the day and takes viewers through the detailed numbers while asking experts the tough questions, giving viewers the hard truth about personal investing. Bell is the author of *Mutual Funds for Canadians for Dummies*.



Effective media relations, in public, private and non-for-profit sectors, is critical. Success depends on it. Without exception. And key to effective media relations is understanding the media – print and broadcast. In a series of web postings on www.rickhallpr.com, direct feedback from today's important writers and editors will be featured, offering clients a rare window into the world of journalism, what works and what doesn't in media relations. The better a client knows the media, the more effective media relations will be.

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