

Taking Cues from the Top: Media Relations Tips from Jen Psaki

With the inauguration of President Biden last month, a new chapter of political media relations began. As legal PR professionals and marketers, we can look at how the new White House press team interacts with the media for ways to do our work more effectively.

From her first press conference, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki made it very clear that she is not interested in participating in the drama that was a hallmark of Trump-era media relations. Psaki promised to bring "truth and transparency back to the briefing room" and acknowledged how important the news media is to a democracy, as [Business Insider](#) reported.

From the first weeks of the administration, Psaki has worked to re-establish the White House brand, centering on professionalism, expertise and transparency. She has set an example that legal PR and marketing professionals can apply to our own work.

Here are four strategies that legal publicists and marketers can take away from the new press secretary.

Understand Your Audience

Psaki understands that her role is not to make friends or enemies but to be a respectful conduit from the Oval Office to the public. Always prepared, she answers questions to reflect White House policy accurately and stays on message. In stark contrast to Trump-era press secretaries, Psaki has allowed reporters to ask multiple questions during her briefings.

Psaki clearly sees her audience as all of America. She considers how her messages will be perceived and filtered through the press corps reporters in the briefing room. She uses language that fits her audience and delivers that message effectively. In the same way, lawyers should keep their target audience and goals in mind when developing content or [talking to reporters](#). And it always helps to be quote-worthy.

Know Your Stuff

Perhaps one reason why Psaki is comfortable with allowing reporters to ask multiple questions is because she knows her facts and is confident in her ability to give thoughtful, appropriate answers.

When preparing for an interview with a reporter, be sure your attorney knows the topic to be discussed. Develop the key points to be made and have them written on a piece of



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paper in front of the interviewee, which will help keep the attorney focused and succinct if they feel pressure. Some reporters will provide questions in advance of the interview. If this isn't possible, take the time to anticipate what they are going to ask. One of the reasons Psaki is good at her job is that she knows what she is talking about and how to frame her answers to best represent the administration, without sounding rehearsed.

However, Psaki is also not afraid to admit when she does not know the answer to something, offering to "circle back," which may frustrate reporters but is essential to maintaining an honest briefing room. If your attorney does not know something, it is better for them to admit that and offer to get back to a reporter.

Delivery Matters

Since assuming her role, Psaki has re-established daily press briefings and has announced that an American Sign Language interpreter will attend every briefing, signaling a culture of inclusion. She is calm, professional and cordial. However, she has sparred a few times with Fox News' Peter Doocy, as [Vogue](#) has reported, especially on the topic of the impeachment of Donald Trump. She offers a "coolly dismissive" approach when Doocy presses, her but does not engage in an argument.

Body language, facial expressions and tone of voice are all important. Acting stiff, formal or hostile automatically makes interviewers feel defensive. Looking comfortable and relaxed puts people at ease, builds trust and assures reporters that you have nothing to hide. A speaker can communicate a difficult, even contentious, message effectively by controlling their voice and making themselves approachable.

Keep the Brand in Mind

From day one, Psaki has taken strides to reboot the White House brand. She has revived a 75-year-old tradition suspended by the Trump administration: picking the attending Associated Press reporter to ask the first question of a briefing, and then letting that reporter end the briefings by saying, "Thank you, Jen." According to the [Washington Post](#), Psaki said, "We have every intention of continuing to look for ways to modernize and be far less traditional, but this tradition sets the right tone of a wire service that is carried in media outlets across the country kicking off the briefing and also signaling when it is time to end."

Effective branding can be its own [culture](#), integrating tone, atmosphere and even traditions. Psaki's efforts to revive the White House brand show how important these elements can be, and how subtle. Whether you're producing content for a website, helping an attorney [interact on social media](#) or teeing up a lawyer for an interview with a reporter, always have the brand at top of mind.

We will continue to monitor Psaki's briefing room to bring you more tips, but in the meantime, if you would like to discuss your firm's media strategies, please get in touch with me, Stephanie Holtzman, at sholtzman@jaffepr.com.