

## **Episode 71 - Lorri Allen - The Soundbite Coach [00:25:44]**

**Intro:** Welcome to Profiles In Prosperity, the leading podcast for residential service contractors sponsored by Service Roundtable and hosted by David Heimer.

**David Heimer:** Hi, this is David Heimer, welcome to Profiles In Prosperity. As you grow your business, eventually you are going to have an opportunity to interact with the news media. How you handle that interaction can make a huge difference for your business. My guest today, Lorri Allen is an expert on the news media. She has been a journalist for more than 30 years. She has a master's from Arizona State's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. She teaches communications at the University of Texas at Tyler. She was a great speaker at one of our international round tables. She is also known as the soundbite coach and her company works with business owners and organizations to communicate clearly and quickly. I love her tagline, "May all your news be good". So Lorri Allen, welcome to Profiles In Prosperity.

**Lorri Allen:** Thank you, David, so much, and thanks for the kind words. I love helping people know the rules of the game for working with the news media.

**David Heimer:** So you and I worked together years ago at Prime Media Workplace Learning, and I always remember the seminar you put on for us about how to be successful working with the press and so, that's what I'd like to start off with. How can you be successful working with the press?

**Lorri Allen:** The first thing is, remember that reporters are not your enemy. Now, I can tell you who your enemy is if you want me to. But if you think as a reporter, as someone who can help you get the word out when it's needed, maybe even help you with a little bit of publicity, which is known as free advertising or just let people be aware of some of the services or good activities that you participate in, you just need to know what they need. Reporters are always on a deadline, no matter what time of day or night it is.

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And so a good first question when a reporter calls is what's your deadline, because if you know that there's no way you can meet it, you can become a reliable resource to a reporter by providing someone else who can talk or telling the reporter how to get the information. The next thing that reporters need is someone who will give them what we call a good soundbite. Now, soundbite is for television, but if it's a print reporter, they might say a good quotation. A good quotation or good soundbite has emotion and or opinion, and opinion's easy, we all give these every day. It's something like I think, I feel, I know, in my opinion, I'm the best person to provide this service because - so we share these with our friends, our family, our customers, but emotion is just not being that monotone person. It comes through in your voice, and it comes through your facial expressions and your gestures. And sometimes it's slowing down or speeding up and talking faster, or getting louder or getting quieter so that you convey feelings.

**David Heimer:** So you mentioned free PR, free public relations. How do you go about doing this? So here's kind of an example from our industry. If you installed a new furnace for a needy person, should you let the press know? How would you go about doing something like that?

**Lorri Allen:** It's a great idea, especially, probably for television, because it would be very visual. And I say that David, but these days, newspapers have a website and a reporter shoot video there. And for the television stations, there's a social media or online department where there are producers and reporters just dedicated to the web, and they write pretty much print style and they take pictures for the web. So, don't be surprised if somebody from the Dallas Morning News shows up with a video camera and by the same token, don't be surprised if somebody from one of the channels in the Dallas area calls and they say, oh, I don't need to come over to your office and bring a

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camera, I'm just interviewing you for a web story. So what you would do is get the cooperation of the family or the person you're doing the good deed for, and you would want to let the media know about it ahead of time so they could get pictures of you installing the furnace and they can interview the person receiving the furnace. Because we're all told as journalists, as reporters, to be storytellers, and as a story, we've got to make it about a person. We wouldn't necessarily make it just about the person installing the furnace; that would just be what we would call a news release. But if we can include the person who received it and tell the story of why they needed it, it becomes a story with a beginning, a middle, and a happy ending. And of course, you can't tell that story without telling about the person who's given away this product, this service for free.

**David Heimer:** Yeah, so you want to make sure that you let them know in advance, schedule it with them so they can be there. They can interview the person. They can do some before and afters of the installation. Hopefully, get a chance to interview you. And I'm guessing you want to be prepared to talk to the reporter a little bit, tell them a little bit about your company, tell them why you do this kind of stuff.

**Lorri Allen:** Yes. And it would not hurt if you wear a shirt with your logo on it. David, we could probably talk for an hour about what colors to wear and how to look. But if you are installing the furnace, you know, you don't want to have your suit and tie on. It's fine to wear a shirt as long as it's not white or black with your logo on it. So blue is always a good color, that way your logo would get into the video. And when they put your name up, the little graphic at the bottom with your name and your title, that's another opportunity for you to get your name out there. But you could answer questions such as - let's pretend you're the person installing the furnace. So, I'm the reporter and I say, "Mr. Heimer, why did you install this wonderful furnace for Mr. Smith?"

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**David Heimer:** You're putting me on the spot here, aren't you?

**Lorri Allen:** No, no, I'm not trying to, I'm actually going to give you the answer.

**David Heimer:** But you should be prepared for that, right?

**Lorri Allen:** Right. And there's going to be why and what questions such as, why did you do this and have a good reason with emotion and opinion in it. We know that it's going to be a very cold winter and we know with the COVID-19 problem, that there are some people who've lost their source of income. When we found out that Mr. Smith didn't have a working furnace and that he had done so much during his career for our country and our community, we just felt like if we were going to do something good this holiday season, it would be to give Mr. Smith the best help we could. And that is doing what we do best at Heimer Incorporated, and that is putting in high-quality furnaces quickly and efficiently.

**David Heimer:** Nice.

**Lorri Allen:** You see how I got that little plug-in at the end?

**David Heimer:** Yeah. What is the bit about not wearing a white shirt or black shirt? Why is that?

**Lorri Allen:** Even though we have very sophisticated high-definition cameras, sometimes the reporter's only using something that looks like their smartphone because it is a smartphone and it takes wonderful video. Sometimes even better than the \$50,000 cameras we used to use 30 years ago. But the white and black are still not the most attractive colors to wear, and if you're out in bright sunlight, the white can do what we call, wash you out and not show your features and the black can make the iris

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closed down and also not make you look as attractive. Everybody looks professional in some sort of medium to dark blue. And if that's not your company's colors, but maybe yours are, I don't know, orange or green, those are good colors too. Generally, Juul tones look good on most people and they look good on camera.

**David Heimer:** Anything else on getting free PR?

**Lorri Allen:** Well, it is good to write news releases, but you want to write them well with no grammatical errors, spelling errors. You know, I have a template for a news release and for an online media kit that I could send to you, David, and I bet you could put it up on your website.

**David Heimer:** Yeah, that'd be great. I'd love to do that, thanks.

**Lorri Allen:** That might help people though, because you want a tab on your website that says something like media rooms or press or news, and it can be all the clips that you've been in or articles that have been about your company, but it can also be a resource for the news media. You can put every news release you've ever written and journalists will use that, not necessarily to go to a story about you, but when they're doing their research about you, they will read those just to get a feel for your company culture and the good things that you've done in the past.

**David Heimer:** And also, it falls back to what you said earlier about making it easy for reporters to get information, make it easy for them to do their job. And by making it easy for them, you're more likely to be perceived positively by them as well. And if you make it easy for them to have good information about your company and the industry, that's the information that they're probably going to use.

**Lorri Allen:** Exactly. You got it.

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**David Heimer:** How would I go about becoming a local expert for the local news media? You know, sort of one of the go-to people. When somebody wants to know something about heating and air conditioning or plumbing or electrical, stuff like that, how would I go about becoming known with the local media as a go-to expert?

**Lorri Allen:** There are several ways to do that. One is they call it, pay for play behind the scenes in the industry, but you pay to be on some of these morning shows that the local affiliates will run. I don't recommend that. I think you can get good publicity without paying for it. One thing you can do is put videos on your website, that show how to fix some easy routine parts around the house that people might not think of. But I'm very willing to think that there are other ways to become an expert. One I did not mention - I was working at the CBS affiliate in the East Texas market just a few years ago. And they had what is called in the industry, a trade out. And it was, hey, we will run so many dollars' worth of your commercials if you will do so many dollars' worth of work for us. And so on those seasonal changes, when you have a slow news day and you need to remind people to, oh, winter's coming, you need to wrap your pipes and you need to change your filter and you need to have someone come out and check, we would do a story with that company.

**David Heimer:** And it was done as a change out, they had done some work for the local affiliates?

**Lorri Allen:** Right. So not only do you get some advertising in exchange for some work or bartering, but on slow news day, you're the first company that the assignment director is going to think of. And it also means as an expert, you're establishing yourself as a resource or as an expert, you call the news media. You call the reporters or you send out a news release at each season or each time there's maybe flooding in your area or

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electrical damage. Maybe a tornado has taken out a bunch of electric generators or air conditioners system. And you let people know here's what to expect during this busy time. And if somebody says this phrase to you or that phrase to you, that means they're trying to scam you. Only go with a Service Nation approved vendor.

**David Heimer:** Basically provide useful information to the news media as the seasons change, or as it's time to do maintenance, or if there's some kind of catastrophic event that is going to affect the residences in your area. So like, if there was a big freeze that was coming, you might want to put out something about how to protect your pipes, things like that, is that right?

**Lorri Allen:** Bingo!

**David Heimer:** And also the other thing is to make sure that they know that they could call you. If the news media could contact you directly, you'd be happy to appear on TV, give them a good soundbite or a good quote, any other information that they might want, right?

**Lorri Allen:** Absolutely.

**David Heimer:** Make it easy for them to contact you. I want to talk about stings for a second. Sometimes contractors have been a victim of a news sting, and other times contractors are invited to participate in a sting. So they will come along afterwards and say, no, this guy did a really bad job, here's what he should've done, etcetera. Do you have any opinion about that kind of stuff?

**Lorri Allen:** I probably have two or three opinions. I don't know that any of them are the correct opinion, but I know you have an opinion, and I would like to hear what you think about it.

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**David Heimer:** Well, my opinion is that they shouldn't participate. Instead of saying, you know, if they called me up and said, look, we're going to just sting of some people in our industry. I think participating in that kind of stuff is bad for the industry. And I think instead, a thing to do is politely decline but say that you know, I know a lot about heating and air conditioning. Instead of doing a sting and hurting some local businesses, you know it's good sensationalist stuff. But how about if we do a positive story about what you can do to protect yourself in this upcoming bad weather that we're going to be experiencing, or some house maintenance stuff, or a story about how we replaced the furnace of this family that was really in need. Give them something that feels good instead, because the other stuff just kind of makes people suspicious for things that they don't need to be suspicious about.

And then if you're the victim of a sting, you know, a lot of times what has happened is there's some minor repair. And what they're hoping is that the contractor will come in and recommend a system replacement or something like that, when all they had to do is replace this little cheap part. And so, instead of having a \$200 job, they ended up recommending a \$7,000 system replacement or something like that. So I think the way to handle those, or if you just made a mistake is just to come clean and say, "Look, I'm really sorry. You know, we make things right, so if there's anything that we've done that's wrong, we'll fix it." And occasionally, our guys do make mistakes. You know, they're only human. And when we found something that's wrong, we'll immediately go back and correct it if we can.

**Lorri Allen:** David, you learned well, that is exactly what I would have coached you to do. The only thing I would add when you were talking about let's do a story, I would add save money because that is typically - let's do a story on how consumers or residents

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can save some money by proper maintenance. Because I heard you say prevent problems in bad weather, help people, but I just didn't hear you talk about dollars and that is really top of mind for so many people. They're afraid that their system's going to go out, and it is going to cost thousands and thousands of dollars.

**David Heimer:** Got it. And the news media is probably attuned to that. They know that a story about saving money is going to get more attention than a story about preventing some kind of problem in the future that is kind of vague and undefined.

**Lorri Allen:** It's kind of like my business, David, no one really realizes, except you, you're so smart, that you can prevent news media problems by learning about them beforehand. But unfortunately, a lot of people don't call me until they've had some sort of crisis or they're getting some negative publicity, negative press. So, you know what you and I have both been saying, we just have been saying it in different ways is do the best job you can, treat people honestly and fairly. I love what you said about if you make a mistake own up to it. One of the tenets of crisis communication is tell the truth, tell it all, tell it now. People will respect you and they will think that you're more honest. When you might be a little bit vulnerable by saying we made a mistake, but we're going to fix it. They will then think that you were more trustworthy.

Going back to the sting; if you participate in a sting, yes, of course, it is bad for the industry as a whole, but also think about how your fellow contractors will feel about you. They probably would never, ever refer business to you. When I can't get somebody to help me that particular day; you know, let's say I've had some kind of leak in the house or the air conditioner won't turn on in August and it's 110 degrees out there. If they say, oh, sorry, ma'am everybody's having the same problem, we're backed up, we can't come out until Tuesday, and Tuesday is six days away, I'm going to say, "I'm sorry, can

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you recommend another company that you trust?" And sometimes they will, sometimes they won't, sometimes they'll say, well, if you had bought our {cross talking 17:49} but you know, you're not going to be a friend in the industry, exactly, if you do that. Now, there's an exception.

If you are the regular guy and you're known as Mr. Fix it or Mrs Fix it, and it's been a family owned business for generations, and that particular station always comes to you as the expert. And you have a regular, maybe a weekly or a bi-weekly or monthly segment where you give a little tip and they ask you to participate in a sting, I think you would have the credibility only for that station and only in your role as Mr fix-it. But you would want to say all of those disclaimers that you just said that we don't like to do these in the industry because it scares people, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But if there really is a bad apple, if there really is somebody who's cheating customers, you don't want that to happen either.

**David Heimer:** Yeah, that's true. So, I want to turn our attention a little bit to the consumption of news. In our industry, and I don't think it's unique to our industry particularly, there is a fair amount of distrust of the media and a sense that a lot of the stories are prejudice, unfair and unbalanced. So I think what a lot of people do is go to news sources that reflect their personal beliefs, but there's an issue with that. I think people need to have access to high-quality news and information. And I think it's important to listen to opinions that are different than our own opinions if you want to be well-informed. So, you know, you're a sophisticated consumer of the news. What do you recommend that people do?

**Lorri Allen:** I'm so glad you asked this question. It's so important because we do get into silos of what we believe. For instance, if you're lean conservatively, you might only

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watch one station by the same token or one cable network, by the same token, you might watch a more liberal network all the time or subscribe to more liberal publications if you consider yourself more progressive. So, the ideal idea is to get your news from many different sources. It may mean you watch that extremely conservative channel one day or for one portion of your day. And then if you're interested in a certain news story, see how the more liberal or progressive station handles it. Or look for biases and decide for yourself, which newspapers and you can read them online, you don't have to - although I do say support journalism, support democracy by subscribing to your local newspaper. You don't have to do that to go to other sources. You can figure out which newspapers are considered middle down the road. Mainstream media gets a bad slam from actually both sides, so you've got to pick some mainstream media that you agree with most of the time, if you're going to, just for convenience sake, only read one newspaper or watch one television station.

Now, you know, I teach a lot of young people and very few of them watch television news anymore. Very few of them read a newspaper in print anymore, and very few subscribe to news magazines. So, what they do, that's smart though, is they do compilations. They go to news curation sites, and that's a way to get information from different sources. Some of them get all their news from Twitter and just go to 'what's trending' or other social media. But if they always go to the same topic, social media sites are so sophisticated now that they can actually curate the news stories for us from a certain site, so you want to watch out that that doesn't happen.

**David Heimer:** I was just going to suggest that if you go to a news site, they start noticing that you're always clicking on Fox news, for example. And pretty soon what you get is only stories from Fox News because they know that that's what you're clicking through on. So, I guess if you're going to a news curated site, then what you want to do

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is make sure that you're clicking on a variety. You go to Fox News, you go to MSNBC, you go to NBC News, CBS News, whatever, but click around and get your news from a variety of sources. Is that what you're suggesting?

**Lorri Allen:** Yeah. David, I worked in Faith-based Media for several years and the organization I worked for definitely felt like all media except the faith-based media was biased. And so, you'll always hear something on every media that you don't agree 100% with whether it's the language or the slant. You and I worked for a company that provided news for law enforcement. And we know that at times, and this was long before what's going on currently, but when a police officer was involved, the mainstream media might call it police beating. But when we were writing news or training for law enforcement, we would call it a use of force incident. So, there is very much language. When I was writing some news for this faith-based industry, one time I called a takeover, a takeover and they stopped the newscast down. It was being prerecorded. They stopped it down and said, you can't use the word takeover. And I said, what's the word I'm supposed to use, and they said, resurgent.

We all have biases, and what we've got to do is realize what some of our biases are and put those aside so that we can be well-informed. We don't want to have a siloed mentality. It's called confirmation bias. And it means you're only going to go to social media and you're only going to go to news or other publications, which you agree with. And that's going to keep you isolated from so many other interesting stories and interesting ideas that you won't hear.

**David Heimer:** Lorri, thank you so much for doing this. If somebody wanted to get hold of you, what would be a good way for them to do it?

**Lorri Allen:** They can call or text me 24/7 at area code 214- 878-8610. That's 214- 878-

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8610. And my website is [soundbitecoach.com](http://soundbitecoach.com) and that's bite with an "I", all one word. My email is [lorri@soundbitecoach.com](mailto:lorri@soundbitecoach.com).

**David Heimer:** Thank you so much for doing this with me and may all your news be good.

**Lorri Allen:** David, you stole my line. I was going to thank you very much for this opportunity. May all of your news be good.

**David Heimer:** All right, thanks a lot.

**Outro:** We're always looking for good ideas and interviews for our podcasts. If you have an idea or maybe you think you should be interviewed, just shoot an email to [profiles Prosperity@serviceroundtable.com](mailto:profiles Prosperity@serviceroundtable.com), that's [profiles Prosperity@serviceroundtable.com](mailto:profiles Prosperity@serviceroundtable.com). If you think what we're doing has any value, it would be very helpful if you give us a great rating on iTunes. Thanks for your support. Hope to see you again soon. Bye.