

# Zuckerberg's congressional survival guide: Tips from experts

April 1 2018, by Mae Anderson

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In this Nov. 9, 2017, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg meets with a group of entrepreneurs and innovators during a round-table discussion in St. Louis. As Zuckerberg prepares to testify before Congress over Facebook's privacy fiasco, public-relations experts who have prepped CEOs before have plenty of advice on handling the hot seat. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson, File)

As Mark Zuckerberg prepares to testify before Congress over Facebook's privacy fiasco, public-relations experts who have prepped

CEOs before have plenty of advice on handling the hot seat.

Among them: Appear sympathetic and be ready for a beating. Take responsibility. Don't feign ignorance. And keep in mind that this is more political theater than public policy. The so-called "optics" —how things look— are as important as what you say.

The stakes are high: CEOs testifying in Washington have lost jobs, faced perjury investigations and otherwise endured public humiliation. It's not comfortable for anyone in a position of power to essentially kowtow to Congress in a televised setting.

"It's an intense, grinding experience, draining psychologically and physically," said Ronn Torossian, founder and CEO of the PR agency 5WPR.

As with others who have coached CEOs in the past, he couldn't name former clients because of confidentiality agreements. Torossian said appearing before Congress is "a very humbling experience for powerful people." But Zuckerberg can learn from those who have gone before him.

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## **PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE**

Zuckerberg should spend days, if not weeks, familiarizing himself with the layout of the hearing room and with specific members of Congress, including the toughest questions they are likely to ask. The Facebook CEO has to appear willing to answer questions.



In this Thursday, June 17, 2010, file photo, protesters stand behind BP CEO Tony Hayward as he arrives on Capitol Hill in Washington, to testify before the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee hearing on the role of BP in the Deepwater Horizon Explosion and oil spill. When then-BP chief Tony Hayward testified before Congress about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, he denied involvement or knowledge of the problem in many cases. That's a classic response designed to avoid legal trouble, but it didn't make him sympathetic to viewers. Hayward lost his job about a month later. (AP Photo/Haraz N. Ghanbari, File)

When then-BP chief Tony Hayward testified before Congress about the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, he denied involvement or knowledge of the problem in many cases. That's a classic response designed to avoid legal trouble, but it didn't make him sympathetic to

viewers. Hayward lost his job about a month later.

"He was clearly very well trained from lawyers, but it didn't rest well with the American public," said Richard Levick, founder and CEO of public-relations firm Levick. He said Zuckerberg needs advice from lobbyists and communications professionals, too.

Helio Fred Garcia, who as president of Logos Consulting Group has prepped unnamed banking, pharmaceutical and other executives, said a CEO client of his went through a mock hearing in which someone said very harsh things to rattle him. He was shown video of his expression to make sure he wouldn't replicate it in front of the Senate. The verdict? "He kept his job, so it went fine," Garcia said.

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## ARRIVE MODESTLY

One of the most infamous missteps happened before the CEOs even got in the door. In 2008, CEOs of the three big automakers flew private jets to Washington to ask Congress for federal bailout money. A public relations fiasco ensued.

When the executives went back to Capitol Hill two weeks later for a second round of hearings, they traveled by car.



In this Thursday, Dec. 4, 2008, file photo, Ford CEO Alan Mulally, center, flanked by General Motors CEO Richard Wagoner, left, and Chrysler CEO Robert Nardelli, testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, before a Senate Banking Committee hearing on the auto industry bailout. In 2008, the CEOs of the three big automakers flew private jets to Washington to ask Congress for federal bailout money. A public relations fiasco ensued. When the executives went back to Capitol Hill two weeks later for a second round of hearings, they traveled by car. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

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## TAKE YOUR LUMPS

CEOs may be used to getting their own way, but they aren't in control during hearings. Garcia said that can cause them "a great deal of distress."

Zuckerberg has to understand he's a target and swallow his pride. His job isn't to try to persuade the senators of anything, but to let senators express their anger.

"This isn't an educational forum," Garcia said. "It's a highly ritualized piece of theater."

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## DON'T FEIGN IGNORANCE



In this Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2016, file photo, Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, before the Senate Banking Committee. When Stumpf testified on the bank's creation of unauthorized accounts, he feigned ignorance about some details. He was roasted by senators for not acknowledging the extent of the problem and his responsibility of it. Stumpf stepped down weeks later. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

When Wells Fargo CEO John Stumpf appeared before the Senate Banking Committee in 2016 on the bank's creation of unauthorized accounts, he feigned ignorance about some details. He was roasted by senators for not acknowledging the extent of the problem and his responsibility of it. Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and other senators called for his firing; he stepped down weeks later.

It's crucial to take responsibility and come across as straightforward, said John Hellerman, founder of PR firm Hellerman Communications.

At the same time, Zuckerberg can't get too bogged down in technical explanations, Garcia said. A hearing puts the spotlight on leadership and accountability, not technical details. Garcia said Zuckerberg has to "speak in leadership terms: 'This was a massive failure and I apologize.'"

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## SPIN IT FORWARD

Zuckerberg isn't likely to lose his job over this, but a bad congressional appearance can have other consequences—mainly, the controversy staying in the news.

So his goal will be to acknowledge anger and try to move on. He has to accept that regulation is likely, "so this is his chance to help shape and guide what that regulation might look like," Hellerman said.

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Citation: Zuckerberg's congressional survival guide: Tips from experts (2018, April 1) retrieved 7 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-zuckerberg-congressional-survival-experts.html>

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