

The intangible benefits of media training

Besides preparing strategic key messaging and practicing that messaging on camera, media training offers other more intangible benefits that I've seen in my years in the PR business.

First of all, the theory portion of a good media training course helps reduce news media illiteracy, which manifests itself in either clients being terrified of the news media, or too arrogant with them, treating them just like another marketing communications function for hire. Teaching these executives, (who seem to never receive media relations training in their business school education), the difference between advertising and editorial, and the inherent danger of underestimating the power of the news media, tends to promote more humility. Explaining that an advertising buy does not guarantee media coverage, even in the smallest trades, is surprisingly illuminatory for some of these executives.

Conversely, once trainees understand the "information as commodity" concept, they tend to relax more when they fully understand their role in that two-way relationship. On-camera practicing of key messaging and general Q&A's reduces the fear, and/or promotes humility and increases media literacy. Also allowing trainees to interview their colleagues, to play journalist, helps them to better understand the role the news media does play and the challenges on that side of the fence. It can also better identify potential information quagmires, since no one generally knows their business better than the trainees, and all the areas that are problematic.

Media training can also greatly enhance the reputation of in-house media relations functions and officers by teaching potential spokespersons how difficult the art and science of media relations really is – that successful media relations is a complicated mix of newsworthy content, access and timing/context. The training can become a useful opportunity to fully explain media relations protocol, and how breaching this protocol can become quite career limiting! It also introduces the in-house media relations team to the executive/spokesperson team, and provides a full day where they can work together and get to know each other and respect each other's roles and responsibilities, opportunities and challenges.

One of the greatest frustrations of media relations specialists, and news media, is the slow response to interview or information requests. Yes, executives in private or public sector entities are as inundated as the media with information via e-mail, voice mail and hard copy, I call them the 100/50 club, 100 e-mails and 50 voicemails per day. But many times I've noticed that executives don't understand the rapid timelines that the news media operate under – they don't understand how quickly something ceases to be "news" or how quickly the media may lose interest in a proactive media relations venture.

The media training experience, when done in a proactive, co-operative style, can also serve as a team-building exercise. The on-camera experience, when done as a group, can pull a group together since it can be as fearful as climbing a wall or scaling a rope bridge, popular team-building exercises in the '80's and '90's. Media training often brings

together product managers from different divisions who only see each other at sales conventions or work-related social gatherings.

As a general training tool, media relations theory and practical training can also form a healthy foundation of knowledge so an organization is better prepared for a deliberate response to a crisis. Then more focused, reactive media training can take place quickly, so rapid but proper response to the crisis can occur, therefore avoiding the widening of the credibility gap, from which there are the carcasses of many brands strewn in its wake.

Some executives I've media trained have shared anecdotes with me where they have successfully applied some of the theory and practical media relations tips to other non-media audiences, such as problematic teenagers or unresponsive customer service departments. And we all know how tough some non-media audiences can be.

We are trained from an early age to always "answer the question" when asked by teachers, parents or other superiors. However, the organizational/news media interface is a two-way flow of information, and information is a commodity to news media. Below are some questions you have every right to ask the journalist before committing to an interview.

Pre-interview Questions

- In what section of the newspaper will the report appear?
- Will the interview be used for an immediate news story, or for a longer feature?
- What's the purpose of the interview and when will it be aired/printed?
- What is the angle of the interview and the report you're preparing?
- Will the interview be live or taped? (for broadcast only)
- How long will the interview last and where do you want to conduct it?
- Who precisely is the audience?
- Who else are you interviewing on the subject?
- What is your deadline?
- What is your telephone number and e-mail address so I can get back to you?
- Media Monitor that journalist and outlet to ascertain background/attitude/treatment.