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Management Preparing The Boss To Go On TV

Matthew Kirdahy, 04.21.08, 4:45 PM ET



In Pictures: CEOs Who Appear In Their Own Commercials

And you're on in 5, 4, 3, 2 ...

The art of communicating is not always as simple as writing a memo. The modern chief executive is expected to address an audience of millions at times. And it'll take more than an e-mail to do it right.

In Pictures: CEOs Who Appear In Their Own Commercials

That being the case, CEOs are getting accustomed to reaching the masses in a two-minute time-frame on live TV or via Web video. It's become part of the job of running a business, and while it's important to keep the lines open in tough times, it's just as crucial to be out in the open when things are good.

Wall Street's top brass could learn a thing or two from this approach since nothing but negativity has hung like a black cloud over the financial world for almost a year now. There's little CEOs could do to make it dissipate since the numbers are telling the tale. The headline news, however, should come with an explanation, and that's what the public needs to receive. Preferably from a credible source, and ideally from the man--or woman--who is the face of the company.

And the need for effective communication works in both a proactive way--when the boss is promoting the company by helping build the brand image--and reactive way, when they have to answer difficult questions about unforeseen events.

Think back to the Tylenol scare in the early 1980s. In what subsequently came to be regarded as a blueprint for effective crisis management, **Johnson & Johnson** (nyse: JNJ - news - people) CEO James Burke appeared in a series of TV ads in the wake of the poisoning incidents. He spelled out what the company was doing to counter the threat and reassure the public that the product was inherently safe. His candor helped the brand and the company weather a difficult period in the media and the marketplace.

Today, according to a prominent management author, of 100 highly educated and highly compensated CEOs, it's likely only 10 communicate well.

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William J. Holstein, in his book *Manage the Media (Don't Let the Media Manage You)*, published by Harvard Business Press, argues that generally speaking, fewer than 10% of CEOs in all industries, running companies of various sizes, know how to convey a clear message. These leaders can articulate a sense of mission.

"That vast majority of CEOs are way behind the curve," he said.

A **Google** (nasdaq: [GOOG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) search on "media training" yields a result of 21.1 million links with listings of an innumerable amount of professionals offering to help executives get ahead of this curve. At the top of the list--Media Training Worldwide.

T.J. Walker, CEO of [Media Training Worldwide](#), said the number of these communication coaches has grown significantly in the past decade as demand for their expertise increases with modern media exposure on multiple platforms.

He started his firm in 2001.

"It's not like when Lee Iacocca could buy an ad on three networks and hit the whole world in 1979 when everyone would see it," Walker said, adding that this is the one task a CEO can't simply assign.

"A CEO can delegate sales, accounting, marketing, but the one thing that the CEO cannot delegate is speaking on behalf of a whole organization to the entire world."

So who already does it the best? Take a look at Steve Jobs, who makes himself the face of **Apple's** (nasdaq: [AAPL](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) innovation. Bill Gates of **Microsoft** (nasdaq: [MSFT](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) also comes to mind, Walker said, as he's shown vast improvements over the years for the software company.

Nick Ragone, senior vice president and director of client development at Ketchum PR, liaises with the press for chief executives of public and private companies. Ragone said he advises his clients to take the "Henry Kissinger approach."

"Here are the questions, answer them, then bridge to the message you want to deliver," he said. "Especially on TV, I have to emphasize how fast four or five minutes goes by."

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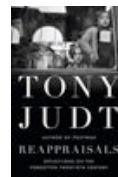


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