

Be ready to meet the press: The keys to an effective media-training program

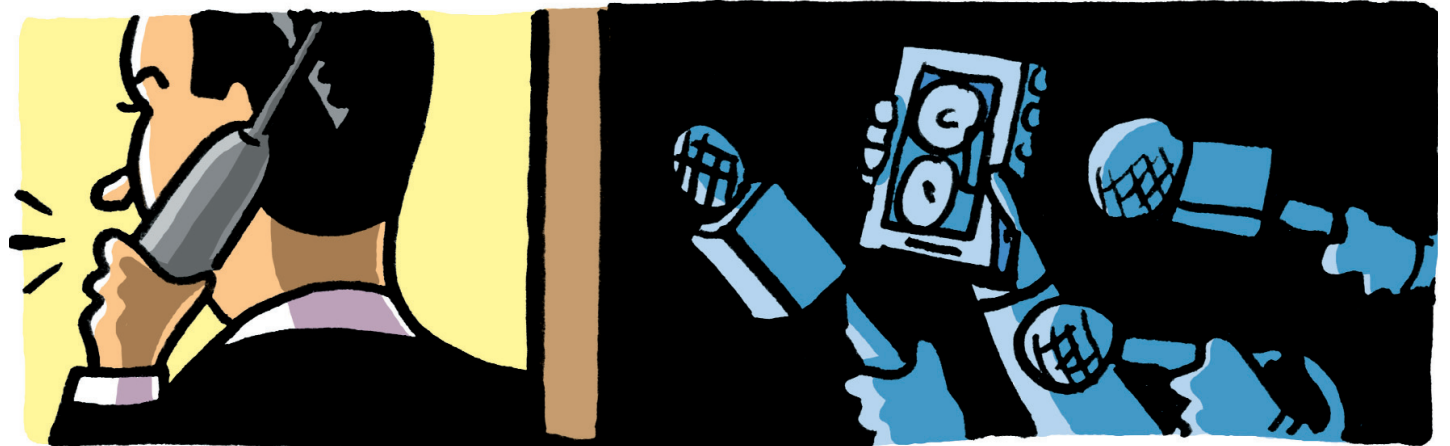
PUBLIC RELATIONS
TACTICS

By Kristi Hedges

It's easy to forget when watching a master at work — be it in sports, the arts or business — that hours of practice brought them to where they are. The preparation that culminates into moments of excellence is assumed and accepted. As an observer, you are able to appreciate the relaxed delivery of perfection. The same approach should apply to one of the key aspects of a PR program: media training.

Yet this is one area where we often falter. As media coaching gains in popularity and more and more CEOs and politicians are subjected to it, interview subjects often appear to be the casualties of overzealous training. Canned responses, repetitive language and flat, if not insincere, delivery are often the telltale signs of this problem.

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media training. They freely use the phrase “staying on message” and not in a positive way. They often insinuate, and sometimes directly accuse interview subjects of being either evasive or untruthful in answering pointed questions. This is clearly not the desired goal of a media training program.

What should be done to combat this growing awareness of and cynicism toward media training? How do we deliver sensitive training that produces the desired results of a relaxed interview that sounds real? The keys to a successful media training program are practice, polish and control.

Practice: Executives should spend as much time as they can practicing the fundamentals of interviewing to the point that it becomes second nature for them.

It is highly unlikely that they'll be able to spend hours preparing for interviews, but they certainly can and should find more than a few hurried minutes to get ready. How many times have we heard someone say, “Don't worry, I was media trained three years ago”? That may be commendable, but it doesn't mean they're ready to answer the potentially tough questions they're about to face.

At the very least, a quick prep session should be mandatory in advance of every interview. Preparation should include a review of all relevant information about the interview topic, an overview of the media outlet, the background of the interviewer, a review of key talking points and the messaging used to deliver these talking points.

Whenever possible, take the time to run through some sample questions, especially the dreaded ones. While many interview subjects know the messages they want to deliver, they haven't prepared themselves to actually do this when someone asks a question, especially a

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query that's unexpected, off-target or controversial.

The mock interview may be the ultimate challenge for a media training counselor, especially those who deal with experienced executives or leaders. These people have a strong level of confidence based on years of success and aren't always open to constructive criticism or even suggestions for improvement.

However, to effectively do your job as counselor, make the effort to fully prepare your executive. This often requires diplomacy, other times scare tactics. The best method might be to use the time-tested query, “So, what questions don't you want to answer and how are you going to answer them when they come up?” Many interview candidates reconsider their level of self-confidence when they're up against such potentially threatening questions.

Polish: In preparing, some time should be spent polishing the executive's interviewing skills. This should not simply entail reciting potential responses. Perhaps the single biggest failing of a media trained interview subject is a canned response.

In many cases, it is necessary to stick to a prepared statement, especially when potentially litigious matters are being discussed. But it doesn't have to look as if the executive is pushing an invisible button

and providing a recorded response. To create a sense of spontaneity, suggest the executive modify his language, making an attempt to say the same thing in different ways. He can vary his cadence and delivery style to avoid the “robot effect.”

In a broadcast interview, either on television or radio, advise him to pause before answering. Why? An immediate response may indicate to the audience that it's really a preprogrammed message instead. A simple pause before responding, even when the executive knows exactly what he wants to say, also gives the impression that the question is being given consideration.

Control: Preparation and polish equal control, the end goal of good media training. Skilled, confident communicators take command of an interview through positive body language; direct, concise responses built on clear, powerful messaging; and an ability to read the atmosphere and the audience. They know what tone should be set at the start of the interview and how to make adjustments based on the dynamics of the interview. Their answers reflect on the questions asked and also include some reference to one of the key messages targeted for delivery in the interview.

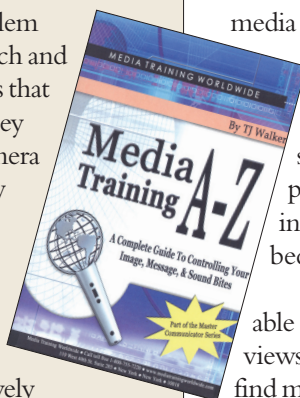
The bottom line is that successfully trained interview subjects don't look trained at all. They just appear to be smart, credible and compelling. It takes more time in up-front training and ongoing due diligence to achieve this, but the end result more than justifies it. **T**

in print

Lights, camera — freak out!

“The biggest problem facing most of my speech and media training clients is that they change the way they talk once the video camera is on them or once they stand up to practice a speech. When most people come into my office and sit down, they are relaxed. They communicate expressively with hand gestures, body motion, facial expressions and a conversational tone of voice. . . . But the second I say, ‘Let's now do a practice interview or speech, and we will record it,’ a transformation occurs. . . . Business executives who were engaging, confident, vocal and alive shrink before my eyes. When people get nervous, they change their normal presentation style, usually by stiffening up. When it comes to trying to give a good impression to viewers, the results can be disastrous.”

Excerpted from “Media Training A-Z, A Complete Guide to Controlling Your Image, Message, & Sound Bites,” by T.J. Walker. *Media Training Worldwide*, 110W. 40th Street, Ste. 203, New York, N.Y. 10018. www.mediatrainingworldwide.com. 176 pages. \$24.95.



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