

Communication Strategies

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Content-Based Media Training

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Media Training: A Definition

The process of preparing people for media interviews through workshops or coaching sessions that focus on content and/or technique

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



In today's media environment, preparing for an interview requires more than getting fashion advice and "tips" on how to answer questions. A more comprehensive approach to media training—one that concentrates on substance without sacrificing style—results in effective and meaningful interaction between your company spokesperson and the media.

To explore this topic, *Communication Strategies* brought together three seasoned media relations veterans, each with his or her own perspective on the best ways to effect a win-win scenario for both reporter and spokesperson (roundtable begins on page 2):



Paul B. Brown

Managing editor of *Financial World*, the financial magazine published every two weeks with a circulation of 500,000 high-net-worth readers. As author of six books, Paul has experience on both sides of the reporter's notebook, having been interviewed more than 100 times.



Alison Davis

President of Davis, Hays & Company, a corporate communications and public relations firm that specializes in developing strategic messages and communicating them to key audiences. Alison frequently leads content-oriented media training sessions for clients.



Joyce Newman

President of The Newman Group, Joyce has been leading high-level media and speaker training sessions for a diverse group of clients since 1975. Her book, *Selling Yourself: How To Be the Competent Person You Are*, was just published by MasterMedia Ltd.

Searching for Meaning in Media Training: One PR Person's Journey

by Alison Davis, President

One of my first experiences in public relations (back in the Dark Ages, before fax machines and indoor plumbing) was helping an account manager run a media training session for a client's spokesperson. To my inexperienced eyes, it was all so dazzling: Lights! Camera! Trick questions! But the training also seemed shallow, as if Hollywood had invaded our Manhattan studio, allowing Style to triumph over Substance.

As the years went on, I continued to harbor suspicions about media training. Sure, it's helpful to know that a blue shirt is better than a white one on camera, but should information like this be preached as gospel? Media training often brought to mind that old joke about two women eating dinner at a Catskills resort: Yes, the food was terrible, and the portions were so small.

Then, many years later, Davis, Hays & Company worked on a project that proved that media training can be more than just a superficial one-night stand. As with many epiphanic experiences, this one started with a challenge: Because of the impossibly busy schedules of our spokespeople, we couldn't meet with them before the

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ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Three Perspectives on Content-Based Media Training



Alison Davis: Let's start by looking at media relations from a reporter's point of view. Paul, how could spokespeople be more effective in their dealings with you? What should they do differently?

Paul B. Brown: Have manners. By actual count, I get 20 to 25 phone calls, faxes and press releases each day. Some tell me that the chairman of ABC Company is in town and would like to come by and say, "Hi." That's very nice, but the

Joyce Newman: That is interesting to me because I often find myself covering basic common-sense rules of etiquette in media training. For instance, people don't call reporters back. It should be a fundamental rule that you call a reporter back, even if you can't help him with a particular story. Because media relations are not about one encounter—they're about building relationships.

Alison: Paul, let's assume that the person who wants to come by and say, "Hi," is appropriate for your magazine—that he heads a publicly held company. What are you looking for in that

Joyce: A key thing we teach in media training is that an interview is not a conversation. It may feel like a conversation—two people talking—but each person has an agenda. The spokesperson wants to communicate certain points, and the reporter wants to come away with a good story.

Alison: It's the spokesperson's responsibility to get his agenda across. Good media training teaches spokespeople how to organize their thoughts into clear, succinct message points.

Joyce: They should be able to deliver those points just as effectively in a three-minute television interview or a one-hour background session. We teach that control is the key to a successful interview, from a spokesperson's point of view.

Alison: Paul, do you mind when someone exercises control in an interview?



"The spokesperson not only has to be thoroughly familiar with the materials, but also has to be comfortable enough with the media setting to let all his knowledge and personality come through."

- Alison Davis

fact is, it's inconsiderate of them to think I can meet with everyone who calls. What's more, most have no business contacting me in the first place.

Alison: How so?

Paul: Most would never be covered in *Financial World*. If they read the magazine or asked me, they'd know that we only write about public companies that our readers can buy stock in. Invariably, someone comes by and we find out he's president of a privately held soda pop company. They've wasted my time and their time.

interview? What makes it work for you?

Paul: I want that person to be smart and entertaining.

Alison: Let's take "smart" first. What do you mean when you say, "smart?"

Paul: If the person sits there blankly, and answers "yes" or "no," that's not smart. The guy is there representing his company, and he should have a point of view that reflects the direction and culture of his company. The reporter should be able to learn something—about the company, the industry, or even business in general.



"It should be a fundamental rule that you call a reporter back, even if you can't help him with a particular story."

- Joyce Newman



"It's inconsiderate to think I can meet with everyone who calls."

- Paul B. Brown

Paul: From a reporter's viewpoint, I don't mind, as long as they don't do it to avoid answering my questions. Most smart reporters understand the quid pro quo of interviews—just as most smart interview subjects understand the balance that has to happen to make the experience successful.

Alison: We've been talking about "smart," but you also mentioned "entertaining." How "entertaining" does a spokesperson have to be?

Paul: They don't have to tell jokes or do stand-up. But they let their own personality come out, and I get a strong sense of what makes them tick, how they're leading the company. I want to talk to a person—not a balance sheet. If I am interested in the fact that a certain company had an 18 percent return on equity, I can look it

up on a S&P sheet. I want to know why.

Alison: It's important for our clients to remember that, just as they're trying to sell something, you're trying to sell magazines.

Paul: Yes, and every publication, every show, is looking to entertain as well as to inform.

Alison: That's one of the reasons that the right kind of media training is so important. The spokesperson not only has to be thoroughly familiar with the material, but also has to be comfortable enough with the media setting to let all his knowledge and personality come through.

Joyce: We have to help spokespersons get over the "good little boy and girl" syndrome. Even sophisticated businesspeople get into an interview and they're petrified. It's like they're in the third pew of church or temple. They don't move, they answer questions with monosyllables and they sublimate their identity. It's not a very effective way to do an interview.

Alison: Good media training has to help people uncover their ability to both master the material and tell their story.

Joyce: Because being able to tell your story is what media training is all about. ■

What's Wrong With PR People?

Nothing, says Alison Davis, who counts some as her best friends. But Paul Brown, normally supportive of public relations and its practitioners, has a bone to pick with PR people in an interview situation: They get in the way, he says.

"Reporters hate having PR people in the room when they do interviews. It's impossible to have a meaningful dialogue with the chairman of a company if there are three PR

people kicking him under the table every time he says something. It sends a very bad message to the reporter: 'The chairman can't be trusted to do this interview on his own. We've got to make sure he doesn't make a mistake.' This makes the reporter very cranky. And it often has an impact on the final story." ■

60 Seconds on "60 Minutes"

It's imprinted into our consciousness: The company spokesperson slamming the door on Mike Wallace. Or beginning to babble while being interviewed by Morley Safer. Or holding a raincoat over his head while being pursued by Steve Croft.

Yes, "60 Minutes" is most spokesperson's worst nightmare. And, as a result, it's overemphasized in media training, says Joyce Newman. "I know some media trainers whose sessions are highlighted by a "60 Minutes"-type ambush technique: During a break, when the trainee goes to use the

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60 Seconds on “60 Minutes”

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restroom, there are all these cameras and bright lights and fake reporters standing there, waiting to ‘get’ the person.”

Joyce finds that approach misguided, since “the training we do is all about building trust and confidence, not making the person feel hunted.”

Besides, counters Paul Brown, “Most reporters are not Mike Wallace. My mother raised me to be reasonably civilized and to call before I go somewhere, and bring a cake when I go.”

Of course, if you *do* encounter Mike Wallace and camera crew in a dark alley, there are ways to deal with them: If you know it’s coming, you prepare for a tough interview the way elected officials get ready for press conferences—by thinking of every possible question and rehearsing your buns off.

But your overall approach to the media shouldn’t be based on the “60 Minutes” scenario, says Joyce: “You’re trying to build relationships, not run from them.”

Media Training: One PR Person’s Journey

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media training. And because they were experts on complex subjects, we wouldn’t know what they would talk about until the session. This made it impossible to precisely craft key messages ahead of time. To further complicate matters, the majority of those being trained had limited media experience, and harbored much doubt and many misconceptions about the journalistic process.

Working closely with our client and with Joyce Newman of The Newman Group, we developed a **content-oriented** media training format that combined three elements:

1. Exploration of our target media—how editors, reporters and producers operate, what they need, and how spokespersons should best work with them.
2. Content analysis—what each spokesperson would talk about with a reporter, and how best to present this information to the media in effective language and format.
3. Individualized training—using the knowledge gained in

the first two sessions and combining it with “standard” media training techniques to develop a personal style and approach that works.

Since those first early attempts, we’ve applied this model in many situations, for the same client and for others. The result is media training that is content-rich. Spokespeople emerge from such training sessions feeling not like overgroomed poodles, but like confident partners in the media process.

Does content-based media training work in every case? Since most of our clients are corporate people who meet the mainstream and/or business press, this approach to media training usually works for them. But if the spokesperson were not a smart, articulate person with his or her own viewpoint and opinion, we’d recommend sticking with the old-fashioned glitzy type of training. Just make sure to comply with U.S.D.A. guidelines by labeling such training “content free.” ■