



## Media Training for Executives

BY BILL GERDES

Media training for executives is taking on added importance. In the movie, *Jerry McGuire*, Renee Zellweger tells Tom Cruise, “You had me at hello...”

That, says **Joyce Newman, president of The Newman Group**, a national media training group headquartered in New York City, is what CEOs and CFOs need to keep in mind when dealing with the media these days.

“You have to get them at hello,” she says.

Earning the public trust—and keeping it—is taking on added dimensions in 2003. The intensified scrutiny over financial statements and other corporate disclosures will bring many more top-level executives into the harsh glare of television lights and under the watchful eyes of print reporters. That translates into a greater need for executives to undergo training that teaches them how to deal with today’s media.

“I am seeing an increase in the number of firms seeking media training, which is all we do. The world around them is changing and the messages are changing,” Newman said.

“All we do in media training is focus on what people do and say and how it comes across to others. CEOs are even being scrutinized for the way they move and what they wear. They need a coach who can help them step out and see themselves from a third-person perspective.”

That’s where media training becomes important and why top level executives need to consider making such training part of their company’s next management retreat.

Today, more than ever before, the news media help set the agenda for corporate policy debate.

“There’s a big difference between knowing a subject and being able to express your knowledge effectively,” says Ralph W. Shrader, chairman and chief executive officer of Booz Allen Hamilton, a global consulting firm whose executives go through media training. “Media training is an invaluable tool for helping executives translate their knowledge and points of view into clear messages.”

Interviews with the news media can be nerve-wracking events for even the most experienced spokesperson. The ability

to spot and avoid leading questions, deliver and repeat key messages while maintaining the necessary calmness and professionalism before television cameras is crucial to the way a corporation is perceived by the public.

“Proper training provides executives with the skills needed to neutralize difficult stories—for example, how to use strong, affirmative language and make your points instead of repeating leading or negative words that might be in the reporter’s question,” Shrader says.

Communicating through crisis is often confusing. In most cases, the facts are sketchy and the media is impatient. Corporate leaders need to know how to respond in volatile situations.

All-too-often, media training is an afterthought in response to a poorly handled event. But the corporate revelations of the past years suggest it is time to take proactive measures, and ensure your employees are prepared to face the public. Some people develop the proper skills naturally and others learn through experience. It’s the duty of management to ensure that everyone is prepared.

We’re not talking about a degree in communications or taking a month of seminars. A single, one-day media awareness training session with a professional experienced in handling the media can make a substantial difference in how your company fares on tomorrow’s business pages, and how it fares in stockholder meetings and in front of the various government agencies.

“For a special interview situation on TV or radio, media trainers conduct ‘mock interviews’ and provide videotape feedback, which can be especially helpful to business people faced with the challenge of getting their message across in an unfamiliar media environment,” Shrader says.

“Media training can be applied in a number of areas,” Newman says. “It comes down one thing, do spokespersons command attention and respect? They have to deal with their shareholders, the regulatory agencies, as well as the media. How are they coming across? Would they pay attention to themselves if they were talking?”

Newman comments that a good media trainer empowers the trainee “to be the best they can be in a variety of media situations. It’s not about making them wrong or look silly or ambushing them on the way to the restroom. It is about making them better with the media. We are teachers. We demystify the process.”

Even though your firm may have provided media training in the past you should consider a refresher course. This is a new day and age and situations change. The surge of websites and electronic newsletters has brought new and faster ways of communication and even the most media-savvy businessman needs a tune-up once in a while, Newman said.

So the next time your company is planning a corporate management retreat, consider including media training. You’ll be glad you did when your secretary calls you and says, “Mr. Smith, a television crew is in the lobby and wants to talk to you....” ●

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