

PRWEEK



The CEO did all the right things: faced with a crisis he came forward immediately, apologized to the public for the disaster, displayed sorrow for the victims and announced swift action to remedy the situation and prevent any repetition. Then a lower-echelon spokesperson went on a major television talk show and in one sentence undid everything by saying: "We admitted we were wrong. Get over it."

The story, recounted by a media trainer, becomes more relevant with every year that passes. More and more, business execs – at all management levels – are finding themselves dealing directly with the media in situations that a few years ago would have been handled by their PR departments. Gaffes like this one are definitely a corporate nightmare.

"It used to be that a plant explosion got you in the headlines," elaborates Bill Patterson, president of Reputation Management Associates (Columbus, OH), "but now it's fraud by a vice president, someone making a racial remark, a company executive growing marijuana. Today, the bizarre has become typical, and companies no longer say, 'Let's prepare for Armageddon.' They know what Armageddon is, and it's the man who picks up his wife in the company parking lot and kills her. That has companies scared. Never mind that it's a police story – the press wants to interview the head of the company."

The fact that a positive news story about your company is four times more believable than an ad, has opened up a whole new avenue for media training, the experts say.

"In the old days," says

Patterson, "you didn't see the company president talking to the media. [You saw the PR pro.] But today, you don't see the Microsoft PR guy dealing with the media – it's Bill Gates himself. PR has become too important to be left to the PR department."

"Reputation management is very important to us," agrees Jim Vitak, PR supervisor at Ashland Chemical, and a Patterson client. With few, if any, crises to contend with, Ashland management nevertheless knows that building a bank of goodwill in the community will pay off in case of an emergency. Vitak relates how its ten-year ongoing media training program garners good news for Ashland facilities nationwide. He gives as an example the Montreal manager who followed up a media training session by inviting a

local newspaper to visit the facility. The result: a positive article stressing Ashland's contribution to the local economy.

Apple-polishing

Dushka Zapata, vice president of Edelman Worldwide, cites Apple Computer's roaring success at Macworld Expo in Seattle earlier this month as a first-class example of media know-how. Zapata, who handles PR for Apple in Silicon Valley, could not confirm that Apple management has ever had formal media training, but its media interactions, she says, are textbook examples of a management team with complete mastery of its principles

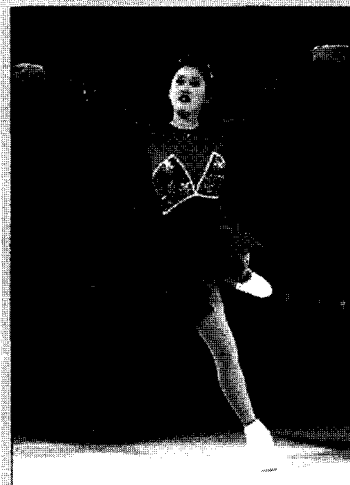
Steve Jobs, keynote speaker at Macworld, addressed an enthusiastic audience for two hours. Few corporate spokespeople find the time to speak that long – or the skill to use it

well. In most business scenarios they are more likely to have only a few minutes, sometimes a lot less, to drive their message home, says **Joyce Newman of The Newman Group (NY).**

Without ever losing sight of the substance of the client's message, Newman makes extensive use of videotape to help clients look their best. Videos are a widely used media training technique that allows clients to see for themselves just how and when they're putting the wrong foot forward.

Newman has found executives – from CEOs to middle management – who are amazingly unaware of the figure they cut when it comes to the fit and color of their clothing, the suitability of their hairstyles, and the unspoken message they send with battered briefcases. She will take them

In practice: Kristi Yamaguchi



Achievement: A champion amateur figure skater while still in her teens and an Olympic Gold Medallist in 1992, Yamaguchi is 27 years old now and a seasoned professional in

both her skating career and in her media savvy. Her sophisticated Web page – <http://www.yahoo.com/promotions/kristi/> – promotes her tours with Stars on Ice and other activities, which include being corporate spokesperson for Celanese Acetate, Dairy Management, General Mills, and Mervyn's as well as her various charitable activities.

Role of media training: As a teenage champion with no media experience, Yamaguchi was one of many young skaters who received media training with the full backing of the US Figure Skating Association. Meeting the media for the first time was intimidating for these young celebrities, who often faced questions that had

nothing to do with skating. "They have to speak about what they know," says Joyce Newman of the Newman Group, "and a reporter can take them way off base." Media training helped these bright but media-naïve athletes take control of interviews and deflect inappropriate questions with assurance.

What PR people can learn from this model: An independent media trainer is often more effective than the PR personnel who must work with celebrities on an almost daily basis. It is easier for an outside counselor to speak candidly to popular stars – or bosses – who may be extremely sensitive to, and even resentful of, anything they perceive as personal criticism.

15 Tips & Techniques

- 1 Have a clear agenda, and make sure your brain is engaged before you open your mouth.**
- 2 Be honest. You don't have to tell everything you know, but everything you do tell must be the truth.**
- 3 Show humanity. In a crisis situation, you must remember to show compassion.**
- 4 Don't admit liability.**
- 5 Don't be defensive – it implies guilt.**
- 6 Be aware of body language. Your face and your body telegraph your emotions.**
- 7 Maintain eye contact. Be sure your facial expression remains pleasant no matter how provocative the questions.**
- 8 Remember that in most stories the reporter's questions are not used. If you repeat part of a negative question, it will look as though you initiated the negative response.**
- 9 Be human. Most people don't trust corporations but do have empathy for people.**
- 10 Speak in soundbites of about ten seconds.**
- 11 Say something positive in every answer you give.**
- 12 Say the name of the organization in every answer.**
- 13 Never say, "No comment."**
- 14 Be wary of going "off the record."**
- 15 Never get angry with a reporter.**

shopping and teach the men to pull down their suit jackets when they sit, and tell the women to pull their hair back so it won't obscure their profiles on camera. It is sometimes incredible, even to the experienced Newman, how far clients will go to delude themselves. "An executive tried to justify an ill-fitting coat by explaining that it shrank," she says.

Newman, who would rather be regarded as a consultant in executive development than as an image consultant, says that making the client likable is an important part of media training.

She tells the story of a richly successful Beverly Hills cardiologist with a new book and supreme self-confidence who appeared on *Good Morning, America*. Once on camera, he spoke incomprehensibly about myocardial infarctions. Not surprisingly, the audience considered him arrogant, and he came to Newman for help.

Newman advised him to make his story interesting and accessible to his audience. "I told him to compare the heart to the tire of a car that doesn't just blow out but deflates slowly over time. People need those kind of analogies," she recalls.

Athletes, Newman says, are expected to be always graceful as well as knowledgeable in areas that have nothing to do with their talents. She has trained a number of them on controlling interviews so that they're talking about what they know best (see sidebar).

Calling himself the odd man out in media training, Jim Cameron, president of Cameron Communications (Darien, CT), says that preparing clients to talk to print journalists matters more than the physical appearance issue so crucial to TV. He believes that TV has great reach but no staying power in viewers' minds.

Trade magazines, Cameron says, are more important than many executives realize. You might think that in an interview with *Progressive Grocer* you're dealing with the industry, but a *Wall Street Journal* reporter covering that industry will throw quotes from that

article in your face one day.

Could a PR account executive do what he does? Maybe. But Cameron quickly adds, "I'm both a specialist and an outsider. The relationship between the client and its PR agency or department sometimes makes it impossible to say to a client what an outsider can say with credibility. Would you speak to the client about his toupee?" he asks.

With today's technology, what you said years ago can come back to bite you, warns Mike Lawrence, senior vice president of Media Services at Cone Communications (Boston). To put teeth in this lesson, Lawrence will spend hours searching Lexis-Nexis and other databases looking for issues on which the current position of a client company seems to contradict the past.

Moreover, company information is becoming universally available via the Net. Multinational companies, especially, must beware of that. "The weaponry a good reporter has, at very low cost, is enormous," Lawrence says. Even an interview with a hometown reporter is potentially risky because that reporter can send the story to the AP and present you with a major daily newspaper-level problem.

Lawrence disagrees with

Cameron, however, on the lasting power of TV coverage. He says, "You can be sure that if a controversial issue is reborn, file tapes of earlier, related incidents will be used to illustrate the TV news story."

A former journalist experienced in both print and TV, Lawrence teaches his clients how to gauge where an interviewer is heading. This protects the interviewee from being boxed by a series of innocuous questions that leave only one answer – an undesirable one – to the question that has been the interviewer's goal all along.

Don't forget the passion

Is there ever a situation when media training becomes a disadvantage? Lawrence admits that a lack of spontaneity can result in spokespeople becoming so focused on not making mistakes that they show no passion for what they are saying.

And passion matters, says Lawrence; don't discount its importance. He recalls Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee, who could never be accused of strict adherence to media training precepts. Yet, when Kernaghan so passionately rebuked talk-show host Kathie Lee Gifford for allowing products bearing her name to be produced in Central American sweatshops,

the media and the public sat bolt upright and paid attention. Did it work? In a word, yes. Kathie Lee insisted that Wal-Mart return the manufacturing of her garment line to a Honduran factory only if plant conditions improved and independent monitoring was established.

PR executives could also learn much from media training, says Vickee Adams, senior vice president/director of the Communications Training Center (CTC), Ketchum. With corporate mergers and changes in ownership rampant, star CEOs are being replaced by star management teams, and media training has become a way to give managers the communications skills to deal with a variety of audiences. "At Ketchum," Adams says, "we're being used as a vehicle to groom managers for next level of leadership."

Clear, concise and compelling

Ketchum CTC is a part of Ketchum Public Relations, making it one of the few in-house media training services, with training studios in New York, San Francisco and Washington, DC. The ability of a spokesperson to handle the increasingly prevalent technology of receiving questions in his/her ears while talking to a camera as if it were a person will become even more important, says Adams. Trainers must be able to simulate what has become a standard method of interviewing.

"Media training," says Aviva Diamond, president of LA-based Bluestreak/A Communications Company, "should help the client appear to best advantage, and to get the desired message across clearly and concisely and compellingly. Our only interest is for the client to look good."

"It's not the dramatic stories that are most significant," notes Diamond. "The real triumphs of media training are the stories you don't hear about: the crises that are averted either because the situation is managed as an issue before it blows up, or because it's nipped in the bud before it explodes in the public arena."