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Back to basics: Media training never goes out of fashion

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Some PR basics never go out of fashion. Spokespeople always need to be prepared to speak strategically, knowledgeably and succinctly. Their messages must resonate with target audiences. With such crucial demands, skillful media training is always in vogue.

Media training helps spokespeople make the most out of interview opportunities. Sessions can range from a one-hour refresher course to a multi-day workshop with exhaustive mock interviews. Programs typically address what you should say and how to say it, as well as ways company representatives can subtly stay in control.

If you are required to speak on behalf of your organization or are a PR practitioner responsible for coaching spokespeople, the following recommendations will guide you to create effective media interactions:

Spokesperson preparation

First, ensure a broad understanding of media relations and what makes information newsworthy. Consider who your spokesperson will be up against and what they can expect from the interview.

Next, clarify the purpose of the interview, confirm the reporter's deadline and gain a deep understanding of your audience's interests and needs. It's also helpful to know what questions people will likely ask, who else is being interviewed and what the news outlet has previously reported about the topic, company or spokesperson.

With such insights in mind, the goal is to help the reporter do their job while positioning your organization well. To accomplish this balancing act, key messages serve as your most critical tool.

Key messages

Develop ideas that concisely deliver three pieces of essential information:

- * Describe the situation, company, product, service or point of view.
- * Differentiate it by showcasing a leadership position and/or core attributes.
- * Address WIIFM ("What's in it for me?") from target audience members' perspectives.



Empower your spokespeople in conversations with journalists by preparing proof points that substantiate, distinguish and add credibility to messages using relevant:

- * Facts, figures and statistics that provide supporting information or quantifiable data points
- * Quotes from third-party experts (not on payroll) reinforcing your position
- * Stories that reveal a trend, case study or customer testimonial
- * Visuals that add clarity via photos, graphics or videos

Rules of engagement

Don't assume that everyone knows how to interact with members of the press. Before a spokesperson calls or meets with a reporter, they should understand that:

- * If you don't want a statement quoted, then do not make it.
- * If you don't know an answer, then say so.
- * If you can't answer a question, then never say "no comment."

Remember the following tips:

- * Do not use professional or technical jargon.
- * Do not speak about your competition when there's an opportunity for you to make statements about your own organization.
- * Do not offer details about timing, volume or costs that your company might not be able to achieve later.

Effective delivery techniques

A spokesperson's primary goal should be to introduce and reinforce his or her key messages. To do so, recognize that repetition equals retention; you can't expect a reporter to recall critical points if you only mention them once.

Therefore, it may be helpful to rewrite approved messages in two or three different ways. This gives a spokesperson more ammunition, enabling him or her to address the essence of the messages while using varied language without sounding too repetitive.

Spokespeople also can enhance delivery by using a one-two punch. It's as simple as making a claim (which is what you want your audience to know) and adding relevant supporting information (which proves that your claim is true).

"Bridging" is another productive technique, which enables a spokesperson to answer a reporter's question, followed by a transitional phrase that allows him or her to incorporate a key message into their response. Phrases such as "let me put that in perspective," "what's important to remember is," or "and don't forget" make it easier to keep the conversation on track.

Enhanced personal presence

A spokesperson's looks or personality should never overshadow what he or she has to say. Yet appearance, gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice can enhance or detract from what this person wants to express.

To guard against a disconnect between spoken words and first impressions, spokespeople should make efforts to engage reporters. In an in-person interview, it's helpful to use direct eye contact, lean forward slightly when seated, employ natural hand gestures and temper body language to reflect the topic.

Whether interacting face-to-face or via phone, a spokesperson should strive to maintain energy while varying his or her voice level to match the significance of the messages.

Ultimately, a well-prepared spokesperson helps people hear and believe an organization's messages, while inspiring actions that positively impact business. It's a sound investment to go back to basics and employ proven media training strategies and techniques.