

BUSINESS PLANNING

Maximizing Your Media Opportunities: Media Training for Business Leaders

By Jeffrey Ory, APR Deveney Communication

The impact of mass media on businesses today is significant. It has the power to help raise awareness of your organization's products and services, highlight your contributions to the community or offer you an opportunity to set the record straight. On the other hand, a lack of positive media coverage or negative stories can severely impede your organization's progress.

So it's no wonder that executives today are more anxious than ever to learn the best way to present themselves in front of cameras, microphones and often intimidating journalists.

A skillfully handled media interview can dramatically enhance the credibility of an individual or organization. But if you lack know-how and finesse, a poor performance in front of any reporter can seriously damage or destroy a company's reputation.

The first step, however, should be to examine your motivations. Why do you want to be interviewed or to accept an interview request? What should you say to the journalist? The answers to these questions should always be based on solid strategic reasons.

Even if you're secure in your motivations and confident that they agree with your business strategy, you're likely to have other questions about media interviews. In our experience, common questions about the media may take many shapes but usually focus on seven issues.

What do they want from me?

The news media are in the business of reporting what they judge to be news.

accurate, intelligible, complete and as objective as possible.

What business is it of theirs what goes on in my company?

The news media guard the right to probe and investigate. It is better for you to offer information to the media, as they will generally find a way of getting the information they seek, particularly if you appear guarded. Keep in mind that if you provide the media with information you have more control over the content, its release and accuracy.

Do I have to respond when the media comes knocking?

You do not always need to respond when asked, but make your decision based on knowledge—not fear. Before accepting the interview find out what topics the journalist wants to discuss, the reason for the story and what form the interview will take. Know why the topic at hand is newsworthy. With this information in hand, you'll be better able to make a strategic decision regarding whether to move forward or not.

What about "no comment?"

Often these two words imply that you have something to hide. It is better to explain that you do not have an answer to the question at this time, but would be happy to provide an answer as soon as one is available. If you are not permitted to discuss the topic or unable to answer the question there are always other

Why does everything need to be so rushed?

Media deadlines are sacred; pressures are continual on journalists. You need to recognize that they are not out to get you, but rather out to get the story. Try to respond as soon as possible, but if you do not have the information needed immediately, say so. When time allows, schedule the interview for later in the day or week based upon the reporter's deadline. This will provide the opportunity to prepare your thoughts before going into an interview.

Aren't they really out to get me?

Today, bad news is "news" and good news is generally worth far less. Ever wonder why it is often easier for those in the opposition to be heard and gain support for their cause? While it may appear that the media sometimes are out to "get" you or your organization, often they are just doing their job of going after a timely, topical story with audience appeal.

What is in it for me?

Any interview is an excellent opportunity to tell your story—if you are prepared to do so. Whether it's good news you want to promote or a negative story you want to put in the best light, this is your chance to let the public hear your side. In either case, it's essential that you do your homework. And by homework, I do not mean just thinking about the questions you're most likely to be asked and how you would respond to them, but immersing yourself in the art of the media

media contact will assist your ability to communicate effectively and is certainly recommended, one of the best ways you can prepare is by participating in a formal media training program.

Media training programs offer an educational and developmental opportunity for business spokespeople to effectively manage media situations, communicate their key messages and control even the most challenging media encounters.

A good media training program familiarizes participants with the actual interview experience. Realize that a media interview is much different than a relaxed conversation between friends—the introduction of elements such as microphones, bright lights and cameras places most people on unfamiliar ground. Unfortunately the result is often blank stares and muddled statements from the inexperienced.

All too often, the unappealing environment of media interviews is the most common reason interview requests go unanswered. But this inclination for avoidance, which is based on fear rather than knowledge, can be overcome.

Media training was especially valuable in the case of Alberta Innovation and Science, an impressive group that includes Canada's top technology, research and science professionals from leading agencies and organizations.

In 1999, the organization faced the approaching threat of Y2K and anticipated intense media coverage surrounding the potential technological disaster. Deveney Communication was brought on board by Alberta Innovation and Science to conduct intense, one-day sessions with organization leaders.

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focus on in their interviews, to “bridge” unrelated statements by journalists to their key messages and to adapt a proactive approach in interviews.

The results of Alberta Innovation and Science media training included a dramatic advancement in communication skills and an increase in confidence during pressure-filled media experiences. Participants reported more positive experiences resulting from their increased ability to present information in an engaging and creative manner.

One week following the media training, a key executive with Alberta Innovation and Science spent an intensive day with a variety of media. With his training he was able to conduct message-driven interviews, which led to over 30 positive national and regional print, television and radio stories that clearly positioned the organization as a leader in the field.

It is important to have a structured and well-defined

approach when dealing with reporters to ensure that interactions with the media are purposeful, effective and contribute to the fulfillment of business objectives. Practice makes perfect, and proper media training can teach you how

to be comfortable with the media and ultimately make your interviews message-driven, not question-driven.

In today's competitive business world, preparation, such as media training, serves as a guide in developing the confidence needed around the media to ensure a successful communication effort that will ultimately strengthen a corporate image and group identity.

Jeffrey Ory, APR, is a senior communication strategist at Deveney Communication (www.deveney.com), a full-service public relations firm that has provided media training services for numerous corporate, government and non-profit organizations, including the Arthritis Foundation, LAMMICO, the Louisiana State Bar Association and the Young Leadership Council. This article is the second in a four-part series by the firm on communication strategies and tactics that help corporate leaders achieve business goals.

