



DOING MEDIA MAY seem like an extracurricular chore to a senior executive, but its impact can be profound. With more media channels than ever before – and news travelling faster than ever before – dealing with perceptions in the marketplace is often a reality an executive cannot avoid.

Take a step back and analyse. Do you and your organisation have the media skills to flourish, let alone survive, in the full glare of the media spotlight? You may have an insurance policy on your building. It makes sense. But these days you also need to consider an insurance policy on your reputation.

You certainly don't want to wait for the worst-case scenario of a media crisis to find out you're sinking rather than swimming. Whatever your company is worth, you don't want it being put through the media shredder and devalued.

Now you find yourself entering the media training maze. Public relations (PR) is not an exact science, being subject to the whims and flows of the daily news cycle, and the same applies to choosing a media trainer.

Just as your business has its unique set of features, so too do those offering to train you in all-important media skills.

So where to start? Let's begin at most people's perception of what media training is all about: the interview. >

STORY BRIAN JOHNSON

THE SPOTLIGHT EFFECT

Negotiating the media training maze can be almost as daunting as facing the media. One of the keys is to hone the precise skills you're most likely to need.

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

“Media training covers a raft of issues and skills, from understanding what constitutes a story and makes news and adjusting key messages to suit an audience, all the way through to being able to manage a news pack at a press conference,” says Rachel Friend, a well-known face on Australian television screens for many years and current director of Media Friendly out of Sydney.

It’s a theme that echoes among leading media trainers. “We generally split our full-day sessions 50-50 on practical and theory,” says Margaret Lawson from Cole Lawson in Brisbane. “Theory covers everything from news values to a day in the life of a journalist and ethical and legal considerations. Quality media training should deliver an understanding of news, as well as practical skills.”

It’s a good point, because every interview you do will be different. Especially so when you consider a radio talkback interview can go for 15 minutes, while radio news may just want a 15-second comment. Further, a television report might only drop a three-second grab into the story – all of which can influence the way you deliver your message.

Did you proactively go to them (via a media release) or did they come to you, seeking comment on something making waves in your industry? Understanding where the media is coming from and what they’re looking for can dictate whether you get the spotlight exposure or your cross-town rival is seen as the authority.

ROOKIE MISTAKES

Many people undertake media training with a high degree of mistrust of the very people they’re hoping to engage and communicate effectively with – the media. Certainly, journalists can hunt in packs, but having a confrontational and negative attitude may not be the best place to start.

For others, it’s the failure to stay on message during an interview. “You don’t want to say anything to a reporter that you don’t want reported,” notes Channel Ten’s Mark Aiston, who runs Adelaide’s Media Insider. “It can mean that what started out as positive news turns into a negative piece.”

Doug Weller, a former ABC journalist and lecturer who operates Corporate Media Services in Melbourne, agrees. “It often comes down to a lack of preparation, and involves the delivery of jargon and acronyms. It’s sloppy and can show lack of confidence, such as failing to make appropriate eye contact during TV interviews.”

All of which leads us back to the need for media training. But just as the interview isn’t the whole story, being trained up for only one type of situation may not be giving you the full range of skills your organisation deserves. If you invest in media training, look to develop a broad set of skills so that you can talk to positive stories, not just learn about putting out fires.

CRISIS AND FEAR FACTORS

A negative attitude towards the media can actually be amplified by media training. There are organisations

that specialise in crisis management courses. If that’s what you’re looking for, fine. But this won’t necessarily equip you to deal with the media in the broadest, most proactive and more positive sense. And not all courses are equal.

In some cases, the operatives can scare you senseless about what can go wrong, complete with cameras in your face from the time you step in the door before an on-screen dissection of everything you’ve done wrong, hour after hour. Then, right at the end, they’ll tell you what you should have been doing. “I know people who have gone along to these sessions and told me it was the worst experience of their lives,” Weller says.

The ability to handle a crisis should certainly be something you’re able to do, but when it comes to choosing a media trainer, think about all the skills you’d like to walk away with. That said, crises are definitely something that loom large in the minds of the trainee. It’s the nightmare of disaster-meets-media that most people fear. What should you do?

Here experts are clear: “Engage the media as quickly as possible,” Weller suggests. “Be honest and open, but don’t feel you need to know everything in a developing situation.”

A classic example of this, in practice, was the marathon media performance of then Queensland premier Anna Bligh during the state’s flood crisis of January last year. “We live in a 24/7 news cycle,” Friend says. “The premier regularly updated journalists and

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MARGARET LAWSON



“IF YOU CAN IMAGINE AN ADVERTISEMENT FOR CPA AUSTRALIA PLAYED ON SKY NEWS VERSUS AN INTERVIEW WITH A CPA AUSTRALIA EXPERT TALKING TO SKY NEWS BUSINESS ANALYST PETER SWITZER ABOUT CHANGES IN SUPERANNUATION, I’D SUGGEST VIEWERS WILL BE FAR MORE ENGAGED BY THE INTERVIEW.”

RACHEL FRIEND

the public, sometimes hourly. She was widely praised during this time because she was visible, available and empathetic. In the event of a crisis, it’s imperative the company’s spokesperson is visible and available.”

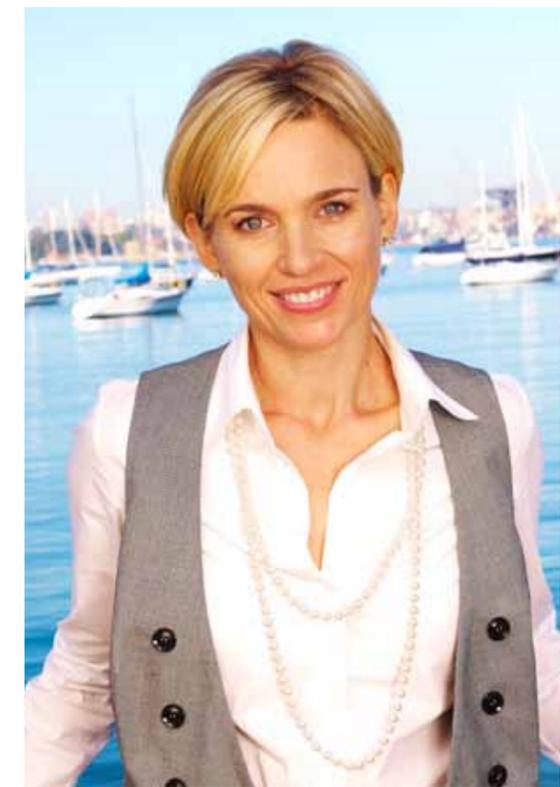
In terms of your own organisation, who should that person be?

LOOK WHO’S TALKING

There may be more than one media option on offer within your organisation. It could be the CEO, the head of PR or an expert on the topic in question.

So, who should do the interview? As a general rule, if dealing with a crisis it’s a better look to have the leader assume a leadership role.

Fortunately, a crisis is the exception rather than the rule. If the media is coming to you as a result of a media release, you’ve no doubt already nominated the >



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talent available. If, however, it approaches you for comment on a news development, you need to weigh the knowledge of the person you're considering against their ability to communicate.

Quite frankly, they may know the subject inside out, but if they don't look or sound sharp it can be counterproductive for your organisation.

A NEW GAME IN TOWN

There's another important variable you need to consider when it comes to media training, and that's social media. It is a real game-changer. This is because, in many ways, you're no longer dealing with the media to get to an audience but directly with the audience itself, and you may find that you need to respond to that audience.

Does your company have a Facebook page? Do you send out Twitter updates to your customers? The rise of the internet has been profound and social media can see messages go worldwide in a click.

Weller suggests applying the "Front Page Rule" to anything your people click out: "If you wouldn't want to see it looking back at you on the front page, don't say it – and don't send it."

IS IT WORTH IT, AND WHAT'S IT WORTH?

As with all aspects of business, there are opportunities and dangers. Media training provides the opportunity to move your organisation into a position of pre-eminence. Put simply, it can deliver a big bang for your buck.

The value of good media coverage is not in question, but how do you measure it? At this point experts part ways.

Editorial coverage has often been deemed to be worth three times the value of comparable advertising space. When you hear some tourist authorities talking about the value of their campaigns, they have looked at what it would have cost them to advertise in those places and spaces then multiplied the relevant ad rates by three.

Based on this formula, a five-minute interview on prime time metropolitan radio can be worth A\$20,000

MEDIA TRAINING 101

It's important that media training doesn't become paralysed by analysis – a bit like the hack golfer who only gets worse because they're thinking about too many things and fail to hit the ball well. The best "instant" solution for dealing with the media is this:

■ **Take out your business card and turn it over.**

■ **Everything inside the card represents what you know. This is what you can control. Everything beyond your card is what you don't know, where you can quickly lose control.**

■ **If someone asks you a question that will take you outside the card – don't go there. Ever.**

■ **Just flip the question quickly and get back in your own paddock. "Well I don't know about that, but we are beginning to see this trend develop ..."**

■ **The reason: If there's one thing more frightening than attempting to answer that first question you don't know anything about, it's the question that follows it.**

or more and a two-minute television report, in which you feature positively and prominently, can be valued at well in excess of A\$85,000. Big numbers, but are they for real? Lawson says there are many other factors to consider. "It's impossible to assign an arbitrary multiplier. For example, to what extent was the item positive, negative or neutral? What share of voice does the organisation achieve in the article? Are the key messages accurately represented? My agency prefers to look at campaign outcomes and measure this through direct research of the audience."

However, Aiston sees it differently. "Let's say there's an interest rate cut and the media interviews a woman who runs her own finance company. Assuming she's well trained, she will be seen as an expert in her field, she will generate personal authority, she will gain publicity for her business and she won't pay for that publicity."

Friend understands that it's hard to put a value on editorial space, but argues that it can be seen as priceless. "If you can imagine an advertisement for CPA Australia played on Sky News versus an interview with a CPA Australia expert talking to Sky News business analyst Peter Switzer about, say, changes in superannuation, I'd suggest viewers will be far more engaged by the interview."

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MEDIA TRAINER

In business terms it's best to view media training as a fully deregulated market. It's about due diligence and shopping for the item that best suits you.

There is no formal accreditation, no ratings system, no off-the-shelf standard. The skills are very organic. It's about people. You, the trainer, the media and the ability to deal with the topic at hand.

The best approach is to do some research. If the trainer has a website, check their media background, their clients and, if available, testimonials. Then ask questions about what the training involves. Many organisations offer more than one course and should be able to tailor training to specific needs.

Most experts suggest the key factor should be experience relevant to your needs. "Do they have

experience across all forms of media, such as print, radio and television," Friend asks.

Weller adds: "Find out who's leading the organisation. Do they have solid, long-term media experience, and has this been as a journalist, as opposed to a marketing practitioner?"

Aiston suggests currency is worth considering as well. "Are these people still working in the media, or have they only just left the media? The media is ever-changing and you need trainers who know the trends."

The bottom line is that you need to find the correct fit for you. It can take a little work, but the pay-off can be significant.

WHAT SHOULD IT COST?

When it comes to media training, it's true that the so-called perfume principle can apply. That is, some deem training to be worth more simply because they paid more for it.

But if you opt for the wrong type of training – say, just crisis management when you need something broader – you can spend A\$10,000 and be left with skills that, perversely, you hope you never have to use. On the other hand, it's also true that you get what you pay for.

There is a diverse crop of media trainers and training sessions on offer. You can go to a half-day group workshop that may cost you anywhere from A\$250 to A\$1000 a head and walk away with a new understanding of the media and some key skills to suit your needs.

You may, on the other hand, prefer to invest in the most comprehensive training available. These may be one-on-one sessions with follow-up interview practice (in studios and over the phone) over a sustained period. It's worth remembering that good media training can take time. For this type of program, expect to pay A\$5000 to A\$10,000 and more. They often involve a day session, followed by a program of practical exercises to properly hone your newly acquired skills.

It all gets back to the value you place on your business, protecting its reputation and possibly moving forward with a strategic media campaign. You certainly don't want to be the bunny caught in the media spotlight. ■

■ **Brian Johnson is a Walkley Award-winning journalist, media trainer, operator of Lighthouse Media and author of *The Little Red Book of PR Wisdom*, to be published this year.**



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