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PR News Editor: Scott Van Camp, svancamp@accessintel.com

Managing Editor: Greer Jonas, gjonas@accessintel.com

Editorial Director: Steve Goldstein, sgoldstein@accessintel.com

Director of Marketing Communications: Amy Jefferies, 301.354.1699, ajefferies@accessintel.com

Director of Circ Marketing: Carol Brault, cbrault@accessintel.com

Assistant Marketing Manager: Rachel Smar, 301.354.1613, rsmar@accessintel.com

Designer: Tara Zaino

PR News VP/Group Publisher: Diane Schwartz, 212.621.4964; dschwartz@accessintel.com

Division President, Heather Farley

President & CEO, Don Pazour

Access Intelligence

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4 Choke Cherry Road, Second Floor,
Rockville, MD 20850 USA 888.707.5814

FAX: 301.309.3847 Telex: 358149;
e-mail: clientservices@accessintel.com

New York Editorial Office:
110 William St., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10038
Phone: 212.621.4875 Fax: 212.621.4879

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Sweat the Small Stuff In Media Training

Who. What. Where. When. Why.

As a former journalist, I have ingrained those 5W's in my head. If there's a breaking news story, a crisis or a noteworthy event, I instinctively want to know who's affected, what's affected, where is this taking place, when did it occur and why did this happen. And I want to know now. Fortunately (though some PR pros would differ on this), with social media and the 24/7 news environment, we can get a lot of answers quickly. And the media remains the most trusted conduit for getting your message heard.

PR people need to think like journalists but perform like reputation gatekeepers. The sound bite from your key executive during a crisis can make *the* difference in many performance metrics: sales, stock price, employee morale, overall media coverage, to name a few. How your spokesperson looks on camera, or what he says in his blog, or how she responds to a "trick question" from the press is up to you, the gatekeeper and driver of the message.

Media training is not just about the 10-second pithy response (though you need to keep it short and succinct). And it's not just about the right makeup and color of your outfit (though blue works well on TV). Media training is often misunderstood as "show time" for spokespeople. In fact, it's all the research and due diligence about the issue at hand, the reporter asking the question, the goal of the interview—*prior* to meeting the media—that will make all the difference in tone of story coverage and your organization's reputation.

This third volume of the *PR News Media Training Guidebook* is an instructional guide to being media savvy. That quote about success/genius being 10% luck and 90% perspiration holds true for media trainers—you need to sweat the small stuff. This guide is not for slackers—there's some work involved in being a media trainer, whether it's full time for you or just a part of your job. You'll find that the gleanings from this guidebook will make you a better communicator and more effective PR professional.

We have reached out to dozens of media training experts to share their case studies and lessons learned in media relations and messaging. You'll read amazing accounts of crisis management and the role smart messaging played in the outcome. And you'll learn Do's and Don'ts of preparing for an interview and bridging the discussion with journalists to your advantage.

We have asked all our contributors to give us lists and checklists because at *PR News* we are list fanatics. With nearly every article you'll see a checklist that will help steer you in the right direction. And you'll discover ways to get positive coverage and learn real-world tactics for being the go-to person in your organization for reputation strategy.

Good luck with your media relations efforts, and keep me posted on your successes.

Sincerely,

Diane Schwartz

Diane Schwartz
Vice President & Group Publisher, *PR News*
dschwartz@accessintel.com
Twitter: @dianeschwartz

Table of Contents

"Media training in today's always-on, always-connected world still retains the core goal of any communications effort: effective, meaningful, actionable messaging."
—Jake Wengroff, Global Director of Corporate Communications, Frost & Sullivan

Overview

From the Koosh Ball to the Elevator Pitch: Get Everyone Involved in Your Media Training

BY DAVE REDDY AND DAVID NIELAND

Media training is a team sport, a reality that hits home every time I'm asked to train an executive alone. Perhaps counterintuitively, those high-touch, one-on-one sessions are the most difficult to make work. And while there are certainly times when solo media training is essential (see sidebar), the best sessions are those that involve multiple trainees (usually 3-5) and—more important—cross-talk, banter and interactive coaching, not just from you, but between trainees.

After all, the messages and stories we teach executives to tell are most often about the organization, not the individual. Even the major executive profiles we pitch ultimately are designed to shine a positive light on the organization and not just the boss. So if the end goal is for executives to tell a collective story—albeit with each individual's personal spin—who better to help us teach how to tell that story than the executives themselves?

It is by no means simple. Trainees, particularly those who work together and perhaps even report to someone else being trained, have plenty of reasons to keep their mouths shut when it comes time to critique a fellow trainee. But as a trainer, it's incumbent upon you to create an interactive and safe place for dialogue and discussion on best practices. When you do, you'll find involving the entire "class" throughout the process—and not simply one-on-one when a trainee is in being interviewed—brings greater energy to the room and a greater clarity to all involved on the story they must deliver upon leaving the room. Remember, what you can offer as an expert trainer in critiquing how well a trainee brought the company to life is important. But they can offer insight as expert *employees*. They live the company story every day. They almost assuredly know it much better than you. Set the stage for interactivity when you open the training. As part of my introduction, I tell trainees the session is designed to be interactive. Each trainee should feel permitted if not required to offer positive and constructive feedback to their fellow trainees throughout the session. Take notes: You'll be asked your opinion.

To reiterate this point, find either the most senior or most experienced trainee in the room and mock-interview them right at the start of training. Do this literally right after your intro. Don't show a single slide or share a single tip. With no preparation and no tips shared, even the best spokesperson is likely to fumble a bit (or a lot).

Then, after the interview, create a safe atmosphere for discussion by offering the critique yourself first and, most importantly, by asking the trainee to critique him or herself. (Again, being positive and constructive are the keys.) After you and the trainee have offered your critique, the rest of the trainees will feel more comfortable agreeing or adding their input.

Bore them with a lecture and solo interviews and not only will your group find media training boring, they'll in turn tell a boring story.

To extract the best possible critiques, ask questions directly of the other trainees. What did you think? Was he or she on message? Was he quotable? What did he do well? Where could he have done better? Did he say anything that you'd hate to see in print? Then keep quiet for a few minutes. Facilitate the discussion, but don't take over—unless someone gets overly critical or suggests an angle or approach that is off-base. When this technique goes well, I've seen trainees realize that they were missing an entire plank of the company story, thanks to input from team members. In some cases, I've seen executives with a weak story reconsider a company's messaging altogether. They realize, as a group, that what they're selling isn't selling at all. That's a good thing to realize in training, as opposed to the real world.

Simple discussion doesn't always work. In those cases—and/or to enhance the discussion itself, consider a few of the following interactive techniques:

- **Break the Ice:** Have each trainee introduce themselves, explain what they do at the company, what their "part of the story" is, and if they've done media before. Ask them how those interviews

When to Let a Trainee Fly Solo

While interactive, multi-trainee sessions are typically most effective, there are exceptions to every rule. Not all executives appreciate group critiques, and some don't add value in group settings. It's your responsibility as the trainer to identify trainees who would be best-served by a one-on-one session long before the training begins.

The first step, naturally, is to ask your client. Keep in mind that most clients err on the side of caution when it comes to multi-trainee sessions, particularly with high-level executives. So don't be afraid to push a bit. Explain the purpose of multi-trainee sessions and the importance of interactivity. If they're adamant, go with their recommendation. Better to do a one-on-one session that leads to a trainee being more open to a group than to have the exercise blow up on you entirely.

Here are some rough guidelines on how to identify individuals who need one-on-one training:

1. *CEOs and other major executives.* Particularly at large companies, chief executives want—and warrant—special treatment.
2. *Returning trainees.* If a trainee has done poorly in a group setting, he or she might need (or even excel) one-on-one. While creating a mild sense of fear is typically a plus in training, as it best replicates real-life interviews, if someone is too scared or shy to perform in a group, try training them singly. If they do well one-on-one, have them back for another group setting.
    1. *The problem child.* Every company has a few. And while they typically make for dangerous spokespeople, they sometimes give great interviews, too. That said, if you've got a maverick in your training, he or she is likely to drag the rest of the class down. Train them separately.
    2. *The subject matter expert.* For very niche spokespeople one-on-one training is best. You may diminish their effectiveness if you train them on the overall story of the organization. (These experts should always be flanked in real-life interviews by generalists.)

—Dave Reddy and David Nieland

went—and what question scares them most. (Naturally, write that question down—and ask it during their mock interview.)

- **Elevator Pitch:** Ask each trainee to give a one-minute elevator pitch about the company. After each trainee finishes, offer your critique—and then go around the room and see what others thought. By the time you get to the last trainee, that elevator pitch ought to be tight and on the mark.
- **Your Dream Headline:** Ask each participant to write a dream headline about their company—and to list 3-5 proof points essential to making that headline a reality. Then go around the room again and ask each trainee to make a short presentation about their dream story and the ingredients it needs.
- **Koosh Ball Q&A:** This one's good for big groups in which you simply don't have enough time to give each trainee a chance at a solo mock interview. Split the trainees into even teams and have them sit on opposite sides of a conference table. Grab a Koosh ball, throw it to a participant, and ask a random rude question—it can be related to the company or not. The participant gets 20 seconds to answer.

Once the first participant is done, assign a score to their answer (a scale of 1-10 usually works). Briefly explain the reasons behind your score. Then ask the participant who just answered the question to throw the Koosh ball to a participant on the other team. Whoever catches the Koosh answers the next question. Keep repeating the exercise until everyone on each team has had a chance to answer one question (or 2-3 questions for smaller groups). When you're done, declare a winning team based on combined score, and then take time to discuss what answers worked well and what did not.

Keeping a session interactive and lively will reap dividends long after you're done training. It gets the trainees excited about the story they're telling—and that guarantees they'll tell the story better when it comes time to meet actual media. Bore them with a lecture and solo interviews and not only will they find media training boring, they'll in turn tell a boring story. PRN

Dave Reddy is SVP and media director for Weber Shandwick in San Francisco/Silicon Valley. David Nieland is SVP for Weber Shandwick in Dallas.

"If someone is only going to hear what you say about one-tenth of the time, you've got to focus and drill it into them to ensure it gets written the way you want it."
—Laura Grimmer, CEO, Articulate Communications

Pitching the Media

Newsroom Mind-Set: Think Like a Reporter to Gain Maximum PR Exposure

BY HEATHER MCMICHAEL

A PR professional recently told me that when she pitches a story to a reporter, she has no qualms about asking if the story is going to appear on the front page of the publication.

That sort of bold, desperate inquiry shows a complete lack of understanding of newsroom operations and the role of PR, and increases the odds that the reporter may not want to work with you in the future.

Ask any newsperson what they think of public relations people and you'll get the gamut of responses ranging from "really helpful and valuable," to "clueless" and, worst-case-scenario, "annoying."

A better approach with the reporter pitch is to spend your time making the idea so newsworthy that the editor or producer wants to place the story or idea on the front page on the home page, or first in the newscast.

"Newsworthiness" is subjective, but generally speaking, it should satisfy the following criteria:

- The story will impact a great number of people
- It is truly interesting or compelling
- It contains unique or never-been-done before components.

If you've passed any or all of these tests, your next challenge is to explain to the reporter that your idea *is* a news story and not a commercial for your client's business. Nobody said it would be easy. To be effective, your role as facilitator between client and the media requires you to think like a reporter. You don't need to have worked in a newsroom to understand this concept but you do need to pitch the story using terminology that will resonate with the reporter.

Offer solid, visual news ideas

When you are suggesting a story or writing a press release, make sure you emphasize the visual component. When the National Institutes of Health granted our

In your press releases, lose the flowery, overly glowing 'marketing-speak' and, when possible, write it like a news story; speak the reporter's lingo.

law firm a multimillion dollar contract, the lawyers commented that it took two years to complete the application process. Instead of letting that fly over my head, I started asking questions. How big was the application? Could I see a copy of it? After I carried it to our mailroom, I discovered it weighed 32 pounds and was 12 inches thick. I used that in my material to pitch the story to reporters.

Several papers sent out photographers to capture the paper trail of work and the story ended up on the front page of several Midwestern *Business Journal*s and legal papers in Chicago. The picture sold the story. Would reporters have covered the story without the photo idea? Probably. But having the lawyer positioned next to the foot-high application helped illustrate the tenacity that went into completing the request for proposal. It was a solid, visual idea.

Give press releases utility

There's some debate on whether the press release has gone out of style. The form may change, but as a crafted, controlled way to share your message it has not. Lose the flowery "marketing-speak" and, when possible, write it like a news story; *speak the reporter's lingo*.

When an executive joins your company, tell the media why John Smith is not only important to the company and clients, but also the media. Let them know Mr. Smith can talk to reporters about three important topics. In the case of our law firm, we let the media know the new bankruptcy attorney was monitoring a decision before the court. When the decision was announced, we re-sent his release and two important industry publications contacted him for comment. This strategy has been

Get the Money Shot

There was a buzz in the air at our law firm when rumor had it the governor of Colorado was stopping by our open house celebrating the move to our new office in a part of Denver that was making a comeback. We invited a few reporters to network but not to cover the party as a story.

When the governor arrived and shook our managing partner's hand, I snapped the photo and it landed in *Law Week Colorado*, the state's largest legal publication. The same opportunity surfaced at another event for clients on patent law. When people naturally lined up to look at a real product versus a fake product, I grabbed the photo because the newspaper could not provide a photographer that day.

The *Kansas City Star* accepted the photograph and published it along with the story. Not all papers will accept submitted photos but with newsroom cuts many just don't have the staffing and are more open to the idea. Don't send the canned "people lined up against the wall" photos unless it's for the society page. For news, send the photo that explains the story—get the money shot. —*Heather McMichael*

Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter (l.) meets Polsinelli Shughart PC managing partner G. Stephen Long at the firm's open house in Denver, November 2009.

successful in getting our lawyers mentioned in national publications including *Modern Healthcare*.

Sometimes a story pitch shouldn't come from a press release. Reporters don't want to write a story that has been pushed to a hundred other reporters. A discussion over coffee about what is keeping clients up at night, industry trends or the big profile piece would best be established with a favored reporter at a targeted publication.

Be helpful when it doesn't help you

How often has a reporter contacted you about an area that won't benefit your client? Did you brush off the reporter or make time to brainstorm to help find a different source? Our firm is "business to business," meaning we handle virtually no family law issues and no divorces. Yet, when reporters call for a divorce lawyer, I provide the name of one who is media trained and ready to speak to reporters. The divorce attorney jokingly commented that she should put me on retainer for all the media I have referred to her. Why do I do that when it won't benefit our firm? It keeps reporters coming back.

The same could hold true for your client whether it's a reporter needing a different type of architect than you can offer, or a business reporter wanting the perspective of a small grocery store on the frozen citrus crop. If your client isn't interested in commenting, refer them to a non-competitor. Never slam the door shut. Spend a few minutes thinking of a referral.

Respect the media

An Indiana congressman first said in 1964: "Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel." In other words, don't whine, stew or fight over story rejections.

It could be that the timing isn't right, not that it's a bad idea. Or, maybe it is a bad idea. Would you want to read about your idea? And when your client does receive media recognition, send the reporter a handwritten note or a tray of cookies. They will value that you have noticed their work. Be sincere and your client may become that reporter's go-to source for that type of story.

As we all understand about public relations, there are no guarantees about placement. If there were, it would be a paid advertisement—controlled but less credible. Spend time strategizing and researching what really makes a news story. Then, when the front-page story arrives, you'll have a happy client and the satisfaction of knowing your killer idea, not desperate plea, sold the story. PRN

Heather McMichael is the Public Relations Manager for Polsinelli Shughart PC, a national law firm with more than 495 lawyers in 16 offices.

“A great message delivered poorly—and we can all think of examples—does not help your cause.
—Loretta Ucelli, Senior Advisor, Gutenberg Communications, and former Director of White House Communications

Messaging

Message Control Without Micromanaging: Changing the PR-Journalist Dynamic

BY LESLIE YERANSIAN

Gone are the days of formality. Now, the relationship between reporter and corporation requires frequency and transparency. Inherent in this new bond: a faster, more casual relationship, with corporate communications specialists still controlling the messaging, but not micromanaging.

Journalists' demands are greater than ever—they're outputting more stories on more platforms. This gives rise to more mistakes, less time to craft a well-told story and less ability to track down sources.

These changes in media have created a ripe time for PR professionals to play a more significant role in shaping news stories. You can make journalists' jobs easier, but you have to play the game right.

I've been on both sides, as a journalist and now as a media relations specialist. My background as a reporter, specializing in business and economics, gives me great insight into what *not* to do. I held many interviews with CEOs by themselves and many with CEOs accompanied by their media handlers.

Nine out of 10 times the best sound bites came out of interviews where there was no media specialist "presiding." This is not to discount the role of a media specialist, but rather to rethink, readjust and revise how a corporate communications professional relates to the media.

Controlling your message is the crux of a media specialist's job. Too often PR professionals micromanage. Unfortunately, micromanaging reaps the worst results for all parties involved in the interview process. The CEO feels tongue-tied, the journalist feels censored and the PR professional is unknowingly initiating an enemy relationship.

As a journalist, I often found PR specialists needed more media training than their C-level executives. The approach to media training today needs to be as much about the communication specialist's relationship to the media as it is about an executive's preparation. After all, it doesn't matter how great your CEO is: If the media relations specialist makes the stream of communication difficult and stressful, then you're no longer in the same tank working toward the same goal.

> ***If the media relations specialist makes the stream of communication difficult and stressful, then you and your CEO are no longer in the same tank working toward the same goal.***

Here are some ways to make an instant shift in your relationship with the media. Ultimately, you have to cultivate this positive dynamic with the media, in order for any media training to succeed.

1. **Control, don't micromanage.** Journalists need PR professionals and PR professionals need journalists. Overstepping your bounds is the worst thing you can do; it produces an "us versus you" mentality. Your objective needs to be the creation of allies, not enemies.

Instead of micromanaging the interview, be proactive and gather the necessary moving parts that will make your CEO not just the "expert" but the feature of the story. How? Provide a face of the story. For ultimate control, don't just provide your executive with talking points, do the reporter's legwork. Provide the story's opening face (i.e. a person whose life you changed with your service or a family hurt by not having access to your product).

2. **Serve accuracy, not accolades.** When you're pitching an idea, don't write a novel. Pitch your CEO's big ticket accomplishments, implementations and goals, hooking them into the story angle. Keep the pitch short and sweet. Don't go into a two-page explanation as to why the executive is an expert.

If you can't tell the success story of your CEO and company in less than a few sentences, then it's quite likely your executive can't either. A PR professional repre-

Five Ultimate Media Relations No-No's Encountered as a Journalist

1. Don't Micromanage

Whatever you do, don't give your CEO cue cards to read from. Don't tell the reporter he/she is limited to asking a specific set of questions. That just enrages a journalist. This should be as natural as a conversation. Too much micromanaging kicks out red flag warnings for the journalist that your company is hiding something. You can stay on message and still appear an open book.

2. Don't Hover

Too often PR specialists hover over reporters, specifically in broadcast. After the interview, if a reporter stays on the premise to shoot a quick stand-up, don't be a hawk. Journalists don't need your help on how to walk and talk during a stand-up, how to hold the mic and certainly not what to say. Let the journalist relax and do a stellar job, without your critical eye.

3. Connect as a Friend First

Drop them a handwritten thank-you. A politician did this once—a simple note, surprisingly sincere, and I will always remember that. He took time out of his busy schedule to not be robotic, not be electronic, but be human and connect. Transforms your relationship rapidly, from a one-way to a two-way street. Too often journalists perceive PR professionals as just wanting free advertisement. Make them view you as a PR professional who wants simply to streamline communications with the public.

4. Deliver, Don't Complain

After a story has been aired or printed, a journalist has moved onto the next story. They don't want to hear criticism from you. Provide only the right bites in the beginning and you'll never need to complain.

5. Picking Up the Pieces After the Fact Doesn't Cut It

Oftentimes PR specialists don't make it for the interview, but then scramble after the interview airs, saying we never agreed to that question, "I had no idea you were going to ask that." A little too late.

Always be there. Being in the room during the interview does not have to equate to micromanaging. If it's an on-camera interview, be in the room. A phone interview, be on the phone. An email interview, oversee the writing. Even if you've looked over the questions, new questions will inevitably be added. If a question was added that the CEO didn't know about and that's the question the journalist pulled a sound bite from, you don't want to be picking up the pieces after the fact. —*Leslie Yeransian*

sents the media's first window into the company. Reel in journalists with quick bites and relevant data; don't repel them with accolades and industry lingo.

3. **Fast access.** Our lines of communication get quicker by the day. Journalists expect to get rapid answers. Give them what they want well before their deadline. Never tell a journalist you could have gotten them the information if they had given you more time. In a journalist's world, *time* is of the essence. They'll never be able to provide lead time, so accept that fact. Your job is to have prepped an arsenal of applicable quotes that you can put your thumb on in an instant.

4. **Craft perfect bites.** CEOs are too busy to write the perfect bites, even if you've trained them well. Do their research for them and create, compelling, relatable 15-second sound bites for television and two sentence quotes for print.

This arms your executive with the ability to handle the toughest type of interviewer: a reporter who allows, even enables, the interviewee to talk endlessly. We saw this firsthand when Katie Couric interviewed Sarah Palin. An executive must only state what's necessary; over-talking equates to less control during the interview process.

Explain to your executives the importance of short, concise, active voice sound bites. Long-winded, passive voice bites fall to the bottom of the story or get lock. Give the reader/listener a reason to care, not industry lingo. Use compelling, visual answers, even analogies, and you'll see your executive's quotes jump from the chopping block to the first graph.

Reaction is key—journalists want an angle. A strong stance will get you to the top of the story faster than a bland, no position response. Too often executives don't take a clear angle and try to stay topic neutral. Sometimes a couple provocative words can even trump standard pyramid style writing, and make your executive's words the story's opener.

Pushing your executive to deliver perfect bites, leads to far fewer surprises when the story airs/prints. In essence, you take control by doing the journalist's editing.

5. **Follow though:** Always follow up after an interview. However, use your time and theirs wisely. Most corporate communications specialists contact the journalist post-interview stating two useless offerings, "If you need anything else please contact me," and "I'd like to take a look at the story before it's released." A journalist has no time to send you the story for "revisions"—perhaps for review but certainly not for editorial criticism. Journalists have their own editors. Asking for the story before it releases immediately puts the reporter on defense. Make them your friend, not enemy. Use your follow-through as an opportunity to pitch a couple extra stories that you've been brewing up. You can be a journalist too. Journalists are always looking for stories. You're on the inside track of an industry—make the reporter feel like you're giving them the inside scoop.

6. **Separate from marketing.** Does the Nike CEO talk to the media and say, "Just do it?" Of course not. That's a marketing slogan. So don't use marketing slogans, campaign talk and mission statements during interviews, and certainly not in press releases. Be natural. Spend your time stepping outside of marketing lingo and into laymen's terms. Mastermind a compelling hook to your company's products/services within the context of the story. Most importantly, give the viewer/reader a reason to care.

Your success stems from the creating a strong message that gets transmitted to the public exactly as spoken. It doesn't matter how eloquent, how insightful or how successful your CEO is, if you can't cultivate fast, open and pleasant relationships with journalists, where they feel empowered, not micromanaged, then your job is done.

Your mission has been accomplished when a journalist turns to you for a sound bite. Typically, that's not because your company or executives are so much better than competitors, but because you are easy to work with, deliver quality bites, not quantity, and are friends, not foes, of the dissemination of information. PRN

Leslie Yeransian has worked as a field reporter, assignment desk editor and producer at ABC and NBC local affiliates and networks. She's a corporate communications specialist at Rising Medical Solutions, a nationwide medical cost containment and healthcare company.