

GS Insight

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The Secret of Savvy Spokespersons

"It is not the facts that are of chief importance, but the light thrown upon them, the meaning in which they are dressed, the conclusions which are drawn from them, and the judgments delivered upon them."

- Mark Twain

This straightforward quote gets to the heart of effective trade and business press relations. A company can't solely rely on news releases and fact sheets to tell a good story. Success often lies in the ability of spokespeople to effectively interact with the media.

While most companies go to extensive lengths to prepare "direct" customer communications, such as sales presentations and collateral materials, all too often, they fail to capitalize on the full potential of media interviews. This is because not everyone equates talking to the press with the ability to speak directly to customers. Furthermore, the degree of "familiarity" between the company and the trade media often blurs the line of what should be said and by whom.

Each interview presents an opportunity to talk to thousands of current and potential customers. It represents a credible, third-party vehicle to announce new business initiatives, reinforce existing programs and projects, or quell concerns or rumors about business uncertainties.

Trade Media Nuances

Unlike the business press that typically calls headquarters to identify the most appropriate spokesperson, the trade press is more likely to interview anyone they meet from a company — from a sales representative to the CEO. In addition, trade interviews often take place in a variety of environments: a casual interview at a trade show; a press conference for a product launch or corporate announcement; a response to a news release or media communiqué; or as a phone call out of the blue. While it is generally a good rule to find out the reporter's deadline and get back to them once

you are prepared for the interview, this is not always an available luxury.

And, since the trade press rarely carries the same "fear factor" as glaring spotlights and video cameras, it is easy for potential spokespeople to take the interview lightly. As a result, some common and costly mistakes include:

- Missing opportunities by not returning media calls in a timely fashion;
- Failing to connect editors with the most appropriate spokesperson;
- "Jumping the gun" on a new product announcement;
- Revealing information that can't be easily "mined" by competitors;
- Substantiating unfounded rumors;
- Failing to identify an objective for the interview, and
- Inadequately following up on promised items

"If your spokesperson can't effectively communicate with the media, you run the risk of getting lost in the shuffle."

It is critical for companies to understand the value of media interactions — whether it is with the trade press or business press — and not to miss opportunities due to poor preparation or interview performance. The old sports adage, "You play how you practice" holds true for media interviews. If the company spokesperson realizes the value of the interview, equates it with an opportunity to "direct market" to

customers, and can effectively sell the company's story, the resulting publicity can exceed anything the company could do on its own.

Role of Media Training

Much like public speaking, few people innately possess strong spokesperson skills. Many potential corporate spokespeople — scientists, senior managers, and in some cases, members of the marketing team — have never been taught how to conduct an effective interview. When faced with the media, these individuals naturally find it difficult to communicate the company's messages and to "work" the interview to achieve desired results.

While some companies invest in media training for crisis or "hot box" situations, they often overlook training for the bulk of actual trade and business press interviews. Therefore, it is important to understand the need and place for both types of training.

"Hot box" training typically focuses on communicating with the consumer and business media in high-pressure, highly volatile situations. Therefore, it is often reserved for a company's key executives and off-site managers and focuses on how to address situations that are a serious threat to the company's short- and long-term credibility.

By contrast, trade and business relations training focuses on how to leverage the value of typical media interactions to "sell" the company's current programs and news. As such, these programs are typically geared for a wider range of company personnel. However, it is important to realize that in the event of a crisis, these same people will likely be the conduit to the core trade and business press, and thus the company's customers.


The problem is that when most people hear the term "media training" they immediately envision an experience similar to boot camp — characterized by a lot of yelling, pressure and intimi-

Interview Tips

1. Take time to prepare; never "wing it."
2. Know your objective(s) before you start the interview.
3. Know your audience. Never assume that the media is well versed on the topic; however, don't be condescending either.
4. Always tell the truth.
5. Support statements with facts and avoid corporate jargon.
6. Never say anything you are not prepared to see in print.
7. Beware of loaded questions or negative terminology.
8. Be patient.
9. Be considerate of the reporter's deadline.
10. "I don't know" or "I am not the appropriate spokesperson" are acceptable answers. However, always offer to find the answer or someone who can respond to the question.
11. Make yourself available for follow-ups.
12. When you have said all you have to say, stop talking.

dation. However, training doesn't have to be this way. The purpose of media training should be to build the confidence of spokespeople, not to make them dread the real thing. More importantly, it should focus on perfecting the skills that will be used the most, such as how to control the interview.

An effective media training program should be a logical extension of the established marketing communications program. Focusing on message development, understanding the media, mock interviews and critiques based on interview content will best prepare potential spokespeople for the real thing. By working with an established industry partner such as a public relations agency, training can be a cost-effective investment to enhance the value of a company's entire communications program.

In short, if your spokesperson can't effectively communicate with the media, you run the risk of getting lost in the shuffle. 

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