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## Spotlight on Training

### Media training helps executives deal with reporters more effectively

BY HEATHERE EVANS-KEENAN

In the midst of diminishing marketing budgets and overall belt-tightening, many tech company executives want to make the most of their own resources to maintain the company's visibility.

Products still need to be launched and issues still need to be addressed. But often, traditional marketing tools have been slashed from an already bare-bones budget. In this environment, many executives are finding that they themselves are the company's best marketing vehicles, especially when they have the occasion to talk to an interested reporter.

A golden opportunity? Yes. Dangerous waters to navigate without a chart? Definitely. So, savvy execs are devoting their time and a few dollars to developing media management skills that will provide a return many times over. Effective media training for company spokesmen can be one of the wisest marketing investments.

Learning how to leverage media interviews takes preparation and practice. Becoming an effective spokesman isn't magic. It may come more naturally to some, but it can be mastered by most. All it takes is a little guidance and dedication to learning how. Here are a few pointers to get you started:

- First, understand what makes an effective spokesman. Make your message concrete, relevant and understandable to the average person.

As one media trainer put it,

“  
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”  
— Heatherere Evans-Keenan

“Trunks’ mean luggage; ‘network’ means ABC, CBS or NBC; ‘migration’ is something birds do every fall and spring.” Buzzwords abound in the tech sector. But to communicate effectively, you need to get beyond the bits and bytes, and convey the “so what” part of your message.

Also, many technology companies, rather than having a tangible product to hold up for the camera, have the challenge of advancing a concept or service. If that's your case, concentrate on communicating the end results of your technology by having a good anecdote ready.

- Second, know the rules of the game. What rights do you have when you're talking to the news

media? Why does the “no comment” response damage a reporter's perception of your company? And what does it really mean when a reporter asks you to speak “off the record?” Perhaps most important, understand the reporter's motivation and news cycle.

Whether you are responding to an interview request or initiating an interview, you have the right to know the general areas of discussion the reporter wants to pursue. The journalist usually won't give you the actual questions, but a good reporter will want you to be prepared for a well-thought-out discussion.

If the interviewer strays into territory with which you aren't comfortable, don't fall back on the “no comment” response. This gives the impression that the company is trying to hide something. Rather, respond with an honest and straightforward, “I can't release that information.” If the reporter asks for information, such as highly technical details, about which you are unsure, respond with “I don't know the answer, but I'll get back to you,” and then do. Maintaining your credibility is paramount.

If a reporter asks you to comment on something “off the record,” don't say anything you don't want to show up in print. This simply means that the information won't be attributed to you, not that it

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won't be published. Consider any conversation you have, either pre-interview chitchat or post-interview follow-up, as fair game to be repeated.

The journalist is looking to report news, not to help you position your company in the marketplace. Be aware of what you say and how you say it, even when you're speaking outside the parameters of a formal interview.

Also, be sensitive and responsive to reporters' deadlines. Timely and honest responses to a query or request are the best ways to maintain a good relationship with the reporter and to position you as a trusted source.

- Third, be prepared. Know the reporter, story angle and publication.

Is the reporter writing for a trade publication going for the technical details or for the business side of a story? Get a copy of a back issue and review stories written by the reporter to get a general idea of his or her knowledge level and style. Set your agenda and plan positive message points. Know what you want to get across in the interview, and return to these points repeatedly. Find colorful examples to illustrate your points, and have good quotes handy. Also, know your limitations. Be very aware of where your knowledge stops and speculation begins

— and then, don't go there.

Last, consider the interview an opportunity. Anticipate the questions you may be asked and determine the message you want to convey. The best way to prepare is to role-play and practice mock interviews.

Concentrate on communicating clearly and honestly, and you will have furthered your aim of generating positive recognition for your company.

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