MEDIA TRAINING

How to Deliver Compelling Messages

Copyright © 2012 Wetherhead Communications. All Rights Reserved.

MEDIA TRAINING

How to Deliver Compelling Messages

Debbie Wetherhead, Wetherhead Communications, Atlanta, GA
770-641-1520; debbie@wetherhead.com

Spokespersons -- and PR practitioners who provide behind-the-scene counsel and support -- know successful communications skills are honed by training and practice. Media training does not teach oratory; it helps you communicate clearly using proven skills and techniques.

According to *Public Relations Journal*, those seeking media training should:

> "Get more than an image consultant. You need more than tips about how to sit, dress and look. It won't matter that your shoes are shined if your foot is in your mouth."

Media training provides information and tools that enable you to:

- Be a **more effective** spokesperson
- **Take control** of the interview process
- **Sell and differentiate** your product, service, program, organization or point of view
- Garner more and **better media placements**
- **Handle difficult media** relationships

This workshop addresses:

- Spokesperson preparation
- Message development
- Delivery and control techniques
- Personal presence

SPOKESPERSON PREPARATION

Understanding media relations and preparation are the first critical steps toward becoming an effective spokesperson. Before participating in an interview:

- Clarify the **purpose of the interview** and identify the **reporter's deadline**. If the story reflects on your organization or industry, some level of participation should be strongly considered.

- Become **familiar with the reporter, media outlet and relevant past news coverage**, but focus on the news outlet's constituents so that you can direct your messages to that **audience**. Consider whether you'll be addressing a consumer or trade audience, customers or prospects, business influencers or people already familiar with your organization.

- Be prepared to offer updated **press materials** and background information.

- **Take charge well in advance of the deadline**. Quickly plan your strategy and gather needed tools, striving to beat other sources in providing the **most** information, the **soonest** and in the most **helpful** manner. Such action may provide you some influence over what is reported.

- You can better position your organization by **helping reporters do their job**. Deliver background information, written statements and executive or subject-matter expert quotes; offer visuals such as photography, graphics and video; and even introduce reporters to supportive customers who may provide perspective via testimonials or case studies.

- **Control the logistics** of the interview and feel free to **set a time limit** with the reporter. By holding an interview to 30 minutes, you are more likely to stay focused on key messages and not become distracted during a drawn-out exchange.

- **Select a venue** which affords you the most control and, if needed, privacy. If the interview is scheduled in your office, hold all but emergency calls, clear the work area of proprietary materials and alert your colleagues that you'll be involved in a media interview that will take priority over potential interruptions.

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

Follow a **five-step process** to drive message development and interview preparation.

1. **Set an Agenda**
   Before each interview, determine **who you need to reach** and **what you want to say**. Further, ask yourself, "If I could write the headline or story lead, what would I want it to state? If interviewed, what quotes would I want attributed to me or my organization?" Your conclusions should be reflected in key messages, supporting information, Q&A responses and a pre-planned closing statement.

2. **Craft Key Messages**
   With repeated use, key messages ensure dissemination of clear, consistent and compelling information. This critical tool can help you prioritize information, stay focused and obtain measurable results. Develop three key messages to serve as the foundation for all communications and to weave into each interview. They should fit on one page: each as two or three sentences in length or 15 to 30 seconds when spoken.

   Be more strategic than simply the "three most important things." Craft messages that:
   - **Describe** a product, service, program, organization or point of view
   - **Differentiate** the product, service, program, organization or point of view and showcase strategic leadership
   - Focus on the **benefits to the target audience**, clearly stating what's in it for them

3. **Prove Your Points**
   Your goal is to introduce and reinforce key messages. Supporting information can extend a conversation, offering proof and adding credibility by using:
   - **Facts**: Use simple and descriptive statements
   - **Statistics or figures**: Put information into easy-to-understand or quantifiable terms
   - **Authorities**: Quote credible, relevant third-party experts
   - **Stories**: Share a case study, personal experience, anecdote or analogy

4. **Ready for Q&A**
   Speculate about **potential interview questions**. Go beyond who, what, where, when, how and why to include inquiries being fielded by the c-suite, PR and sales. Consider what's topical in the news or your industry, as well as what you're afraid of being asked. After listing 20 to 25 potential queries, you can arm yourself with key message-laden responses and seek needed data or counsel in advance of the interview.

5. **Make a Lasting Impression**
   Because people often remember what they hear first and last, it's worthwhile to pre-plan a meaningful **closing statement** that reinforces your benefit statement.

EFFECTIVE DELIVERY

- **If you do not want a statement quoted, do not make it.**
  When you agree to be interviewed, don't assume you can tell someone part of what you say is "off the record." Also, "off the cuff" statements made in the hallway or on the way to lunch run the risk of becoming headlines.

- **If you don't know an answer, say so.**
  Don't speculate. Refer the reporter to someone who can answer the question or say “I don’t know the answer; I’ll have to look into that for you” -- and do so respecting their deadline.

- **Never say "no comment" or someone is "unavailable for comment."**
  It can make you or your organization appear to be unresponsive, evasive or guilty.

  Instead, provide a three-part answer that says:
  - “I’m sorry I can’t answer that,”
  - and explain why, such as “for competitive reasons our organization doesn’t provide that information,” and follow with
  - “but what I can tell you is” and then share information pertinent to the original question

- **Don't use jargon.**
  If you use professional or technical jargon, immediately follow with a layperson's explanation.

- **Try not to speak specifically about your competition.**
  Instead, make statements about your own product, service, program, organization or point of view, or address the industry category.

- **Try not to offer unconfirmed information about timing or volume.**

CONTROL TECHNIQUES

These four **control techniques** enable you to: **respond** directly to a question, **shift the focus** of the answer and **influence** follow-up questions.

1. **Repetition**
   According to the American Association of Advertising Agencies, your audience may need to be informed of your key messages as many as seven times for the information to be **remembered**. Strive to revisit your key messages often and say the name of your product, service, program or organization several times.

2. **Flagging**
   Help the audience recall your message by **emphasizing** what you consider to be most important. You can preface a statement with an attention-getting comment such as:
   - "The most important thing to remember is..."
   - "I've talked about a lot of things today, but I think it boils down to..."
   - "The best part about..."

3. **Counting Down**
   State the quantity of points you wish to make and articulate them one by one, **alerting the reporter and audience** about your agenda. It also helps you maintain control as you are less likely to be interrupted.

4. **Bridging**
   Respond to an inquiry by answering the question and then use a **transitional phrase to bridge** to your key message, as appropriate. Examples include:
   - Let me put it in perspective...
   - What's important to remember however is...
   - What I really want to talk about is...
   - And don't forget...
   - Before we get off that subject/topic let me add...
   - That's not my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is...
   - That's a good point, but I think you would be interested in knowing that...
   - Let me just add...
   - That reminds me...
   - Let me give you some background information about...
   - Let's take a closer look at...
   - That's an important point because...
   - What that means is...
   - Another thing to remember is...

Although interview opportunities are often positive in nature, be armed with techniques to combat potential **hostile situations**.

- If an interviewer asks **multiple questions**, respond first to the question which you would like to answer and which best meets your needs.

- If an **inaccurate statement** is made by you or the journalist, or you feel as if "words are being put into your mouth," correct it immediately or, if necessary, even after the interview is long over.

- Do not start your response by repeating **negative or inaccurate information** as you run the risk of having the offensive language attributed to you.

- If a **reporter is quiet**, it may be their way of trying to rattle you or urge you to talk further about a subject that you do not wish to address. Consider:
  - It is not a spokesperson's responsibility to counter the silence.
  - Use the opportunity to bridge to the information that you would like to deliver.

- Be prepared -- if the **interview ends** abruptly -- to deliver your pre-planned closing statement that reinforces your benefit statement.

Ambush interviews are rare, but they do happen and can undermine even the most experienced spokesperson. Here are some ground rules:

- A reporter's right to the story never preempts your **right to courtesy** -- and to know what the story is about before you are forced to speak.

- **Defuse the reporter** by saying:
  - "I'd like to find out what you want to talk about with me -- please put the camera down and come into my office. Once I understand what you'd like to know, I'd be happy to answer your questions or refer you to the appropriate spokesperson."
  - Once the camera is off, ask the reporter what has happened (if you don't know) and tell him/her you'll need a few minutes to find out the facts.

- Keep your **ego** out of it: don't try to put the reporter "down" or in their "place" as they will most likely "win" based on the coverage produced.

- There may be occasions when you will have to state:
  - "I'm sorry, but this is not an issue I can speak about with you. The reason is ...."
  - **Give a reason**, such as: for competitive reasons or we are involved in litigation regarding this issue and cannot prejudice the case or the next-of-kin have not yet been informed.

PERSONAL PRESENCE

A spokesperson's looks should never overshadow what he or she has to say. However, your **appearance, gestures, facial expressions or clothing** can enhance or detract from your messages. Take the following actions to convey confidence and increase your credibility:

- Use direct **eye contact**
- Stand in a **balanced stance** or lean **forward** slightly when seated
- Make natural **hand gestures**
- Keep your **energy** level high or appropriate for the situation
- Vary your **voice level** to match the significance of your message
- Temper your **body language** to reflect the nature of the topic

DEBBIE WETHERHEAD
President, Wetherhead Communications

Leading Wetherhead Communications, a full-service PR agency established in 1995, Debbie Wetherhead manages programs for globally recognized names such as The Coca-Cola Company, Beazer Homes, Digital Insurance, YKK and NASA; leaders in healthcare, real estate and financial services, as well as start-up organizations and entrepreneurs. Wetherhead Communications is best known for its ability to generate positive publicity, finesse business-to-business communications and provide nationally acclaimed media training.

Backed by 25+ years of experience, Debbie has conducted almost 500 communications training workshops for individuals, companies and communications firms representing Fortune 500 companies, entrepreneurs, government agencies, trade associations and non-profit entities.

Some of her training clients include: ACGO, Autotrader.com, Beazer Homes, Cbeyond, City of Atlanta, The Coca-Cola Company, Colonial Supplemental Insurance, Cox Communications, Delta Air Lines, Emory University, Georgia-Pacific, General Motors, The Grove Park Inn, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, Hill & Knowlton, Humana, IBM, ING, Inviro Medical Devices, Johnson & Johnson, Kaiser Permanente, Ketchum, Manheim, Motorola, NASA, Per-Se Technologies, RBC Insurance, S1 Corporation, Song Airlines, Theragenics Corporation, Transitions Optical, University of Alabama System, Unum Insurance, Waffle House, Walt Disney Imagineering and more.

Debbie has presented media training at the 2011 and 1999 PRSA international conferences, 1999 PRSA travel & tourism conference and 1998 PRSA national conference. She has been a featured speaker for Ad Club of St. Thomas/St. Croix; Democratic Party of Georgia; IABC Atlanta chapter; PRSA Anchorage, Atlanta, Greenville, Richmond and San Diego chapters.

Selected from a nationwide search of industry experts, Debbie contributed to the 2011, 2010 and 2007 Media Training Guidebook published by *PR News*, as well as has been featured in *Georgia Trend*, *Competitive Edge* and *Business to Business* magazines, and on 60secondmarketer.com.