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The Benefits of Media Training

Many business people view journalists through a prism of distrust. They believe, wrongly, that the relationship is necessarily an adversarial one. In my experience, the best media-source relationship is typically arm's length, but it is also amiable and based on mutual regard and respect. Remember that reporters have a job to do. My best advice? Help them do it. When you treat a reporter professionally, I have found that most of the time, the relationship will yield reasonably good results and a balancing of their interests with yours.

Among other things, it is important that you understand the rules of the road. The difference between "off the record," "not for attribution" and "on background," as examples. Among the other do's and don'ts: Don't respond with a "no comment." (It's like chumming for barracuda). Don't ask to review an article before it's published. (It ain't gonna happen). Don't make any special requests at the conclusion of an interview. And if you want to have a reporter read your quotes back to you before an article goes to press, by all means ask – but remember to set the ground-rules before the interview begins.

What do reporters really want? The answers are many and not all that complicated. For most, though, it's an interesting story with pithy quotes from an industry source who can share something of value.

A one-day workshop with a media trainer can go a long way toward helping you position yourself as that source – someone who can identify nascent trends, offer a fresh perspective, serve as an expert on issues of importance to both you and clients, and, critically important, tackle tough questions.

It's essential to choose a media trainer who has worked in a newsroom. There are a lot of presentation trainers who claim to do media training, but unless they have news experience, you're not getting the real deal. Simply put, they won't know how to prep you for news interviews. Media training isn't about cosmetics – the color of your tie, your shirt or your gestures – it's about your message and how you deliver it.

The heart of the media training process involves participation in a series of simulated role-play print and broadcast news interviews. The trainer, after researching you and your firm, will pose questions designed to elicit not only the most important information, but help you sharpen your marketing messages. The questions are likely to be insightful, often provocative and some may even involve subjects you'd least like to talk about. As the saying goes, nobody cares about the ship that gets to port safely, it's the one that doesn't. Remember, anything is fair game. Be prepared.

Some of the media training interviews are face-to-face while others are conducted over the phone. All are videotaped. The results can be quite revealing. What does your body language actually say about you? Maybe you drop your left shoulder when you get a question you're uncomfortable with or have a verbal tic and don't realize it.

I trained one chief investment officer who accentuated every comment by hooking his index finger. When he was particularly excited about a point, the finger took on a life of its own. The point is, he may have been enthusiastic, but his finger became a distraction. During TV interviews, in particular, body language is key – how you use your eyes, how you smile, how you sit in your chair or shift your weight and even fold your hands. (I suggest layering one hand over the other to avoid what we in the trade call the “dance of the thumbs.”)

The cost of a one-day workshop typically runs about \$2,500 per person. The better workshops occur when there is a mix of marketing people and investment professionals. It's kind of a spontaneous team-building exercise that helps what may be two very different sides of the business come together to build a unified message.

We've all seen folks on TV who weren't media trained: no message, no body language, no appeal. Or maybe they were selected purely for entertainment value. I've often said, 'send me a man with wiry hair, a bow tie askew, wearing suspenders who bounces around in his chair, and I can get him on TV once, maybe twice.' That's entertainment. Show me a guy who is thoughtful, credible and trustworthy – and I can get him on again, again, and again. That's the guy who's been media trained. And that's the guy your clients will want to do business with.

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