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Media Training

If you are prepared, there's no need to sweat.*

—Jim Caldwell (Coach of Indianapolis Colts, Super Bowl 2010)

Professional media training today is a must. There is no winging it anytime you are facing the media and never ever when you are under fire. Media training will help prepare you, “inoculate” you against the pressures and trials of a media interview.

You need a trustworthy, experienced professional who not only understands the media and how it works but understands business, too. You also want to know that they understand and/or have direct experience in dealing with a crisis.

The best media trainers have all those characteristics and more—they are also trained trainers who understand adult learning and how to work effectively with management of all ages and stages of life (see Box 23.1).

Experienced media trainers will teach you more than how to stand in front of a camera and drill you on what to say. They will create a stimulating and “safe” training environment, and they will teach you strategies to help you navigate your way through the media minefield, as well as how to deal with tough questions.

For those of you who are afraid that you will be taught how to spin stories or to be less than genuine, I offer this advice: Media training does not mean learning how to become artificial. As Robin Conn says,

* Jim Caldwell (Coach of Indianapolis Colts, Super Bowl 2010), as quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 7, 2010.

and I wholeheartedly agree, "Saints preserve us from overtrained executives on television interviews saying 'Dan (smile), I'm glad you asked me that (smile).'"

Media training will help you sort the men from the boys and give you confidence that your organization will more than survive a crisis. It is not a nice-to-do; it is a must-do.

BOX 23.1 CHOOSING THE RIGHT MEDIA TRAINER

While there are many trainers with varying qualifications, it is important to ask these questions.

Does your media trainer:

- Have experience as a journalist? If so, what level, where? They need to be able to walk the talk!
- Demonstrate a strong understanding of strategic communication?
- Have formal training qualifications?
- Teach proven tools and techniques, not just tell stories?
- Explain the theory that underpins what they teach?
- Design workshops that work every time and meet the needs of each participant?
- Understand that no two participants are alike, and can vary their approach with every person and group?
- Offer a detailed analysis of each participant's technique?
- Research your issues before you arrive at the workshop?
- Use a scenario approach to your crisis media training?
- Have crisis experience?
- Work with an experienced journalist and cameraman during training sessions?
- Follow up their training with refreshers, exercises to validate skills?
- Know that it isn't an ego trip for them; it's about getting you the results you want.

Source: Media Skills (Flyer, 2009).

* Robin Conn, *The PR Crisis Bible: How to Take Charge of the Media When All Hell Breaks Loose*, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 2000, p. 216.

WHO SHOULD BE MEDIA TRAINED?

Many companies I have worked with have a very firm policy that *only* people who have been media trained can do media interviews. This is a wise guiding principle (see Box 23.2).

Now exactly who should that be? I advocate that as much attention, training, and education be given to the front line (security, reception, call center, customer service, operations) as to the senior management and the board of directors.

Clearly, there will be different levels of training—some will be awareness so that everyone understands their role and responsibilities in a crisis—that is so very important. Others, like those at the operational level, who will be at the “scene of the crime,” need intensive training, as do the nominated spokespeople and their backups. You want to avoid a single point of failure.

BOX 23.2 SPOKESPERSON STANDARDS

The spokesperson must be:

- Media trained
- Able to perform under pressure
- Highly credible and authoritative
- Espoused to company values
- Informed about the impact of the incident

The following gives an overview and recommendations for who needs to be trained and when, according to the stage when the media report a crisis.

Stage One

A thorough analysis of your organization's risk and vulnerabilities *before* a crisis hits will determine where and when you need spokespeople. In this brave new world where immediacy and speed of response are even more important, there is a need for the front line to be trained—perhaps not to be full-blown spokespeople, but to at least have an awareness of what to do and what to say. At the very least, it is important to have guidelines and



a policy for employees on how to handle the media including the social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook.

The U.S. Army discovered firsthand the perils of social media and employee citizen-journalists during the shootings at Fort Hood.

Most employees will want to be seen doing the right thing, but as crisis communication expert Gerard Braud says, we default to gossip, exaggeration, and negativity unless we have been schooled otherwise.

Braud, who is a big advocate of “ambassador” training for crisis preparedness, says you can deescalate the likelihood of negative messages with some basic awareness training. He says to listen to chatter in the grocery line, gather around the water cooler, and you will hear negative gossip.

Take Braud’s scenario of a hospital where employees are asked questions about a patient whose hand had been accidentally cut off. The untrained employees are likely to say, “Oh that’s not all, not only did we cut off his hand but we did ...” or “Oh, that’s not the first time it’s happened ...” That is why most companies feel they need a strict “no speak” policy regarding the media. But media-aware employees will help you, not hinder you, in a crisis.

In an awareness session, key frontline employees will learn to say something like, “That’s a very unfortunate situation, and this is how and why we are doing XYZ.” Braud says that the conversation is likely to end there—no more gossip, no more negativity.

The U.S. Coast Guard trains all their frontline responders. They firmly believe that the people doing the work should be the ones to talk about what they are doing. Their credo is, “*Maximum disclosure, minimum delay.*”

Bottom line:

- Do a vulnerability assessment to help determine spokespeople.
- Train key operational staff at a minimum.
- Develop a media spokesperson policy.
- Develop a social media policy or at least guidelines for employees.
- Develop standby lines for frontline employees.

Stage Two

At this stage, you will know the basics about what happened. You also will have started an investigation. It is time to roll out the key spokesperson, if you have not already done so. This may or may not be the chief executive

* Gerard Braud, interview with author, July 9, 2009.

officer (CEO) as we discussed in Chapter 13. Your choice and criteria for choosing a spokesperson will always follow this line of questioning:

- What is the overall impression we want to create?
- Have people died or are lives at risk?
- Are our reputation and values under attack?
- What is the panic and who is best to address that panic?
- How big is the impact and visibility of the crisis—statewide, national, international?

BP had no option but to bring out the “big guns” given the seriousness of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The “big guns” may also be the heads of government, as we have seen with many of the major crises around the world. Presidents, premiers, and prime ministers get involved when the crisis is of significant magnitude and the company or regulator is seen not to be coping.

During the Fort Hood shootings, the chief spokesperson was Lt. General Robert Cone, who is in charge of the Army base; he was onsite. However, he was not the only official spokesperson, as you would expect for a crisis of this scale. The heavy brass visited and spoke, the president spoke, and the victims spoke. And Colonel John Rossi, the post’s Deputy Commander, also spoke, updating and explaining what the Army was doing.

The Army spokespeople performed very well under pressure—as you would expect—and no doubt had been trained and well rehearsed in how to handle the media in a crisis.

The spokespeople also managed the social media well. After the first round of unvetted enthusiasm by a soldier, Tearah Moore, whose Twitter account was quickly suspended, they quickly established a Facebook presence and regularly updated their Web site with comments from Lt. General Cone.

Train and rehearse your key operational people, your crisis management team, and your key crisis spokespeople, and have the frontline involved in crisis media awareness training so they understand their role in Stage Two.

Dealing with an apology is very appropriate training for Stage Two spokespeople. Saying sorry (see Chapter 26) needs to be sincere, and this needs to be tested in the training room. Taking responsibility and showing that you care also need to be tested and validated in the training room.

You may also want to review the role of security to determine how exposed your spokespeople are. Where and when will security face the public—your customers, clients, and families of the victims? Many organizations include security contractors in their training sessions. I worked with several security firms and their frontlines doing crisis media awareness sessions in leading up to the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. Remember to include social media in your training sessions, too. Who will be your official tweeter, who will be “speaking” on Facebook, who will blog? What is the role of the frontline in SocialMediaLand?

Stage Two is an important stage. Your reputation will be formed or broken here, so prepare well and choose wisely.

Stage Three

If you are rolling out your spokespeople at this stage, you are likely to be slammed, as Domino’s found out. They responded too late, even though we understand they were doing the right thing behind the scenes. They were working in the old-school mode. They presented the company president, Patrick Doyle, some 48 hours after the rogue employees had delivered their foul acts to the Internet via YouTube. Domino’s reaction was too late in this instantaneous communication age.

You have no option: You need to train the CEO, the chief spokesperson, the crisis management team (CMT), key operational people, plus experts to cope with the challenging, finger-pointing Stage Three. Think also about any special advisers or third-party endorsers who may add independence and credibility to the efficacy of your response, actions, and messages, remembering that in Stage Three, everyone will have an opinion about you and your response. You need to have a very effective, unflappable spokesperson who can effectively address the “I told you so” syndrome; someone who can deal with blame and is inoculated against biting into the poisonous questions or repeating the negative.

Social media are still important and will in fact keep bubbling along well after the headlines have fizzled out in the traditional legacy media, so you need to ensure that your spokespeople are ready and trained to cope with that frenzy.

Stage Four

Because this stage takes you back to the beginning by providing closure with a funeral, an investigation, a return to work, or product back to the

shelves, the consistency of spokespeople, people who have won our trust, is vital.

If you started with an operational spokesperson and stuck to that decision throughout the crisis, then that is the spokesperson who handles this stage.

Train your spokespeople to deal with questions like, "What have you done to make sure that this never happens again? Are there questions of liability? What have you learned?" Ensure you have the appropriate level of compassion balanced with firm resolve, and test this in your training.

Remember that the social media will still buzz with opinions and will need to be monitored and maintained.

Group or Individual Training?

We have discussed who should be trained. Now let's look at whether it should be group training or individual coaching.

Groups are more cost-effective, and participants in small group training learn a lot from watching each other. They may also come up with more effective messaging that can be tested in a safe environment. However, it is rarely effective or productive to have the CEO, boss, or immediate supervisor in the same group as their direct reports. I always recommend to my clients that the most senior spokesperson have his or her training on an individual basis. Personal coaching yields better results for the top executive. And refreshers are most certainly needed, plus rehearsals and coaching when the crisis does hit. Have the phone number of your trusted media coach handy so you can reach him/her when "the proverbial ... hits the fan." You will need them.

HOW OFTEN, HOW MUCH?

Depending on the level of risk in your organization and visibility of your brand, you will need to train at least annually, ideally twice a year. Include media training in your annual risk assessment. And make sure you have top-level support and a decent budget to work with a professional trainer. (A day with a trained, accredited media trainer working with a journalist and camera crew, based on real risks and vulnerabilities in your organization, will be around \$6,500 to \$10,000. A full training program that includes all your team, including frontline, plus drills and exercises, will range from around \$40,000 to \$90,000—a tiny fraction of what may be at risk in legal fees and compensation, not to mention the impact on the bottom line.)

Media training does not just end with the end of a session. To maximize learning requires practice. It definitely requires your commitment to using the skills outside the training room. Don't wait for, heaven forbid, the next crisis to use the skills. To be good at media interviews, like any skill, needs practice and reinforcement. I always encourage individual study—watch some media interviews, both on the traditional mainstream media like CNN, *ABC News*, or BBC, as well as YouTube. Call a talk-back radio station and practice the tools and techniques with a succinct opinion and/or question. (Better to do this on your own time on a subject that is near and dear to your heart as opposed to sensitive company policy.) It is also a good idea to research how others in your industry have managed a crisis.

The bottom line is that you need to choose your spokespeople according to the values and mission of your organization and train them accordingly. Take a good cross section of your organization and use the media training to test and validate skills and messages *before* a crisis hits.