



# HOW TO SHINE IN THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

A former reporter reveals the secrets of successful spokespeople

by Karen Friedman

**Y**ou've probably seen them on television—interviewees who always seem to deliver a quick quip, an interesting anecdote or an important fact that makes you stop and take notice. They seem natural, conversational, energetic and unrehearsed. They engage you as soon as they speak. Others simply ignore the reporter's question and, like any good driver, take quick control of the wheel, heading off in their own direction. What is it they have in common? Chances are, these savvy spokespeople have benefited from good media training.

Not long ago, a colleague complained that in today's media-charged environment, it's hard to find an executive who hasn't been coached

**Karen Friedman is president of Karen Friedman Enterprises Inc. and recently earned IABC's prestigious "Recommended Speaker" designation. An award-winning television reporter and anchor, she covered local, national and international events for 20 years. She can be reached at +1 610.292.9780 or [www.karenfriedman.com](http://www.karenfriedman.com).**

by a media trainer. And in a recent *Columbia Journalism Review* article, well-known journalists grumbled that as a growing number of media trainers teach spokespeople to twist interviews, dodge questions and seize control of interviews, the public is suffering.

## Strive for verbal fluency

Imagine that! Intelligent spokespeople who don't want to be caught off guard are coming to interviews armed with facts and messages, have practiced delivering those messages, and are learning how to speak clearly and concisely so they can explain complicated information in simple terms. What a concept!

In the early 1990s, Thomas Harrell, professor emeritus of business at Stanford University, studied a group of MBAs a decade after their graduation. His goal was to identify the traits of those who were most successful. The one common trait among the "successfuls" was their verbal fluency. They were confident communicators who could talk to anyone—colleagues, investors, strangers, bosses or associates. They could speak well in front of audiences, and they were easy to talk to. That's why media training—



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*media consultant*

otherwise known as communication coaching—should be mandatory in business.

As a reporter for more than 20 years, I interviewed countless numbers of smart, articulate people who had a lot to say but didn't know how to say it. As a result, they missed great opportunities to get their point across and shine in the spotlight. They were nervous and uncomfortable and, like many of us, feared being misquoted, blindsided by unexpected questions or taken out of context. So, instead of plotting their own path, they simply followed my lead and let me determine their direction. While reporters certainly have their own agendas, until recently, no one had given spokespeople the tools or permission to take control away from them.

While you may never find yourself being interviewed on TV or having to answer tough questions from a reporter from a major newspaper, facing any journalist without preparation is bad news. Interviews shape public perception about you, your company or your product. Think of them as opportunities.

### **Think like a reporter**

Most media training focuses on developing key messages, dodging questions and preparing for responses. Good media training will teach you how to crawl inside a reporter's head so you understand how to get what you need while giving him what he wants. Reporters want you to answer questions, not spout messages. They want you to appear animated, not coached. They want you to talk about your product or service but are turned off if you start promoting. So, how can you bridge the gap and make the most of every

interview opportunity?

The key is to think like the reporter. Let's say you're a doctor who is offering advice about how people who suffer from depression can get through the holidays. It is natural for you to want to discuss years of research, data and safety profiles before getting to possible solutions. While that information may be relevant to certain audiences, it is far more compelling to put the facts into perspective by explaining the magnitude of the problem and how it affects your target audience. If people don't understand the problem, they can't appreciate the importance of a solution.

Imagine if you said this:

“For nearly 20 million people who suffer from depression each year, the holiday season can be an especially difficult time, resulting in time away from work, strained personal relationships and an inability to complete everyday tasks. That's why it's so important to recognize symptoms, because this is a very treatable condition.”

By explaining the significance of the problem (20 million people), you are helping the audience understand how it affects others (work, relationships, tasks) and why the advice (recognizing symptoms and getting help) is so important.

When reporters cover stories, they ask three questions: Who cares? Why do they care? And how is my reader, listener or viewer affected? Reporters don't want volumes of information or lengthy background. They want you to give them the bottom line—quickly.

“A spokesperson needs to talk in concepts and put information in perspective, rather than memorize sentences,” observes

crisis management consultant Rick Amme. “By knowing what people care about, you can prepare messages that go to the heart of their wants and needs.”

### **Humanize the story**

Reporters need that perspective to tell the story. They ask questions to evoke emotion. They want you to speak from the heart so you reach through the screen or come off the page to make people see what you saw, hear what you heard or feel what you felt. This doesn't mean you need to sob or tell a journalist everything you know. When you speak, you should look for opportunities to humanize the information so that people can visualize and relate to what you're saying.

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This is especially important when a situation unexpectedly thrusts a company or an event into the spotlight and reporters are banging down the door. I once covered a story about alleged sexual misconduct by a high-ranking association official who worked with children. When the accused and the association refused to return our calls, we showed up at their door. When they still refused to acknowledge our presence, our editors instructed us to report live from the scene. This fueled speculation, additional media attention and community outrage. The association would have been in a better position to control the flow of information if it had issued a statement saying it was aware of the allegations but no charges had been

## Do's and don'ts for great media interviews

### Think of a media encounter as a good dining experience

- **Start with a clean plate.** Forget about what you can't control. Assume the reporters know very little about your area of expertise. Think of communicating as a way to help them solve their problems.
- **Think of planning a dinner party.** If you were sitting at their table, what would you like to eat?
- **Whet their appetite with the first course.** The first words out of your mouth really count. If you don't interest them immediately, they'll tune out.
- **Don't serve them all at once.** Don't tell them everything you know. Tell them what they want to know.
- **Stuff them till they're full.** Pack your discussion with real-life examples. Facts and information are dry. Explain with stories, examples, analogies and anecdotes.
- **Don't make them wait.** Get to the point or they'll lose their appetite.
- **Offer a little dessert.** Keep it short and sweet or they'll be too full to enjoy.
- **Deliver service with a smile.** Be fully engaged to make them feel valued.

—K.F.

filed, or that this was a terribly upsetting situation and they were working closely with authorities to determine what, if anything, had happened.

How a company responds often drives what the media reports. It is better to explain why you can't comment than not say anything at all. By appearing open and honest, you will be perceived as a caring person who is trying to manage difficult circumstances, instead of someone who is just attempting to defend or "spin" your actions.

### Know your game

Preparing for a media interview is similar to preparing for a football game. You need a game plan. You must first determine where you're headed, how you're going to get there and what outcome you desire. Like a kickoff, you need to come out strong and set the tone, because first impressions score big. Then it's important to stay focused by limiting the number of points

you throw out. In a sense, that's why media training is about far more than talking to the media. It helps people communicate more effectively to a variety of groups, including business audiences, analysts, investors and the public. Here are tips to help you deliver your message with greater impact.

■ **Be real.** People want to relate to you. No one wants to hear from a robot who is so "on message" that he never smiles or shows emotion. Enthusiasm is contagious. If you want to engage a reporter, then let your passion pour out.

■ **Speak their language.** They know you're smart—that's why they're interviewing you. So avoid big words or workplace jargon. Speak simply and conversationally. If the reporter doesn't understand you, then she can't explain it to the reader.

■ **Own your interview.** Interviews are opportunities to share, inform and educate. It's not enough to simply answer the

question. Try to address the question and look for opportunities to insert your message.

■ **Don't assume the reporter knows what you're talking about.** Most reporters are not experts in your field. They know a little about a lot, not a lot about a little. What is clear to you might sound foreign to them. Make sure they understand what you're talking about. They can't accurately report and make sense of information that they only think they understand.

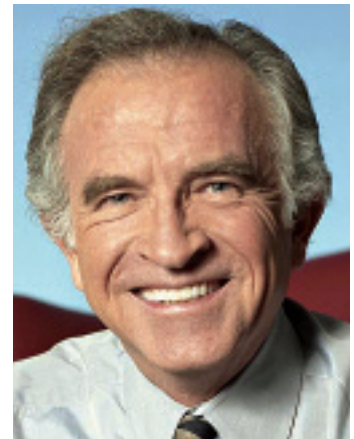
■ **Attitude is everything.** Cooperate. Don't be offensive, argumentative or confrontational. Don't tell the reporters how to do their jobs. You should provide information to guide them, but ultimately they will write the story. Reporters do not work for you.

■ **Stay on the yellow brick road.** Don't ramble. Say what you have to say as clearly and concisely as possible, and then stop! It is not your responsibility to fill the silence. Too much information and too many details create confusion, inaccurate reporting and misunderstandings.

■ **Avoid either/or questions.** Either you agree or disagree. Which is it? You cannot win an either/or question, which is designed to box you into a limited answer. Take the high road to present a broad picture of the issues involved.

■ **Be yourself.** If you don't know something, say so. Reporters will respect your honesty.

If you're serious about improving your skills or keeping your boss out of the hot seat, seek media training that focuses on standards and values. Words without principle are words without meaning. Listeners will see right through them—and right through you. **CW**



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