

MEDIA TRAINERS: JOURNALISTS SHOULD THANK THEM!

By Karen Friedman

In a recent edition of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, well known journalists complained that as a growing number of media trainers teach spokespeople to twist interviews, dodge questions and seize control of interviews, the public is suffering. To quote 20/20's John Stossell: "*Give Me a Break!*"

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 in advance and are learning how to speak clearly and concisely so they can explain complicated information in simple terms. What a concept! As a veteran news reporter, I would like to thank them for investing in the public's education.

For more than twenty years, I interviewed people who had a lot to say, but didn't know how to say it. Even the most seasoned communicators are nervous and uncomfortable when thrust in the spotlight. They are afraid of not knowing answers, missing opportunities, sounding too technical and getting blindsided by unexpected questions. Most don't understand what reporters want or how a story is put together. Not only will a good coach help people master the difficult task of explaining complicated information in easy-to-understand terms, but an experienced trainer teaches even the most media-savvy athletes and celebrities to take charge of what they want to say instead of being held hostage by limited questions.

Contrary to some correspondent's perception that "interviews become excuses to practice public relations", media coaches do not spin. In fact, media coaches should really be called communications coaches because they help people communicate more effectively to a variety of groups including reporters, business audiences, analysts, investors, and the public. They focus on strengths and values which should come across in every word you speak. They help spokespeople give meaning to their thoughts and teach them to speak in concepts so they can address the concerns of their audiences. They teach people not to repeat a reporter's negative words, which will be reported as their own. They help people give tough subjects perspective through stories, analogies, and examples so complex information can be remembered.

Do they use phrases such as: “What’s more important to discuss” or “What I’d really like to talk about” to bridge to their own agenda? You bet they do and why shouldn’t they look for opportunities to get their own points across? After all, they’re being interviewed because they have information to share. Like the interviewer, they want to look good too. Maybe it’s time for journalists to stop the pity party and like their interviewees, learn how to better craft an interview so the public is treated to the big picture. They might even want to consider getting some communications coaching.

Notice I did not say *media training*. That’s because good media training should teach you to communicate to audiences beyond the media. If you’re serious about learning to connect with readers, viewers and listeners, then you should schedule media training just like you schedule a doctor’s appointment. Better safe, than sorry!

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