

By Jerry Walker

Media coach puts clients in reporters' shoes

Karen Friedman, a Philadelphia-based media trainer, is not one of those coaches who is big on teaching people to talk in sound bites.

"Actually, I'm just big on getting people to talk, period," said Friedman, who brings 20 years of on-air TV experience to media and communications training and consulting.

"Over the years, I've stood at the scene of many a story and asked how did that happen?," said Friedman, who covered news for a Philadelphia TV station about six years before opening Karen Friedman Enterprises in Blue Bell, Pa. (610/292-9780).

She is not the least bit shy about using her news media experience to show her clients how to take advantage of media interviews, presentations and public appearances.

Friedman can recall numerous times when an organization had a great opportunity to tell its story, but either declined comment, (letting the media define the story for them) or slammed the door on a story that was begging to be told.

In almost every case, she said the companies and spokespeople were scared. "They simply did not understand what the media needs and how they can tell their part of the story," said Friedman.

She used an actual story of the time she covered the coming home of a three-year-old girl from a Philadelphia hospital for the first time.

"The parents had been told little Amanda might never leave the hospital but thanks to incredible therapists and God's will, this miracle child was going to walk out of her home for the first time since birth. What a story!



"Reporters need to see what you saw, hear what you heard and feel what you felt," says Karen Friedman, a Philadelphia-based media trainer.

"So, out she comes, cameras clicking, our tape caught it all as she clutched her mother's sleeve and was all giggles and smiles as she walked the short distance from the hospital door to the waiting car.

"We couldn't have scripted it better. Yet, when my photographer and I walked up to do an interview, the hospital said there would be no interviews," said Friedman.

She protested and explained not only did she need the interviews to tell the story, but she wanted to talk to the doctors and therapists, videotape the room where the girl had lived, and take pictures of the machines that kept her alive.

"No one at the hospital seemed to understand that without these elements, we really didn't have much of a story," said Friedman, whose first bit of advice to clients is to think like a reporter by asking themselves: "Who cares and how does this story affect my audience?"

For example, she recalls covering a space exhibit and asking a scientist to explain a certain process. "Rather than spouting off data that was relevant to him, he told me that one day this technology

would save the lives of my grandchildren."

Her point is reporters don't care how great the technology is, but rather, they want to know how it can improve someone's life.

She also advises clients to become their own audience when preparing for an interview.

"Close your eyes for a second and imagine that you are your audience," said Friedman. "Then ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What would you, the reader care about?"
2. "What would you, the radio listener, ask if you were putting the story together?"
3. "What would you, the TV viewer want to see if you were watching at home?"

She believes reporters ask questions they think their audiences want answered. "In reality, you are not even talking to a reporter. You are talking to the reporter's audience. So, do not assume the reporter knows what you are talking about. If you do, you have left it up to them to interpret, communicate and translate for you," she said.

In the case of spokespeople, she believes reporters look for these personality and professional traits:

Passionate: "Reporters need to see what you saw, hear what you heard and feel what you felt."

Concise: "Stay away from too many details. Use simple, descriptive words and analogies that help illustrate your point."

Sincere: "Work from your own script. If someone helps craft your messages, deliver them in your own words and style."

Informative: "Use an interview to get your message across. Answer the question, then transition to your key points."

Clairty: "Forget the industry buzzwords."

Prepare: "Understand why they are talking to you and what people want to hear so you can address their needs."

Context: "Talk in concepts and ideas that mean something to the audience."

If newsmakers implement her suggestions, Friedman believes they will find themselves talking in those sound bites or quotes that once seemed so elusive.

"Reporters are simply storytellers. But they cannot tell a story they do not understand," said Friedman.

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