

## **Planning a Media Training Program**

Christopher Dillon

Media training is hot. With the success of public relations-driven companies like Starbucks, growing awareness that PR is a potent marketing tool, and the popularity of books such as Al and Laura Ries' *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR*, many companies are turning to media training to strengthen their executives' communication capabilities.

Christopher Dillon of Dillon Communications looks at media training and how to make the most of the training process.

### **What is it?**

Media training is the process of equipping your staff to interact effectively with journalists and present your organization in the best possible light.

For front-line employees it means learning the basics—media inquiries are to be promptly and politely referred to the corporate communications department and company gossip is not to be shared with the (seemingly) nice man or woman from the newspaper. At this level, training is mainly preventative.

For corporate communications staff, media training ensures different offices or branches use the same standards, techniques and information to handle journalists' inquiries. It can also involve crisis simulations, where executives manage the communication aspects of a rapidly unfolding situation, often with incomplete information.

For executives who will speak on behalf of the company, it centers on upgrading or polishing their media-handling skills, usually with videotaped interview simulations and detailed appraisals. Training is often scheduled to support an important event, such as a merger, acquisition, downsizing or product launch.

### **Regional considerations**

Regardless of who is being trained, the program must equip them to deal with the media they will encounter on a day-to-day basis. In Asia, this presents some unique challenges, because the media range from propaganda outlets like North Korea's KCNA to respected global news services such as Bloomberg. Levels of skill and sophistication vary accordingly, and spokespeople can encounter anything from a cub reporter to a knowledgeable industry specialist.

Cultural differences make miscommunication between Western executives and local journalists and—increasingly—between prominent local executives and Western reporters, a very real possibility. And, as China's former President Jiang Zemin demonstrated in October 2000 when he publicly pilloried a group of Hong Kong reporters for being "too simple [and] sometimes naïve," these issues are not limited to East vs. West.

Language is another potential stumbling block. While training should be conducted in the language in which the interviews will take place, most media training concepts are language-neutral. In the absence of skilled local or multilingual trainers, English is often a suitable compromise.

### **Planning the program**

Because media training supports your organization's corporate communications, public affairs and/or marketing functions, it's a good idea to involve these departments as early as possible in the planning process. Topics that should be discussed include training goals, the trainees and their needs, the course content and the overall training approach.

Having realistic goals is critical. A half-day session won't turn beginners into seasoned pros, but it will let you introduce basic concepts and determine who has potential, who is terrified and who is unlikely to be an effective spokesperson. As with all training, setting these goals in advance is essential.

Advance planning is particularly important if you are training senior executives with busy schedules. Holding the sessions off-site—at a hotel, the trainer's office, or an annual conference—is a useful way of minimizing distractions and disruptions from urgent paperwork, phone calls and email. It can also create a sense of excitement about the training process.

When you have identified the trainees, distribute a questionnaire to determine their experience, interests and concerns. Then use this information to fine-tune the program and group trainees according to their needs and responsibilities. In Asia, mid-level staff are rarely comfortable in the same session as senior executives (and vice versa), particularly when the program involves detailed critiques.

For training that includes interview simulations, small-group sessions offer the optimum combination of personal attention, flexibility and cost effectiveness. While less expensive on a per-head basis, larger groups are difficult to schedule and offer limited opportunities for trainee participation.

Another option is use programs that train people from different companies at the same time. While better than no training at all, these courses' fixed schedules and content make them inflexible. And because they are open to the public, they are unsuitable for rehearsing confidential or commercially sensitive information.

### **Program content**

Your program's content will be driven by the trainees' needs, and will typically include some or all of the following components.

*Policy review*—For transferees, new hires and front-line staff, media training is a natural opportunity to review your communications policy, including the interview approval and tracking process, who may speak to the media and what topics they can address. An external trainer can reiterate these messages to senior management, a task that may be difficult or impossible for corporate communications staff.

*Media introduction*—To give trainees a common foundation, you may include information on reporters and news organizations; how stories are written and edited; and the differences between electronic and print media. You can also explain why the media is interested in your organization, and show examples of positive and negative coverage. If you are training expatriates, this is a good place to contrast local media and reporters with those in their home countries.

*Interview preparation*—For executives who will represent the company, include a section on selecting and packaging information. This is important because the interviewee usually has access to years of experience, which must be reduced to a handful of sound bite-length messages that are crisp, compelling and coherent, as well as being relevant to a local audience. You'll want to include techniques for responding to difficult or unpleasant questions, and specific tips for television, radio and print interviews can also be included here.

*Simulations*—In our post-course surveys, participants consistently rate interview simulations as one of the most valuable elements in the training process. If you are training executives who will represent the company, include simulations for each participant. There is no substitute for seeing and hearing yourself answer a reporter's questions, and receiving constructive, specific feedback.

Simulations should include easy, difficult, open-ended and “dumb” questions, and be appropriate for the trainees' role and responsibilities. A *60 Minutes*-style ambush interview can be valuable for the CEO or spokesperson of company in a crisis-prone industry, but is rarely appropriate for a novice trainee.

Finally, include plenty of Q&A time so trainees can resolve any outstanding questions. To keep the course topical, use real-world examples from your industry. And incorporate some fun elements to relieve the tension trainees may feel about appearing on camera.

### **Choosing a trainer**

There is no standard media training curriculum or certification for media trainers, and some training programs cost over US\$10,000 per day. As a result, whether you hire a global PR firm, an independent agency or a corporate training firm, choosing the right trainer is critical.

Referrals from your corporate communications department and from other HR professionals are a good place to start the search. Short-listed companies should be able to provide references and explain their course materials, training approach and pricing policies in detail. They should also be prepared to accommodate special requests, and handle any company- or participant-specific idiosyncrasies.

You'll want to meet the person delivering the training—not just the person selling it—to ensure they are diplomatic, credible and able to build rapport with trainees. This is particularly important if you are working with busy senior executives or specialists who may be skeptical about the training process.

The trainer may suggest using freelance journalists in the program. While this can add realism, it can also create confidentiality issues. Everyone involved in the training program should be covered by a non-disclosure agreement so you can discuss sensitive issues in confidence.

### **Wrapping it up**

When the training session has been completed, use a questionnaire to track participants' satisfaction levels with the program, content and the trainer. You can also hold debriefing sessions to determine which parts of the program were effective and which need improvement. Use this information when you plan future sessions, or hold follow-up and refresher courses.

Finally, be sure to share your comments and feedback with the trainer. Good trainers are always looking to improve their services, and your comments are an essential part of this process.

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