

Talking points

Helping executives understand the need for media training

By James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

Among the most frequent questions I get from PR practitioners is, “How do I get the boss to agree to media training? He needs it with interviews, of course, but believes himself to be a terrific communicator.”

My favorite is the senior-level expert — the physician, engineer, scientist, college professor or celebrity. These tend to come to their tasks feeling more self-sufficient and capable than most others we see as executive coaches.

Preparing the boss matters now more than ever. CEOs are targets for a diversity of audiences and investigations seeking explanations for organizational behavior. We all know that the crucial decisions are made at the top. Sending someone less senior than the CEO to represent an organization is often considered disingenuous or a cover-up.

Today, everything from depositions to congressional testimony to statehouse testimony is videotaped. In fact, Web sites can tell you where security cameras in most medium to large sized cities are located and monitoring. If you are videotaped walking down the street, given the date and time, that videotape can be retrieved. Many company and organizational meetings are videotaped, too — if not by the meeting sponsors, then by those in attendance. Videos filmed without a person’s approval often become a permanent memorial to the person’s presentation and carelessness.

Since performances, even the informal ones, may be captured, people need to assume they are on camera whenever they are outside of their homes and private spaces. Recently, an important legal



stock illustration source

case was lost because a physician expert was deposed, when he found himself testifying against his own video in court. He looked and sounded arrogant and careless in court, but his videotaped deposition was even worse.

Prospective coaches need to be ready for two great resistance strategies:

“I don’t need training”

Most executives believe they are excellent communicators.

The question you as the coach need to answer is how good are they really? Some years ago, I worked with a top executive at a telecommunications organization who was being featured on a public television business series. I spent two or three hours with him several times before the broadcast just to make certain he was comfortable. His staffers were concerned because he came from the Southwest and had a strong regional accent.

The executive ducked each of our appointments. At the final one, he showed for the last 15 minutes to apologize for missing the previous appointments. He said:

“Jim, I know who you are and why you’re here. I guess you figured out that I was ducking these sessions. But when I

told Edna, who I’ve been married to for 49 years, that I was going to be trained by this bright fella from New York, she burst out laughing and said, “Tommy, you and I have been married for 49 years and I haven’t been able to train you for anything. What can some stranger do in a couple of three-hour sessions?”

That was when I really understood what was going on. I said, “My intention was to coach you a little bit for this PBS series in some simple but important ways that will help you get ready and make you more comfortable.” Tommy’s response was instant and positive, “Coaching? I can always use some coaching.” We spent the 15 or 20 minutes left that Friday afternoon preparing for the taping.

The punch line of this story is that once the program had been videotaped, the company asked me to do a written assessment of each broadcast. I watched the series as it aired, so it was easy for me to share three observations.

From the moment Tommy opened his mouth, you understood why everyone trusted him. He spoke the truth, he was candid and he obviously knew what he was doing.

Just maybe this Eastern-based company ought to rethink its standards of

communications performance by a chief executive since this man was savvy, a storyteller and came across as more genuine than many East Coast-trained executives.

Last, I suggested that they use sections of the tapes to demonstrate how complex corporate transactions and even technologies can be explained powerfully, with great competence and passion.

“I don’t want to sound over-rehearsed”

Sometimes I think these executives went to graduate school to find strange ways to avoid doing things they know really ought to get done. This is one of the lamest, but quickly thought of excuses. I have been at this now for more than 30 years. I have worked with some of the brightest, dumbest and dullest, but in all those years, I am hard-pressed to think of an example of an executive who was over-rehearsed. We know that well-rehearsed executives sound like they are really at home in their job, understand what they are about and can help others.

Just watch this year’s presidential candidates and their perpetual town hall forums. What the candidates say and do is what employees hope to hear and see when their top executives appear before them. What makes top executives good is their passion for rehearsal. I talk about it from three perspectives:

Respect your audience. Even the boss has no right to waste people’s time stumbling through presentations.

Understanding the company’s strategies and goals is among the highest priorities of every top executive, especially the chief executive. The only one who can explain those goals and build followers is the CEO or the top executives.

The most powerful task every leader has, besides helping people understand an organization’s direction and goals, is helping people become collaborators in success. **T**

Copyright © 2008, James E. Lukaszewski. All rights reserved. Reproduction without written permission is strictly prohibited.

Want to learn more?

There is a lot more to talk about on this topic. Join the author in a 90-minute PRSA teleseminar called “**Media Training for Media Trainers**,” **Thursday, Sept. 25 from 3 - 4:30 p.m. EDT**. Visit www.prsa.org for more information and to register.

This teleseminar provides 1.0 Maintenance Credit towards the minimum 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA, 212.460.1436 or kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org. **T**



James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, helps clients deal with touchy, sensitive, high-profile situations. His latest book is “*Why Should the Boss Listen to You? The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor*.” Details: www.e911.com. E-mail: crisiguru@e911.com.