

The PR Professional as Coach: The Missing Link in the PR Tool Kit

By Joan Lowery, M.Ed.

We frequently forget that getting the press to schedule an interview is only the first step in the process. Whether or not the media opportunity turns out to be a good experience or a bad one depends on a number of complex, yet mostly controllable, factors if the PR person takes a proactive role in preparing his spokespeople.

Perhaps the biggest mishap in a PR professional's training is the failure to incorporate media coaching into their PR tool kit. A degree in public relations trains budding professionals to write press releases, create press kits, develop publicity campaigns and better understand the media ... all skills essential to being an effective PR professional. Unfortunately, however, public relations degree programs give short shrift to developing the students' communications skills as potential spokespeople to the media.

It is even far less likely that the PR professional's training will give any more than a cursory mention that it is, in reality, the responsibility of the PR representative to prepare and coach her spokespeople for media interviews. Little, if any attention is paid to the important role that the public relations professional should play as a skilled and dedicated coach to her spokespeople before, during and after media interviews.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that the mistake we frequently make as

PR professionals is to forget that getting the press to schedule an interview is only the *first step* in the process. It is merely a "foot in the door." It certainly provides a chance for the organization to stand out from the competition. However, whether or not the media opportunity turns out to be a good experience or a bad one depends on a number of complex, yet mostly controllable, factors if the PR person takes a proactive role in preparing his spokespeople.

Of course there are many shades of convenient excuses for not bothering to become effective coaches to our spokespeople. We tell each other, "He isn't open to coaching. He has an ego the size of California." Or, perhaps we convince ourselves, "He doesn't need training. He's very experienced and simply neither needs nor has the time to be coached." However, underneath all the excuses are usually feelings of being unprepared, or unwilling to take on the role of coach to our spokespeople.

Given this state of affairs, it's not surprising that both young and seasoned public relations professionals are a bit

overwhelmed by the status of the high-powered people they promote to the media. They admittedly feel insecure about “standing up” to them to encourage, or even insist that they rehearse for their press interviews. Conversely, many of these high status spokespeople don’t have any idea about how invaluable the PR person might be in helping prepare them for successful media appearances. So, even if the PR person suggests that they rehearse, all too often the untrained executive is convinced that she doesn’t have the time. She mistakenly tells herself (and even the PR professional) that since she “lives and breathes” the subject every day, she certainly doesn’t need to take time from her busy schedule to rehearse familiar material.

In these common cases, the press interview becomes a dress rehearsal by default. Thus the results are often poor, or far less than optimal, media outcomes. Furthermore, rather than understanding that inadequate preparation produced an unsatisfactory media interview, it’s more popular to blame the reporter. Too often the spokesperson or PR professional involved concludes that the reporter just didn’t understand the story; wasn’t excited about it; was too superficial in telling the story; misquoted; skewed the editing or made other mistakes. Rather than recognizing that the preparation wasn’t adequate, it’s easier to scapegoat the reporter for disappointing coverage. And, of course, there may even be some validity to the blame placing. But, that doesn’t excuse the fact that lack of effective media coaching can result in far less than ideal results.

· Great spokespeople may, indeed, have natural aptitude. However, spokesperson skills most definitely can and should be learned. Just as athletes improve with good coaching, spokespeople can become excellent, adept communicators with informed, consistent coaching. Accomplished spokespeople are a tremendous asset to their organizations. They spread the word about the programs, products, ideas, services or causes that their organizations represent in a way that entices audiences to take action. And that action can

directly impact the bottom line through sales, investment and overall good will.

Media coaching skills can be learned and developed. And, those PR pros who do take that extra step, become trusted coaches to their spokespeople and indispensable contributors to their organizations. They hold the keys to making a difference between good and bad interviews. Most PR people are aware of the important role that coaching can play in determining interview outcomes. So what stops them from coaching?

Often they lack the confidence to position themselves as media coaches. Perhaps they’re intimidated by the spokesperson’s status, his formidable personality, experience or reputation. Or, maybe the organizations they work for just do not value the importance of coaching because they have never seen its positive results. In any case, when there is a lack of coaching, we forfeit the opportunity for a predictable outstanding interview.

Media coaching skills should be taught initially at the university level and later reinforced and expanded in a systematic manner on-the-job. It takes a recognition, on the part of our profession, that it is our responsibility to give spokespeople the best opportunity to succeed in their press interviews. It takes a commitment to ensure that PR professionals are trained to be effective coaches and, once, trained, holding them accountable to master that role.

In order to become effective coaches to their spokesperson clients, PR professionals must develop a working understanding of what effective media coaching involves and develop skills in the following areas:

The coaching process

A good coach is effective at giving behaviorally specific feedback in a manner that motivates people to change. In my media training seminars and executive coaching sessions, we focus on behaviors, versus judgments. For example, saying “you looked confident” is flattering. But, it does not help the

spokesperson to know what specific behaviors created that impression. Thus she has no idea how to replicate the impression of confidence.

Describing the factors that resulted in the projection of confidence is more helpful. So, for example, the coach might say, "Your eye contact, both while speaking and listening, along with the well-moderated pace of your delivery, the animation in your voice and your smile when presenting key messages, exuded great confidence."

Conversely, rather than saying, "You looked nervous and uncomfortable," the coach may say something like, "clicking the pen frequently, wringing your hands together and bouncing your legs up and down gave me an impression that you were uncomfortable and a bit nervous."

When giving feedback, always give positive feedback first. Make sure that you point out all of the positive behaviors before discussing the more negative ones. Almost everyone I've coached is far more critical of themselves than supportive. They rarely see all the positive things they did in an interview. It is important for them to be aware of what they do well, so that they can not only replicate those behaviors, but also build their confidence.

Developing the spokesperson's "internal coaching skills"

Train spokespersons to become their own internal coaches. Just as an actor, dancer, singer, or athlete must develop a strong internal coaching ability, so, too, must the spokesperson.

Begin feedback sessions by asking spokespersons to critique themselves, starting with the positive behaviors first. Then, reinforce the positive behaviors and add any they may have missed. Secondly, guide the spokespersons to critique the behaviors that need improvement. Then, add your own. That way, they are less reliant upon the coach and, once their internal coaching skills are developed, they can "course correct" during an interview.

Formal and informal training for spokespersons

The PR professional may, or may not, be qualified to teach media skills. If not, enrolling the spokesperson in a good media training program will help him to gain the necessary skills to deliver successful interviews. Then, the PR pro can reinforce the learnings in the coaching sessions which should routinely occur before all interviews on new topics.

Working with spokespersons who don't appear to want coaching

There are many reasons why spokespersons sometimes say they do not want or need coaching. It could be because they have never had a good coaching session with a PR professional and therefore do not understand the invaluable benefits. It could be that they actually fear the interview and are more comfortable going into denial about it than facing their fears. It could be that they don't realize that a media interview is very different than a speech or one-on-one casual meeting. Or, it could be that they just don't know how they come across and don't believe there is much they could do about it anyway.

In all instances, video taping the mock interview can be all that is necessary to convince spokespersons of the value of practicing with a capable coach *before* the interview. Building in media training and/or coaching into the PR plan is critical to gaining acceptance of the coaching process.

Coaching before, during and after the interview

We have already discussed the coaching behaviors necessary before the interview. During the interview the coach can help to facilitate things when appropriate, and to help smooth things over with the reporter. If it is a phone interview and the coach is in

the room, she can cue the spokesperson to discuss key issues.

After the interview the coach and spokesperson should have a "post-mortem" coaching session in which they discuss what worked and what still needs improvement. If video or audio tape is available, they should view, or listen to it. In the "after the interview" session, the coach should also ask for feedback on his coaching style and effectiveness. This is an excellent opportunity to improve in the future as well as to strengthen the trust that will build between coach and spokesperson.

Once spokesperson realize the value of coaching, they will view the rehearsal sessions as an expecta-

tion, not a chore. The valued coach, just as in athletics, theater or music, gets outstanding results. This leads to the PR person gaining greater credibility, respect and appreciation from spokespeople and the organizations they represent.

From the standpoint of PR professionals, adding coaching to their PR tool kits enables them to optimize the interviewing potential of their spokespeople. This, in turn, makes the whole PR process, from developing the messages, to pitching the story, booking it, conducting the interview and seeing the results in print or on TV or radio a more comprehensive, predictably successful experience.

About The Author



Joan Lowery, M.Ed., and founder of Lowery Communications in Sarasota, Florida, has more than 20 years experience working as a professional communicator both nationally and internationally. She has extensive experience as an award-winning broadcast and print

journalist for news organizations such as CNN, Associated Press, CNBC-TV and the Discovery Channel. Joan specializes in media training, coaching and consulting. Articles about her work have appeared in *Forbes Magazine*, *Darwin Magazine*,

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