

The PR Manager as Coach—And The Supporting Cast of Characters

By Joan Lowery

PR professionals can provide numerous justifications for inadvertently enabling their spokespeople to treat their press interviews as little more than “dress rehearsals.” However, maybe it’s more useful to ask ourselves some tough questions:

- Does your spokesperson have an ego bigger than the State of Texas—making it very difficult to get him to commit sufficient time to practice for the interview?
- Have you found that reviewing key messages with her just didn’t “do the trick”?
- Did providing the executive with a Q & A document fail to translate into your spokesperson delivering crisp, clear messages at the interview?
- Were you too “intimidated” by this high status, always busy and potentially challenging spokesperson to consider serving as her coach?
- Do you lack the training and “know how” to be an effective PR coach to your spokespeople?

The PR Professional’s Accountability

Regardless of the reasons, if the results of a media interview aren’t excellent, I suggest the PR person consider what he or she could have done to better prepare the spokesperson. Rather than perhaps attributing an unsatisfactory interview to poor reporting, or even bias on the part of the journalist or the editorial staff, it’s helpful to consider what, if anything, went wrong at your end.

Is it possible that you, the PR professional, could have better trained your spokesperson to maintain control of the story and to handle difficult or even hostile questions more eloquently? Did you help your spokesperson adopt an educator, versus a victim, mindset? If so, did s/he make sure that the reporter understood the key messages and how they were intrinsic to telling the story? Did you prepare your spokesperson to be engaging and approachable in terms of both her verbal and non-verbal communication?

While great spokespeople may, indeed, have natural aptitude, it is also true that spokesperson skills can be

learned. Just as athletes improve greatly with good coaching, spokespeople can become excellent, adept communicators with informed and consistent coaching.

Media training is an excellent and powerful “springboard” for spokespeople to learn the basics and to recognize the critical importance of preparing and rehearsing for media interviews. But it takes ongoing, skilled coaching from the PR manager to reinforce and embed excellent, reliable media skills in the spokesperson’s communication tool kit.

So how do you become the kind of media coach that spokespeople value and want to work with because they know that you will help optimize their chances of success?

Did you help your spokesperson adopt an educator, versus a victim, mindset?

Excellent Coaches Wear Multiple Hats

The following eight distinct professional roles, when taken together, capture what it takes to be an outstanding coach. Please note: I’m using these “Cast of Characters” as metaphorical examples to help us better envision what is needed from good coaches at different stages of the coaching process. Also, keep in mind that I am not describing a linear process. The effective coach is flexible, highly alert, even intuitive, and able to skillfully flow from one role to another, depending upon what is needed moment-to-moment.

1. The PR Coach As Cheerleader

The PR Manager is a cheerleader in two distinct ways:

- 1) She must present a convincing rationale to her spokespeople to help motivate them to talk to the press, and 2) She must be a strong and consistent supporter of the spokespeople who will carry the message to the press.

Do not assume that the proposed spokesperson thinks of a media appearance as a wonderful opportunity and simply can't wait to have his/her turn in front of the press. The public has a love/hate relationship with the press and, as we know from our media trainings, that opinion is shared by most budding, and sometimes even veteran, spokespeople.

No matter how powerful and highly regarded your executive may be within the company or industry, she still needs your support in navigating through unfamiliar, and potentially unfriendly, media territory. In fact, it may be precisely because the executive spokesperson has such a good reputation that he or she does not want to risk it on a bad, or disappointing, media experience.

So as a cheerleader for media coverage, the PR person must be able to persuade her spokespeople that press appearances can create powerful opportunities for furthering brand recognition, building credibility and ultimately increasing profits or investments.

Even high profile executives have insecurities and aren't necessarily comfortable taking the risk of talking to the press.

Once the spokesperson has "bought into" doing the interview, the coach should show genuine appreciation for the spokesperson's time and effort. He must also support her through the entire process—from preparatory discussions to providing practice opportunities with skilled feedback to being at the interview (if possible) to debriefing.

2. The PR Coach as Reporter

All good reporters prepare a set of neutral, potentially positive and challenging, or even negatively-worded questions that will address all sides of the story. As the PR coach, you do your subject matter homework before the rehearsal and have a set of these questions ready for your coaching session.

You and/or your spokespeople know where the "skeletons in the closet" are kept. Rather than denying that there could be some potential "land mine" questions or discussion during the interview, you coach your spokesperson in how

to manage such potential "rough spots" in the interview while maintaining control and a positive attitude.

3. The PR Coach as Student

Your spokesperson is a subject matter expert. So, as part of your preparation process, you want to tap into his or her expertise. This will give you valuable information to use in preparing for a potentially deep and highly interesting interview. You may discover ideas for future stories you can pitch to the press. And, very importantly, it gives the spokesperson the chance to become invested in the interview process and excited about embedding her vision, ideas and passion into the story.

If he hasn't already been involved in the formulation of key messages, you should give him an opportunity to share his perspective on the topic. Ask for stories, metaphors, analogies and statistics that will help captivate the interest of the target audience who will read, listen to or view the interview.

4. The PR Coach as Storyteller

PR professionals and reporters have one very significant feature in common: they are both engaging storytellers who communicate with very specific audiences in mind. Your job is to work with your spokesperson to explore how she can best present her story to the media in a captivating way.

As the "storyteller in waiting," you embark on a journey with your spokesperson to discover the compelling story angles and messages that she can share with the target audience. Story support elements such as facts, statistics, analogies, metaphors and quotable quotes are all added to the mix so that the story can be told on many levels—making it memorable and moving to the readership, listenership or viewers.

5. The PR Coach as Prophet

Your spokesperson is the prophet, or evangelist, for the story you wish to spread through the media. You, as the PR coach, are also playing the prophet "behind the scenes" as you work with her to decide what specific messages you want to communicate and how to best communicate them in a compelling and memorable way.

As the PR manager, you hold the road map for the overall company communication objectives. How does this particular interview help to advance those larger objec-

tives? As the PR coach, it is important that you share the “strategy behind the strategy” of the current interview with your spokesperson. This supports him in understanding how his particular interview aligns with the overall mission and goals of the organization. With this awareness, the spokesperson can position the current topic in the context of the overall vision or purpose of the organization.

6. The PR Coach as Director: The Heart of Coaching

The director’s role best encompasses the spectrum of skills that come to play in coaching spokespersons. Like the director choosing a play, the coach chooses the story and “casts” the spokesperson.

Once the reporter or editor “bites” on covering the story, the coach moves into the heart of her role: preparing for “opening night”—the media interview. The coach helps the spokesperson bring forth her knowledge and key messages into a media presentation that can be skillfully delivered both verbally and non-verbally.

The PR Coach as Director works closely with the spokesperson to:

- Clarify the story
- Identify what they want the audience to understand/do
- Rehearse by role playing and providing skillful feedback on what works and what needs improvement
- Prepare to address “Unanswerable Questions” through effective bridging
- Tell the story in a “media friendly” way (short and to-the-point answers)
- Provide post-interview feedback to learn from the interview experience and build confidence to participate in future interviews

Using video during rehearsals to record the mock role-plays is a powerful learning tool. Follow the recording by viewing and providing feedback. After the interview the coach leads a Post-Mortem session, providing additional feedback to the spokesperson.

7. The PR Coach as Therapist: Transforming Mindsets

It is important for the PR Coach to understand the best approach to take when working with specific spokespersons. As mentioned earlier, keep in mind that even high profile executives have insecurities and aren’t necessarily comfortable taking the risk of talking to the press. It is your

responsibility as their coach to help them gain confidence in being spokespersons. Building confidence can transform a reluctant would-be spokesperson into a willing one as she recognizes the value that media appearances can bring to your organization.

To help motivate spokespersons to be willing to engage with the press, you may want to address the mindset that might be behind their reluctance. Many potential spokespersons hold a “spokesperson as victim” view of talking to the press. Even the coach may share that view to some extent. It’s this “elephant in the room” that needs to be identified and addressed in order to help move our spokespersons to a more productive frame of mind regarding talking to press.

8. The PR Coach as Translator

Imagine that you have a great story that the reporter’s audience would be eager to hear. You have the expert in the field who can address this story and potentially glean favorable publicity for your organization. The seeds are planted for a positive media interview. However, if your spokesperson cannot adapt his message to the concerns and interests of the audience that will view, hear or read the interview, that spokesperson is heading for trouble. His potentially great story will be at risk of being “canned,” misconstrued or underplayed in the telling.

When a spokesperson begins to view herself as an educator/coach to the media she feels empowered and eager to share her stories and knowledge.

It’s crucial that the PR Coach ensures that the spokesperson’s story is relevant and adapted to the interests and educational level of the audience. If the story is truly compelling and audience-relevant, it’s likely to grow “legs,” gaining additional exposure and spawning even water cooler conversations.

Debunk “Spokesperson as Victim” Mindset

The “spokesperson as victim” mentality is not, after all, that far-fetched. All of us have witnessed examples of well-meaning spokespersons getting “skewered” or grossly misrepresented by journalists who may be using them to build their own names on the “ruins” of a powerful leader

DEVELOPING YOUR COACHING SKILLS

Developing the ability to identify what works and what needs improvement in a spokesperson's communication is a critical coaching skill. Additionally, being able to break down desired communication behaviors into their component steps so that the spokesperson can practice more effective communication behaviors is also crucial. Developing these skills will make you an indispensable coach to your spokespeople.

Becoming a coach requires training your eyes and ears as well as listening closely for what is, and is not, being said. It requires being willing to engage in a process of trial and error and being open to learning from others. As you grow in your ability to facilitate behavior change, you will develop a coaching style that works and can be adapted to different personalities.

Seek opportunities to be coached by outstanding coaches. Find someone in your PR group or professional association who is willing and capable of mentoring you to help you reach your coaching goals.

—Joan Lowery

or celebrity. While these news ambushes don't happen often, when they do, these unfortunate incidents can become etched in the minds of potential spokespeople. Such impressions may result in fear and trepidation about granting media interviews.

In reality, most journalists are simply trying to do their jobs and aren't out to snare your spokespeople and ruin their reputations. They must continuously look for good stories. More often than not, they are delighted if they can get a strong story from a spokesperson that will attract and hold the attention listeners, viewers and/or readers.

The "Spokesperson as Educator" Mindset

Most reporters don't have the time or background to be specialists. Therefore, if they discover an excellent spokesperson that has both a good story and the ability to deliver it clearly, concisely and in an audience-relevant way, they are delighted. They will return to your spokesperson again and again if they know that they can count on her to deliver relevant and interesting interviews.

When your spokespeople truly understand how they can be educators to the media, versus victims of the media, their fear and trepidation melt away. I have actually seen, time and again, how when a spokesperson begins to view herself as an educator/coach to the media she feels empowered and eager to share her stories and knowledge.

When spokespeople hold the educator mindset they welcome reporters' questions and view them as opportunities to share their expertise and gain a voice in the media. From the educator perspective, even challenging, tough and negative questions are seen as opportunities to clear up misunderstandings and present an accurate picture of their organization's perspective.

The Case for Coaching

Coaching requires a sophisticated collection of skills—some that you may already have, and others that you will need to develop if you want to be an outstanding media coach.

As mentioned earlier, viewing coaching as a metaphorical supporting "cast of characters" can help you to identify which skills you already have and which ones you might want to develop.

Work at your own pace. Notice how adding these skills to your coaching repertoire impact your ability to support your spokespeople. By practicing and mastering the behaviors, attitudes and skills exhibited by expert coaches, you will not only see your spokespeople grow and experience success, you will also enjoy greater work satisfaction and be recognized and appreciated for your contributions. **PRN**

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