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▶ Tip Sheet

Media Training

Media Relations

Social Media

ANDREW GILMAN



Media Training: A 25-Year Perspective

January 2010 marks the 25-year milestone for CommCore as a media and presentation training/crisis communications consultancy. Much has changed since our first training programs, but the essence of what we teach is still very much the same:

1. Messages matter.
2. Analyze the reporter and media outlet, and also focus on the end audience of readers, viewers and listeners.
3. Anticipate the difficult questions and plan your answers.

We've seen both a retraction in traditional media and an explosion in other media. While newspapers and magazines are folding and electronic media editorial staffs are shrinking, blogs, YouTube, e-zines and Web sites offer countless opportunities to reach a wide audience, but greater risks of unwanted exposure.

Here's what's still the same and what's changed—with a few caveats:

▶ **Messages matter:** The name has changed over the years. Call it a sound bite, key message, comment, conversation, sparkler or must-air—it all starts with what you want to say to a reporter or on a blog posting. In a world of information overload, all communications starts with what you say. The more precise and visual the message, the better.

▶ **Biggest change:** The ability to shape the story in more media. Since news outlets are budget-starved and have fewer fact checkers, they rely on more materials from those they interview. The PR prep job: In addition to preparing answers to anticipated questions, pull together charts, key slides from other settings, photos and videos that support messages.

▶ **Major outlets still count, but not as much:** Whether it's *The New York Times*, CNN or *60 Minutes*, the high-stakes interviews still have a "high anxiety" level. When prepping for the big ones, prepare for all of their media. *The New York Times* is still hard copy, but prepare to help the reporter who needs to reposition the story for the Web site with links and video segments.

▶ **The new "major" outlets:** You don't need traditional media brands alone to communicate. While a story in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* or on the NBC network still has superior credibility, a Huffington Post or Politico story may get you a wider audience. A YouTube video shot with a flip might reach more people than any interview edited by a traditional outlet.

▶ **Prepare for the "click factor":** One question I always

ask in media training sessions: When was the last time you read an article online that didn't have multiple links to click on for more information? The click factor gives the spokesperson a couple of advantages. The first one is to come prepared and provide a reporter with the links that you will want the reader to go. Second, the click factor allows you to control the interview a bit more. You can acknowledge a question and say that the answer can be found on a link, then bridge to the related subject that you would rather focus on.

▶ **Bridging matters:** Answer or acknowledge the question. In the past few years, we've seen media coaches who counsel that you don't have to answer a journalist's question. From Carrie Prejean to Sarah Palin, we've seen more spokespersons in live settings blow off legitimate questions and then suffer credibility hits. That doesn't mean that all questions deserve an answer; the more subtle technique requires you to acknowledge the question, a.k.a. hit the target, before bridging to a related subject.

▶ **It's easier to correct an inaccurate story:** Letters to the editor and full-page ads were the old way to object to a story. Now, it's easy to correct misinformation on a blog or a Web site. Since everything

is searchable, a blog posting response to a negative article could show up better than a standard letter to the editor. If, however, the original story has gone viral, no amount of Web site blogging and e-mailing can overcome a tsunami.

▶ **Crisis planning is now more essential:** I cut my media training teeth during the first Tylenol crisis. At the time, J&J and the team of consultants thought we responded in a New York minute. A similar crisis now would be global in an Internet nanosecond. Sure, PR and risk managers have more tools to work and respond with. All too often we narrow our focus to the exposure from proactive partnerships with marketing, advertising and social media.

But as the bookend event on our 25th year, the Tiger Woods moment demonstrates the need for media trainers and other PR professionals to ask the hard questions earlier on, promote the positive and prepare for the toughest challenges. PRN

CONTACT:

Andrew Gilman is president and CEO of CommCore Consulting Group. He can be reached at agilman@commcoreconsulting.com.