



Mark Halper is a freelance business, media and technology journalist for TIME, Fortune, The Hollywood Reporter and the UK's Independent on Sunday, tracking everything from media moguls to arguably more powerful subatomic particles. When not spotting early trends in the telecom, media and tech world, he's written lively stories on subjects as diverse as manufacturing, cricket, cloning, surfing, energy and anti-matter. Currently based in the UK, Mark has published articles over 20 years in the New York Times, the Financial Times, Forbes, Business Week, Variety, the UK's The Business and Japan's Diamond Weekly. His TIME story on Rupert Murdoch and BSkyB was shortlisted for a 2004 European Business Journalist of the Year award. He has provided television commentary for the BBC and CNBC, and moderates lively debates at industry conferences. Mark is a history graduate of Cornell University and lives near Bristol, England, with his wife and two children. He is fluent in technology as a second language.

White paper

## CAN AND WILL BE USED

### How media training will make your words work FOR you

Let's face it. Many executives are wary of the media. They look forward to an interview with a journalist as if the police were about to question them. The famous, foreboding phrase "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law" figuratively runs through their minds, if not literally.

Those words, of course, are the mandatory "Miranda" warning that American cops read to freshly arrested suspects as they advise them of their right to remain silent.

It doesn't have to be this way in media relations. Executives need not fear the press and broadcasters. With a little media training, the opposite is true: media training instils a savvy in the executive that will steer him or her to speak and present in a manner that delivers just the right message.

Media training by seasoned journalists, in fact, can turn the warning on its head. With apologies to Mr. Miranda, media training can help assure that your words **can and will be used FOR you** – in the court of public opinion.

But how? And why really bother with media training? After all, many

executives have already trained up and polished their leadership skills, their presentation powers, their interpersonal techniques, their persuasiveness, their negotiating tactics. Shouldn't all that serve them



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well in their dealings with some journo who eats lunch for a living? The answer is a self-evident no: If all those other training disciplines prepare the exec for the media, then why do so many stiffen like a possum playing dead at the thought of meeting the press? And, in a corollary, many executives who think they're ready to leap into the media mosh pit will crash to the floor as their overconfidence ignores media nuances and delivers words that come back to bite them.

Good media training by experienced journalists can prepare the exec by providing him/her with

both a) a big picture view of the beast he is taming – the media industry, and b) the tricks of the trade that journalists practise and the buttons that push them into action.

Media training's broad view explains how journalism works – it provides a day-in-the-life of a newspaper, a magazine, a broadcaster. Most executives don't really know how things function on a paper/magazine or in a studio – with alarming speed, hasty decisions, rewriting, and editors' changes, all as major news breaks that completely shatters "Plan A", sometime minutes before air time or hours before a print deadline. The U.S. Army pulled Saddam Hussein out

of his rat hole late on a Saturday – causing Sunday and Monday magazine editors around the world to tear up thousands of pages of previously planned stories. A few executive interviews probably hit the cutting room floor that week. The point: can-do business executives are accustomed to implementing decisive, authoritarian action, but when it comes to the media, they are not the final arbiters. Someone once likened the production process of newspapers and magazine to that of a sausage: good end result, but you wouldn't want to see them being made. Media training helps prepare executives for this. The overview provides several benefits: enlightened executives appreciate this glimpse into another world; it helps the executive calibrate expectations; and it also provides some general fodder to help him/her establish common ground with the journalist. So, on interview day, he/she might know to empathize with words like, "I know you're on a deadline so I'll give you a quick answer, let me know if you want more detail." This in turn has the knock-on effect of encouraging him/her to hone his thoughts and answers.

Of course, media training is more than an overview of the media industry. It specifically aims to prepare the exec for communicating to the media in a print interview, in front of a camera or microphone, a "doorstop", a chance encounter, a phone call or wherever. A good media training session runs through specific pointers and critical "dos" and "don'ts", both through tutorials and through the highly valuable and practical mock interviews that toughen the exec up for game day. Here is a taster of just a few practicalities:

### **Marketing Food to Penguins – Know your audience.**

If you were selling grub to Antarctica's famous flightless birds, you might advertise it as "easily regurgitated" because adult



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penguins feed their chicks with, shall we say, the mushy reappearance of their own semi-digested, recently eaten squid and fish. But you might emphasize "tasty" if you were selling the same squid to the scientists at the local research station. The point: know your audience. While executives have probably learned this lesson somewhere along the way in their public speaking or presentation courses, they typically forget it in the context of media. But journalists represent a wide swath of interests. The way an executive describes things should vary depending on whether he/she is talking to a general interest publication, the business pages, a trade paper, TV, the wires, the tabloids, etc. Know when to avoid jargon, and when to use it. Jargon is often taboo but it has its place. Through mock interviews by experienced journalists, media training tunes an executive into the different lines of questions he/she might receive, and prepares him/her to answer differently.

### **There's no such thing as "off the record".**

Ernie "Fats" Holmes, a burly American football player for the Pittsburgh Steelers, once assaulted a sports journalist because Fats

objected to quotes the writer printed and attributed to him. Fats had no qualms with the words' authenticity, no quarrel about getting quoted out of context. He simply objected that the journalist had used the quote. Media training will not teach an executive how to throttle writers, but it will drill into them the importance of when, what and how to confide, and whether and when to trust a journalist.

### **The importance of colour.**

Have some engaging or quirky anecdotes or quotes handy. I still remember the night – over 20 years ago – after coming off the phone with Henry Kissinger who was suing an American lads' magazine, Penthouse, for publishing an allegedly unauthorized interview with him. Penthouse Magazine's publisher subsequently gave me a quote that helped win sympathy for Penthouse. "This is the first time I've ever known Dr. Kissinger to feel uncomfortable in the presence of attractive young ladies," he said. This light-hearted touch of humour changed the tenor of the story, not

necessarily in Dr. K's favour. Media training from a veteran journalist is rife with examples like this, and helps an executive open his/her own treasure chest of anecdotes and quotes that he might not have realized he had.

### **What Drives a Story?**

Journalists are not just factual reporters. They are storytellers. They look for angles, words, and slips of the tongue that make for a good read. The factors that drive a story often circle back to the quote and the colour. A glib example: I was once reporting from a business conference when I met a chief executive from Iceland, who's first name was Frosty. At the time, I didn't yet know what I would report from the conference. I hadn't yet found my angle. But I knew I couldn't pass up a chance to include a "Frosty from Iceland" in whatever I wrote. I chatted to him on the spot about anything and everything, determined to derive something quotable. Needless to say, Frosty got ink that week. That was a lucky break for Frosty. But sometimes, things work the other way. An executive's innocuous, throwaway, unthinking remark can suddenly make a headline, to the executive's chagrin.

Media training helps prepare executives to meet the press with confidence yet with a proper dose of caution.

Executives should not underestimate the storytelling aspect of journalism. Effective media training assures they won't, and drills home the point that journalists want to come away with something useful. Journalists are often not experts in the executive's field. They're looking for allegories, not algorithms. I remember a recent 14-day period in which I was busy one week interviewing the likes of Robert Redford, Isabella Rossellini, and Black Eyed Peas front man Will i Am. The next week I was probing the intricacies of technologically integrating manufacturing software into accounting programs. Talk about sublime to the ridiculous! I was expert in none of these areas. To this day I couldn't recite Redford's film history. But I sure got a good quote from the famous actor/director, who was at a mobile phone conference to

promote phones as a film medium. His Sundance Institute was funding the production of short films for the mobile format. "Robert, when you're not working, do you watch films on your phone?" I asked. "When I'm not working, I'm skiing," he replied. That one quote helped put the subject of "mobile phone entertainment" into its proper, reality-check context.

How did I make manufacturing software interesting? In part with some of my own tricks of the trade involving crafty interviewing techniques. But also with a huge contribution from SOME of the executives I interviewed. The execs who understood that the subject required a deft and lively touch of communication made it into the story. Head to a media training session to find out more about how.