


The Lasting Effects of Media Training

Long-term Strategies for Developing Stellar Spokespeople

Ed Barks



Media training must deliver return on investment — an investment that bolsters long-term business and public policy success for the enterprise and career success for the participants. Yet in its current state, it too often fails that test due to a lack of emphasis on sustained professional development.

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Executive Summary

Allow me to begin by speaking heresy to many involved with [media training](#). The fact is a single media training workshop, in and of itself, is of relatively negligible long-term value. [One lone day](#) will do little to fast forward your communications strategy.

Rather, it is the results that a continual media training program helps to achieve — a shinier brand, a promotion on the job, victory before lawmakers and regulators — that matter.

Every CEO who signs off on media training for their company wants to ensure those training efforts result in long-term business and public policy success.

Here's even more sacrilege: Much media training as practiced today is largely ineffective. Why? Many workshops fail to provide a plan for strategic and continued long-term business and career success. Furthermore, they neglect to address return on investment (ROI), both for participants individually and for their companies.

This report was last updated five years ago. I've written [three books](#) as well as publishing a second edition of my debut volume in the interim, so figured it's time for another look, given the passage of time and events, and changes wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic. Regarding the latter, note the new segment on remote training options.

So let us examine what action media training consultants, internal communications and public affairs executives, and their C-suite leaders can take to achieve more positive and long-lasting results. All parties are encouraged to maximize the return on their media training investment by making use of the best practice recommendations outlined in this report (see Appendix), taking heed of those suggestions that best fit their situation. These steps can include anything from additional formal refresher workshops to video or telephone consultations to informal drills these executives can do independently.

Even among businesses that tip their caps to long-range professional and organizational goals, implementing any plan remains difficult: Participants are often left with little if any direction. Their ongoing skill building suffers, falling victim to factors such as day-to-day business demands, and diminishing motivation over time.

As one interviewee for this report put it, “Everyone is pumped up at the end of the session saying how wonderful it was,” but the energy or follow through “falls by the wayside later.”

The recommendations suggested in this report are designed to take advantage of the enthusiasm at the end of a workshop, and prevent that energy from dissipating.

In the typical media training environment as it has come to develop, participants are often subjected to a single one-off session in which they are expected to learn everything in that instant. Legitimate attempts at learning [how better to work with reporters](#) are too often the exception, not the rule.

While a single “just in time” workshop will no doubt do your C-suite inhabitants and other spokespeople some good, one will not get noticeably better at the craft without regular practice. In the words of one respondent interviewed during the research for this report, it should become “an evolution of their skills.”

This hypothesis that too many media training workshops are ineffective due to a lack of emphasis on sustained professional development resulted in discovery of four philosophical categories into which media training consultants and internal communications executives fall:

1. **The Mover and Shaker:** Expresses frustration with the lack of leveraging communications efforts for long-term business and public policy success, and takes action to improve the situation.
2. **The Quitter:** Realizes it is difficult to inculcate sustained professional development, and throws their hands up in frustration believing there is nothing anyone can do to make it happen.
3. **The Carefree Soul:** Recognizes it is difficult to instill a long-term view, and is not bothered by it. In fact, they prefer one-off relationships with no follow up.
4. **The Know Nothing:** Consists of low-skill “trainers” in the marketplace, often communications generalists moonlighting as strategy consultants. These individuals may not even realize the situation exists.

This report examines the attitudes and methods of the three main groups with a stake in media training:

1. Internal communications executives
2. Media training participants
3. Media training consultants

The author hopes this research contributes to the knowledge of each of these three groups, helping them gain real value from their media training efforts. Improving the lot of even a few businesses will serve a worthy purpose, assuming it leads to constructive change in how

consultants and internal communicators approach such sustained professional development opportunities. Even a small attitude shift can help advance the long-term business and public policy success of companies and the career paths of their spokespeople.

Segment 1

Examining the Lasting Effects of Media Training

This research was undertaken with the goal of making media training more effective for companies that devote time, effort, and budget dollars to it, and for [C-suite executives](#) who deal with the press.

Why does such effectiveness matter? Companies capable of delivering magnetic messages via spokespeople who exhibit sharp communications skills tend to win the day in everything from new product launches to public policy battles.

Effectiveness certainly matters to the C-suite executives and the thought leaders who study in a media training workshop, for those who demonstrate solid communications skills have higher odds of achieving their professional development and career goals more quickly and effectively.

In brief, the findings in this report stand to help:

- Corporate spokespeople who participate in media training workshops
- Internal communications executives who advise their C-suite leaders and other spokespeople
- Media training consultants
- Freelance generalists (who offer services other than media training to their clients, but may advise them on selecting a qualified consultant)

Making Media Training More Enduring

This report strives to help businesses maintain momentum from their media training endeavors by shedding light on the need for ongoing progress. It also aims to make media training more effective and efficient in three ways:

1. It emphasizes the strategic approach of media training, treating it not simply as a check-the-box tactic.
2. It unmask the current situation, making businesses and their leaders more aware of the inherent shortfalls in many an approach to media training.

3. It offers practical improvement strategies that media training consultants and internal communicators can put into practice immediately.

While the focus here centers on media training, one respondent points out that the principles learned in a training workshop also apply in such situations as staff meetings, business presentations, and [fielding questions](#) in a variety of settings. This means that extending performance in a conscious fashion beyond the day of one workshop broadly impacts professional development and career advancement goals as well as corporate communications and public policy objectives.

The steps outlined in this report can also prove valuable with regard to other types of communications training, such as [public speaking](#) workshops and [legislative testimony](#) preparation (though such a review was not part of this analysis). To be sure, not all those who practice media training — consultants and internal communicators alike — have the expertise to focus on these other niche business needs. To the extent they do, it is my hope they will glean some value in these findings to help their spokespeople and clients.

Segment 2

Methodology

These qualitative findings featured interviews with nearly two dozen communications training consultants and internal communications experts. In the interest of full disclosure, the author notes that some are clients of Barks Communications.

The invitation to participate stated the report's examination of "such issues as the importance of lifelong learning for media training participants, effective methods for encouraging lifelong learning, and the attitude of trainees toward lifelong learning."

Yet it is interesting to note how often many of the interviews strayed from the lasting effects and into discussions of standard media training techniques; i.e., viewing it as a tactic rather than a strategic initiative. Ideas surrounding development of long-term business and professional success rarely surfaced without prompting.

It was a constant effort in most cases to tug the conversation back to the topic at hand. The author accepts some of the responsibility for allowing the dialogue to go astray. Still, the drifting off topic may be an indicator of how little ongoing professional development is considered with respect to media training and how challenging it is to focus training consultants and internal communicators on the need for continual improvement.

You may note no attributions. Several early respondents indicated a discomfort with being quoted. As a result, in the interest of consistency, the decision was made to give confidentiality to all. Every contributor has this author's heartfelt thanks for their valuable insights.

A few words about terminology to avoid possible confusion. "Participant" is used to denote one who takes part in a media training workshop — the spokespeople who are there to sharpen their skills. "Interviewees" and "respondents" refer to those who were interviewed during the course of this research for their expert perspectives. "Communicator" designates those involved in the communications function, but who do not specialize in media training.

Segment 3

Professional Development or Check the Box?

As one expert interviewed during the research phase for this project said, executives who go through more detailed training are in a high enough position to have regular interaction with the media or an imminent interview. At that level, they are not focused on becoming better communicators per se. Rather, they are “looking for techniques [that can help them] hang on to their jobs.”

Once an executive rises to a certain level in some organizations, media training is often mandated. One interviewee revealed his “pet peeve” that in some companies once you rise to the level of vice president, “you needed to have that media training.” However, with the principles not reinforced regularly, “they wanted a refresher” to prepare for a specific interview. This type of scattershot approach not only renders improved performance relatively ineffective, it also impacts budgets when companies are forced to conduct multiple intensive workshops instead of regular doses over time.

“Most CEOs unfortunately take the training for granted,” lamented one individual.

The view of media training as a [“check-the-box”](#) task, not a professional development and career-building opportunity, does little good for two reasons:

1. There is a higher chance this check-the-box attitude will result in an inferior “off the shelf” workshop, one that is customized neither to the particular individuals’ needs nor the company’s strategic goals.
2. It ignores the need to truly improve media relations abilities, instead becoming little more than an item on some bureaucratic to-do checklist.

One of the challenges is that people get wrapped up in things, reports one internal communicator. They don’t ignore the training they have undertaken, they simply forget to implement it, given day-to-day pressures. That is why a training continuum — arranging future skill sharpening opportunities — is important over time.

As one respondent pointed out, some consultants and executives view communications training as similar to a one-time seminar on a specific and narrow skill such as how to use email. “We are different,” says this individual with regard to him and his colleagues who

conduct training workshops. In an email seminar, “You learn it once, you get it.” Internalizing best communications practices, on the other hand, is more nuanced and requires more ongoing practice to become effective.

The Value of Sustained Professional Development

Why do businesses sign up their spokespeople for more skill building? They return for two reasons, suggests one respondent. They either have more spokespeople who need skill sharpening or they require a repeat course for individuals who require more attention. This respondent goes on to say that people who seek out more knowledge add depth to how they express their story, and gain more command, comfort, and leverage with what their story can do for them. “Their story moves from a training exercise to becoming a part of them.” He adds that he appreciates them coming back and enjoys watching their development.

Another respondent holds that the long view is simply not a topic of conversation with participants, and that neither the consultant nor the participating executives think of media training in that way.

One interviewee suggests framing the subject as, “How to leverage PR [public relations] for long-term business success.” That opens up a conversation about how communications skills fit into success with the press, and how media training benefits the bottom line by sharpening communications abilities (a note of caution: I would avoid using the term “PR” as that has a pejorative connotation in many a C-suite).

This definition dovetails nicely with that of Eurofound (the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, a European Union body), which describes lifelong learning as “all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.”

Segment 4

What Type Are You?

Analysis of the interviews finds four basic attitudes when it comes to sustained professional development relative to media training.

Those involved with organizing media training, both consultants and internal communicators, fall into one of four categories. They are, as noted earlier:

1. **The Mover and Shaker:** Expresses frustration with the lack of leveraging communications efforts for long-term, strategic business and public policy success, and takes action to improve the situation.
2. **The Quitter:** Realizes it is difficult to inculcate sustained professional development, and throws their hands up in frustration believing there is nothing anyone can do to make it happen.
3. **The Carefree Soul:** Recognizes it is difficult to instill a long-term view, and is not bothered by it. In fact, they prefer one-off relationships with no follow up.
4. **The Know Nothing:** Consists of low-skill “trainers” in the marketplace, often communications generalists moonlighting as strategy consultants. These individuals may not even realize the situation exists.

What Does Your Training Consultant Believe?

Reviewing these four categories, it is evident that some [training consultants](#) are frustrated by a chronic lack of long-term relationships with participants. One interviewee is “still searching for that motivator that will make it happen.” At the same time, others prefer one-time occurrences, with one Carefree Soul even laughing when discussing with a Quitter a preference for one-time engagements.

Your company must decide which is the right approach for you. At a very minimum, it would be wise to ask prospective consultants about their long-term approach to media training, and its return on investment as it relates to your goals and your spokespeople’s career objectives. Examine the four categories above, decide which philosophy best suits your needs,

and seek out the consultant whose beliefs best mirror yours. In fact, you might ask your prospective consultants to classify themselves into one of the four types listed above.

Segment 5

The Training Consultant's Responsibility

Training consultants can — and bear a responsibility to — advance their clients' professional development by suggesting specific steps, both formal and informal (see the appendix for a list of potential steps).

“Participants must understand why they need to practice” after their workshop, says one interviewee, adding that the approach should not be “training for training’s sake.”

Follow up must be “really individualized,” according to one respondent. It boils down to learning from one’s own performance, both in real life interviews and in simulated exercises, and understanding the areas where improvement is necessary, this individual adds. Interestingly, the focus here is on correcting weaknesses as opposed to continually sharpening inherent strengths — a common shortfall among many training consultants and internal communicators. More on this later.

Emphasizing Career Benefits

“The only way to encourage lifelong learning is to show them it’s valuable to their current job or long-term career,” stated one respondent. This individual suggests explaining that their [professional prospects can suffer](#) if they neglect offers to improve, calling it a “missed opportunity.”

This individual goes on to say that the approach “must be very practical,” adding that “It’s a roomful of business people with [profit and loss] responsibility. You have to show them how it will help them. It can’t be esoteric, learning for the sake of learning.”

Though it will certainly take time and effort to shift toward this strategic perspective, one relatively easy fix is for the consultant to emphasize the concrete benefits of ongoing improvement — from a brighter career path to better news clips — with everyone in the client organization, from initial contacts in the communications or public affairs shop to the CEOs, vice presidents, directors, and managers who partake of the training regimen.

Part of this can be done verbally. For instance, conversations with clients should assume that follow up steps are a normal part of the mix.

Some of the attitude adjustment can be done in written form. Preparatory materials for participants, for example, should include reference to the fact that they are expected to extend their execution over time.

Begin at the Beginning

One training consultant's experience shows that spokespeople embrace next steps when they see real world applications in their daily lives. This respondent referenced the connection one executive made between skills he learned to be interviewed on the Today Show and his later efforts at pitching an editor with an article idea. Another example is the corporate CEO who applied the communications principles acquired when preparing for a CNBC interview to help him run more efficient staff meetings.

Media training consultants owe it to their clients to devote conscious forethought and planning when it comes to [advancing executives' communications skills over time](#). They also, this author argues, bear an ethical responsibility to do so. It is the consultant's responsibility to make it obvious to workshop participants.

Plan for Success

This fact raises one area for improvement that is fairly straightforward: Training consultants should build in to the planning process for every engagement a means for extending relationships beyond the day of one lone workshop. Further, they should reinforce its importance throughout the session with such techniques as offering an opportunity to revisit matters in person, via video conference, or over the telephone following their next media interview.

As one respondent said, semantics matter (as all training consultants should know well). Executives might be resistant to training once they have participated in one workshop. Instead of suggested additional "training," words like "refresher" or "update" can keep things on a positive note, prevent them from thinking they may have done something wrong, and offer an ego boost.

When the day of the workshop arrives, it is recommended that consultants raise two issues with participants at the beginning of the session (advance consultation with the client is strongly advised to ensure there is support for these moves):

1. Schedule a later session at a date certain to reinforce essential principles. The date may range from one week to one year, depending on the participants' needs and severity of the issue at hand.
2. Emphasize the return on investment that flows from the training workshop, in terms not only of dollars, but of corporate reputation and career enhancement as well.

Beating Participants over the Head

Understanding that there is more to ROI than mere dollars, one respondent suggests showing a video clip with a poor interview subject, telling participants, "You don't want to be the person in this negative clip. This person didn't think that was them either." As one respondent put it, "It's a wakeup call when CEOs see it from a peer-to-peer standpoint [and think] 'That could have been me.'"

The second point above raises an important issue that is beyond the scope of this research, but which nonetheless merits mention. Too many media training workshops place the emphasis solely on correcting mistakes. Or, as I often say more colloquially, participants enter the room believing they will be smacked over the head with a two-by-four when they make missteps. This emphasis on weakness is a rocky path to progress for most of us.

While minimizing missteps when speaking to the press clearly matters, it's a fact that performance is more readily enhanced by [concentrating on strengths](#). What does the participant do well and how can that be highlighted during interviews with reporters? The lesson here is to also show them interviews that lead to positive outcomes.

One hurdle for consultants is to blend a focus on utilizing strengths with a strategic longer range plan to correct communications challenges. This applies particularly to dealings with strong-willed senior executives who expect rigorous critiques on what they need to improve as opposed to what they do well. Thus, the consultant bears responsibility not only for sharpening participants' communications skills in the long run, but, at the same time, encouraging them to improve more efficiently.

Many senior executives already have a solid grasp on the basics of media relations. Rather than an experience that scans the horizon, these more advanced officers need to deal with specific, individual challenges such as the need to improve brevity or eliminate jargon.

Some consultants err in making media training a one-off experience when working with a highly accomplished spokesperson. Yet the fact is that they probably got really good by dedicating themselves to sharpening their communications edge over many years. The “good ones” are the very individuals likely to crave more advice because they realize there is always room for improvement. Thus, I suggest caution if a consultant does not come forth with a plan to continue to advance even the best spokesperson’s performance.

The Curious Consultant

Another large part of the picture: Consultants must find ways to rise to the challenge of continuing to advance their own expertise. Their professional development may be accomplished through reading, conferences, informal conversations with colleagues, research projects that stretch their horizons, membership in professional societies that feature relevant opportunities, or other means.

This is “walking the walk.” Those who advocate ongoing improvement must themselves practice it in their own professional lives.

Segment 6

The Participant's Responsibility

No single strategy — and no single training consultant, no matter how skilled or dedicated to sustained professional development — can force individuals to employ best media interview practices if they resist. This applies both to lessons in the workshop itself and to ongoing development since so much is dependent upon an executive's self-motivation and openness to employing new approaches.

One communications practitioner reports that dealing with some participants reminds her of “talking to a junior high student with a blank face.” Similar to cramming for a test in junior high school, she adds that practice is necessary, but most people aren't going to do it “unless an interview is imminent.”

One internal communicator got right to the point: “[People who think they need it the least need it the most.](#)”

Another explains that much depends on the participant's motivation and level of regular engagement with the media. Thus, consultants would be wise to ask in advance of a workshop what participants expect to do with their new skills, why they were nominated for the training session, and why they care (are they up for a promotion? Did they evince subpar performance in a recent interview? Will they get fired if they fail to take part?).

Raise Your Hand if You Want More Advice

As part of this research project, interviewees were asked what percentage of media training participants call for more knowledge upon the completion of a workshop.

This question often elicited a thoughtful pause from the respondents. It may have been due to the fact that they were trying to calculate percentages. Or they may never have considered the question before (which would be another indicator of the low priority given to sustained professional development).

The disparity in numbers of media training participants who request added steps afterwards was broad. Interestingly, those interviewees who did answer this question quickly

and firmly typically replied, “zero.” On the other end of the scale, one estimated 80 percent asked for some type of follow up. Other answers ran the gamut in between, with a concentration at the low end of the range.

One veteran training consultant, who estimates a 50 percent rate of return business, attributes that comparatively high percentage to an approach that derives “from a relationship perspective.” Being an informed and acknowledged expert, believes this consultant, wins return business. Clients sense a familiarity both with them and with their content, saying, “You know our business,” or “That’s a tough question. You’ve done your homework.”

This consultant believes that a workshop that does little more than cycle through a litany of mock interviews does not result in return engagements and, therefore, hampers the advancement of media interview skills. This is not to say that [simulated interviews](#) lack value. Such exercises, however, should not be the end-all and be-all.

The experienced consultant who claimed an 80 percent rate of repeat business, noted that those requesting follow up may ask for a summary of new, more effective messaging or seek to learn about specific journalists or publications in order to pursue a higher media profile. This individual went on to say that participants must see a return on investment, especially when the source is working for a public company, citing the belief that, over the years, there is a growing recognition that media training provides ROI.

Media training in its early days, this expert holds, was thought of as tactical. However, it is now considered strategic. Therefore, executives are more open to the need for it and see its value more clearly.

Return on Investment Is Paramount

One respondent phrased it directly: “Everything these days is return on investment.”

Another suggests reinforcing the strategic results spokespeople get when they continue their learning — benefits such as more money, another job, or a promotion.

How can consultants communicate what type of ROI media training delivers? Of more importance with regard to this research, how do extended media training opportunities provide ROI? When the term “return on investment” is uttered, many executives think only of dollar signs. Yet there are other equally important measurements. To name just a few:

- Reputation

- Positioning vis-à-vis competitors in the marketplace
- Career advancement
- Comfort level in what can be a stressful professional dialogue

Additionally, at the end of any initial workshop, it is a good idea to review with the participants what perceived benefits they gained. Then match those benefits to the company's overall communications strategy plan as another means of reinforcing the ROI gains.

One respondent got to the heart of ROI relative to media training when he pointed out, "As hokey as it is, people think, wow, I don't want to be this person" who performs poorly or in an embarrassing manner in a news clip. Raising their abilities over time helps reinforce the value of media training as well as that of the consultant and the internal communications function.

Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?

One consultant reports that it is rare to hear from a participant after the session, the lone exception being occasional feedback from account teams when business is gained through public relations agencies that commit to frequent and ongoing client contact. This respondent noted that training consultants often lack access to a sustained relationship with the participating executives themselves, so cannot do much to emphasize sustained improvement with only one shot at them.

This begs a series of questions: Is this due to the fact that the consultants don't even try? Is it something inherent in current approaches to media training? Are there institutional roadblocks that need to be torn down?

One respondent notes that the correlation "depends on the depth of the relationship" with their training consultant. Another believes it is almost always the case that internal communicators are the ones "nudging the executive to do a refresher unless it's a pressing issue."

More Questions than Answers

What accounts for the disparity in the percentages of those asking for more? Does it have anything to do with the type of individual involved? For example, is there a difference in

outlook between those who work for large corporations vs. smaller businesses or non-profit organizations? Is it something specific to the structural differences among such entities? Might the perspective of scientists differ from that of marketers who, in turn, differ from accountants or various other professions?

Is it the approach of the training consultant? What is the correlation between the consultant's point of view and how many participants ask for added professional development opportunities? For example, among the interviewees for this report who say zero participants ask for added counsel, is that because the consultant neglects to emphasize it? Or does the consultant fail to emphasize it because their client base has demonstrated over time an indifference to professional development and they have given up in frustration?

While this project unearthed no "silver bullet" solutions, it behooves both consultants and internal communicators to reflect upon the possibilities outlined above with the aim of improving their own approaches and, therefore, the value to their clients, be they external or internal.

Segment 7

The Company's Responsibility

One key to implementing a [sustained media training professional development effort](#) is the active involvement of senior internal public affairs and communications and, where applicable, investor relations staff. It is these individuals who will have day-to-day contact with spokespeople after the workshop. Their role in creating a culture friendly to continuing advancement cannot be emphasized enough.

While individual motivation is a key component, internal communicators would be wise to push the needle in the direction of sustained improvement. This does not happen often enough, according to one respondent, who pins the “fault” squarely “on the person in the communicator’s role.”

Suggests one respondent, these internal experts “need to build a culture of education and training,” making it “a chronic approach.”

One consultant attributes the possibilities for this type of professional development to “organizational ethos” and the value the organization’s communications or public affairs experts place on improvement over time. Where that commitment is strong, he says, he tends to get more frequent calls for assistance.

Creating Internal Systems

One internal communicator admits that, in a formal sense, there are “not a lot of mechanisms in place” to ensure the company’s spokespeople get better over time, other than “back and forth” with the communications shop. In the end, learning comes through real-world experience, though the individual concedes this is “maybe not the best way.”

In many cases, spokespeople who have a grasp on the principle of sustained professional development rely on their internal advisors to get them ready for specific interviews. In the words of one respondent, “Our people get a lot of real time advice from staff. The good ones appreciate it.”

Left unsaid is the idea that the spokespeople who perform the weakest are the least likely to appreciate and take advantage of such opportunities. The company faces a choice with those individuals: Either put them on an accelerated track capable of improving their performance, or eliminate or minimize their interactions with the media.

Internal communicators also bear responsibility for moving strategically to advance their spokespeople's skills. "Sometime it's us letting them know they need it, especially with new spokespersons," said one.

Choosing the Right Consultant

When turning to consultants with special expertise in media training, businesses have a vast array of choices available to them, simply because every consultant has a different philosophical approach to the workshop as a whole and to its effectiveness relative to ongoing skill building.

This makes it incumbent upon the business dedicated to constant improvement of its spokespeople's abilities to perform adequate due diligence when selecting its preferred consultant.

Part of that due diligence means asking questions:

- What types of ongoing professional development resources (if any) do they offer?
- Have they [authored books](#) and training guides or does he instead rely on a sheaf of copies stapled together?
- Does the proposal or contract contain language that solidifies a commitment to improving participants' skills over time or is it silent on that matter?
- Do they emphasize follow up workshops, telephone consultations, or e-learning?
- What training modules have they developed that are designed to further performance over the long run?

While companies may differ in the responses they prefer, it is advisable to clarify such issues ahead of time to ensure that they get the type of training they want and to avoid future misunderstandings.

The Public Company Effect

Communicators who work for public companies and, in particular, those that operate in regulated environments face extra challenges. In an often changing regulatory landscape, the communicator must carve out time to make sure timely and accurate messages are in place, notes one respondent.

One interviewee mentioned that the CEO at a corporation where he once worked was provided with media training to prepare for potential crises before they occurred. Such inoculation provides a reasoned, strategic method of enhancement over time. This individual adds that this took place in a regulated environment, which may be more attuned to such needs.

Heavily regulated industries like health care, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, and financial services would be wise to place added emphasis on their spokespeople's sustained professional development if, for no other reason, than to keep pace with constant change and stay out of regulatory hot water.

Segment 8

Raising Consciousness

At the risk of tooting one's own horn, it appears this research has already led to some benefit during the interview phase. At the conclusion of their interviews, three trainers — two consultants, one internal — stated their intentions to be more deliberate when it comes to shining a light on sustained professional development. One of the consultants admitted there is a benefit to thinking more about what steps to recommend at the conclusion of a workshop, noting, “We're often so focused on the immediate situation that we miss the opportunity.”

Another paused to consider the question, “Could we have done more” in past workshops, adding, “I might go back to the participant list and offer more.”

If this report leads to this type of consciousness raising, great. The true benefits, of course, are those which accrue to the corporations and individuals who participate in [media training workshops](#). If this work improves the lot of even a small number of businesses, it will have served a worthy purpose by leading to constructive change by at least a few degrees in how consultants and internal staff view continued performance improvement. Even a small attitude shift can help advance the objectives of companies and the careers of their spokespeople.

Methods and Manners

Certain interviewees displayed some reticence when it came to revealing specific techniques, probably due to competitive reasons. Some of the reservations were spoken (e.g., a reluctance to give away agency “secrets”). Yet there was possibly some unspoken reserve as well.

This may help explain why the only techniques mentioned by some consultants were a leave-behind tip sheet or exhortations to watch broadcast media interviews.

While reasons for this reluctance to reveal best practices cannot be confirmed, logic dictates that it can be attributed either to 1) the competitive issue noted above or 2) the fact that many experts give little thought to steps beyond the day of the workshop.

How Much Is Too Much?

One obvious means of extending advancement beyond a single workshop is to add on a second session at a later date. One respondent stated that he always witnesses improvement as subjects take part in multiple opportunities. For example, one client asks for a workshop every time an earnings report comes up. Others ask for additional counsel to hash out new and emerging issues.

One interviewee suggested holding hour-long sessions for [larger groups at larger corporate or association meetings](#), that can serve either as an introduction to dealing with the media or a more advanced approach that puts participants “on the hot seat.”

Communications training consultants bear responsibility for offering innovative and engaging (and, dare I say, enjoyable) strategies over time. One interviewee encourages sessions on at least an annual basis.

From a business and client relationship perspective, however, added workshops are not always practical or viewed kindly. Indeed, recommending no more than additional formal workshops — admittedly a high ticket service — can be viewed by clients as little more than a means for the consultant to pad the bill.

A Question of Balance

Another respondent acknowledges the tightrope walk consultants face when they assemble an effective program that encompasses more than a single workshop. This individual calls for a partnership between the consultant and the internal communications person, and goes on to say that consultants who recommend a robust, extended program should not be viewed as merely seeking an added revenue stream.

That said, it may hearten consultants to know that some businesses understand this need. One internal communicator welcomed any offer for extended counsel at the end of a media training workshop, recognizing, “That may be another business opportunity.”

Another public relations agency professional recommended raising the notion of extending the relationship at the end of the training in the context of what spawned the session in the first place. Shine a light on the day-to-day, week-to-week applicability. In addition, “be

brutally practical,” and emphasize that the training is “not some kind of academic exercise,” rather, one that reflects on their professional success and the reputation of their enterprises.

The issue of resources also comes into play, particularly in times when companies have slashed training budgets. One-trick pony communications training consultants who offer only one service — a formal workshop — fail to put their clients’ interests first. Indeed, they face the risk of running their own businesses into the ground.

Remote Training Options

Smart businesses help their spokespeople get up to speed on the finer points of remote video interviews for, born of the pandemic necessity, Zoom and similar video platforms have become a common choice for news outlets.

I am not going to try to convince you that remote professional development options are on a par with in person sessions. I have argued for years that they are not, and have not changed that view. My estimate is that remote trainings can provide approximately 70 to 80 percent of the value as compared to in person workshops. Still, that percentage is better than zero.

The fact is, however, that we live in the real world in which remote meetings, interviews, and — yes — professional development opportunities, have become omnipresent.

One area where remote options can make a substantial difference is in follow up steps. Reinforcing improvement using video or telephone interaction can help to raise spokesperson performance over time.

I’ve long held two remote exercises in my bag of tricks. The first is [Reporter’s Roundup](#), in which I don my former reporter’s hat and conduct an interview over the telephone or video link just like a real newsperson would. You then receive a news article via email based on the interview within 90 minutes. It highlights positives as well as any tricks and traps. We debrief after the interviewee has had time to review the article, giving them the chance to ask questions, learn about their positives, and chart directions for future improvement.

The second remote drill is [Express Training](#), a session that makes sense in a few situations:

- Prepare for times when last minute interviews pop up
- Give a potential spokesperson a taste of what dealing with the press is like

- Assess whether potential spokespeople might have what it takes to serve in that capacity

Another distinction between in person and remote sessions: While in person workshops can last for the better part of a business day, remote offerings are more effective when shorter. Experience tells me that it is decidedly challenging to hold everyone's interest on a small screen for a prolonged time. Thus, I rarely extend remote programs for more than an hour at a time.

It is too easy for even the most dedicated spokesperson's attention span to wander. Plus, I cannot monitor and quash distractions like incoming text messages, ringing phones, office mates clamoring for attention, or distracting family members or pets.

I can better monitor the focus when everyone is in the same room, and bring it back to center stage when needed. Having participants move on occasion helps (as does shifting my position routinely at the front of the room to shake up their visual perspectives). It is also possible to dole out breaks to keep energy levels higher.

Budget ramifications also come into play. Remote sessions are somewhat lower cost, though not at a bargain basement level. After all, you wouldn't want to skimp on spokesperson performance during critical interactions with the media. Remember, you're not paying your media training consultant for their time; hourly rates are the sure sign of a low-skilled freelancer. You're paying for expertise and value provided. If, as noted above, remote offerings deliver 70 to 80 percent of the value as compared to in person sessions, reason dictates that the professional fee should fall along those same ratios.

Segment 9

The Bottom Line

[Media training](#) must deliver return on investment — an investment that bolsters long-term business and public policy success for the enterprise and career success for the participants. Yet in its current state, it too often fails that test due to a lack of emphasis on sustained professional development.

CEOs who endorse media training for their businesses have the right to expect a more effective and strategic approach. The ROI they seek is not limited to dollars. It may be measured in anything from corporate reputation to the ability of an up-and-coming executive to expand their skill set in preparation for a step up the organizational ladder. And it must fit in seamlessly with the company’s communications strategy.

Even companies that acknowledge the need to strive for such long-range professional and organizational goals find it difficult to implement employee development over time, as participants are often provided little long-term guidance.

The current media training environment is replete with single, “one-off” media training engagements. While this type of limited program can be of some use to executives and spokespeople, the evolution of their skills suffers for lack of sustained attention.

Fortunately, this research sets forth concrete steps that media training consultants, internal communicators, and spokesperson participants can take to achieve more positive and long-lasting business and career success from their media training endeavors.

All parties are encouraged to maximize the return on their training investment by making use of the best practice recommendations outlined in the Appendix, utilizing those ideas that suit their situation.

Appendix

Best Practice Recommendations

This appendix includes a catalog of possible follow-up methods designed to help businesses achieve the long-term business and [public policy goals](#) they want to attain from their media training workshops. It is highly recommended that you work collaboratively with your media training consultant to implement the approaches that make sense for each individual training experience:

- Close every media training workshop with a set of personalized next steps.
- Emphasize that this is not a “here today, gone tomorrow” approach before and during the initial training session.
- Schedule multiple opportunities at the start of the planning process.
- Make it clear that meetings should be planned a number of times a year, even if only for 15 minutes on the telephone.
- Offer instruction sessions via video conference or telephone.
- Convene a workshop devoted strictly to messaging.
- Hold regularly scheduled refreshers.
- Set up as needed “just in time” sessions to deal with issues that arise.
- Conduct follow up sessions to deal with a crisis or specific issue.
- Underscore the value of applying techniques learned in a media training workshop in other areas of professional life, such as dealing with policymakers and running meetings.
- Provide ongoing email counsel.
- Offer examples of spokespeople who started poorly but improved over time.
- Review periodically the video of exercises conducted during their workshop.
- Emphasize that the training represents a long-term investment in the future of their career and their company’s reputation.
- Conduct occasional spur of the moment role plays led by internal communications staff.

- Give them easy to use and specific role play exercises they can practice with colleagues when time permits.
- Present them with a book they can consult for handy reference.
- Give them exercises they can do in a flash to sharpen skills.
- Conduct periodic mock telephone interviews with an ex-reporter who writes an article based on the conversation.
- Write a report that includes assessment of the existing situation, growth noted during the session, and common sense improvement strategies to pursue.
- Work through a specific question the participant has difficulty dealing with.
- Offer a one-hour larger group session to serve as an introductory course for other potential spokespeople.
- Hold group sessions that put participants on the hot seat facing tough Q&A.
- Leave them with examples of interviews gone wrong.
- Offer additional exercises that focus on specific bloggers and other digital media writers.
- Provide a notebook in which they can write about media interviews they observe with a mind toward the quotable quotes. What is that one sound bite that makes the cut, and why? Many spokespeople struggle with this.
- Organize a session on the changing journalism landscape.
- Give them pre-assignments they are expected to complete in advance of their workshop.

In the interest of furthering this research, the author urges readers to [contact him](#) with additional methods that can be added to future reports.

About the Author

Author and communications strategy consultant Ed Barks works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need their communications strategy and messaging to deliver bottom line results. They gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business and public policy goals.



He is the author of [four business books](#):

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Ed contributes to a variety of publications and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has also published numerous research reports and position papers, including [“A Buyer’s Guide To Communications Strategy Consultants.”](#)

More than 5500 business leaders, association executives, scientists, government officials, entertainers, and other thought leaders thank Ed for sharpening their communications edge.

According to his clients, he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his communications training workshops “two thumbs up!”

He has served as President of Barks Communications since founding it in 1997. He served a nine-year tenure on the Board of Governors of the National Press Club and joined the faculty of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Institute of Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the Consultants Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

An inside-the-Beltway veteran, Ed has spent more than three decades in Washington, D.C. He brings another critical perspective to his clients’ communications needs — that of a broadcaster and journalist. He knows firsthand the tricks and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio broadcasting.

Ed also publishes the Communications Community, available by free subscription. Join using this [link to get a special bonus](#) — a free copy of *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator*.