

Common Ground

How Media Training Benefits the Press

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Overview

Some reporters exhibit a sour look when the subject of media training arises.

They may believe a [media training program](#) is little more than a consultant trying to stuff spokespeople's brains with canned responses. Others may think such a program gives their sources too much of an advantage during the parry and thrust of an interview. A handful may be jealous of the consultant who has transitioned from journalism to business ownership.

The journalistic cream of the crop, however, realizes that expert media training consultants work to make what I call the "[business deal](#)" between reporter and source flow more smoothly.

A media training program done right supplies executives with insights into how they can make a reporter's job easier. And let's face it, with ongoing newsroom cutbacks, a public less than enamored with the scribe tribe, and incredible deadline pressures, reporters can use all available help.

I concede that there are abysmal consultants in the marketplace who do position the press as the enemy while doing little more than trying to cram sound bites down clients' throats. Your company should want nothing to do with them. These are generally the same laggards who view media training as a one-and-done affair. They fail to view it as a cornerstone of [sustained professional development](#).

To facilitate better understanding among newsmen and their sources, this paper puts forth 10 questions — along with answers I trust you will find enlightening — in hopes of fostering a healthier atmosphere for both spokespeople and the reporters who cover them.

As with all my research and writing, I encourage you to [get in touch with your thoughts](#) after reading this paper. What hits home with you based on your company's experiences? Where would you elaborate? What's missing? What are your quibbles with my viewpoints? I look forward to the dialogue.

1. Ed, you are an advocate for your clients. Indeed, that is your primary obligation. How can you claim to be good for reporters, too?

No question that my primary my responsibility is to my clients. The written agreement we enter into outlines our mutual obligations. And clients do, after all, pay the freight.

Why do smart businesses deem media training mandatory? In order to get their message out, effective spokespeople need to know what they want to say. This sounds basic, but you might be surprised by the number of interviewees who choose to wing it. One essential part of media training is the obligation to [forge a message](#) that is as airtight as possible, one that is able to respond to questions be they routine or challenging.

Clients also need to hear in no uncertain terms from their consultant that honesty is crucial. Granted, dealing with the press is not equivalent to a courtroom where you need “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” While every comment must be factual, you do not need to unveil “the whole truth.” Some matters are best left unsaid.

It is true that members of the press will sometimes pose tough questions. They will and, I would argue, should, as they work to unearth the facts as they are known and to get perspectives from their sources.

When a reporter raises a contentious or privileged issue, sources need to develop the ability to acknowledge the question, [build a bridge](#) with a transitional phrase, then return to their message. This Q&A technique (and others) helps to keep things on the up and up.

Executives also must develop the communications skills to say it with punch and pizzazz. This means that both verbal and nonverbal skills need to perform at a high level.

On the other side of the coin, the less reporters need to dig out information and [quotable quotes](#) from interviewees, the easier their job becomes. Reporters often have a tough slog, so the more sources can facilitate matters, the better for both parties.

There are few things more frustrating for reporters than an individual who doesn’t know how to convey a message accurately and cogently. It is no fun trying to pry words from the mouth of an unskilled spokesperson.

2. Tell me three ways you benefit your clients.

While each [media training program](#) has its own distinct flavor, there are some common advantageous elements.

First, it leads to a magnetic message, or at least the beginning of forming that message. Companies are in different places on the messaging spectrum. At the positive end is the firm that crafts elegant messages, commits them to writing on a single page (no exhausting discourses or confusing diagrams allowed), and backs them up with examples, anecdotes, numbers, third party endorsements, and more that prove its contention to reporters.

At the other end of the scale is the business that has given no organized thought to what it wants to say, let alone committed it to writing. The upshot? This second group is going to require a much more concentrated and rigorous workshop to get its message squared away in the first place. In cases like this, it is often best to first hold a session devoted strictly to messaging. This should involve senior communications staff and the executives in charge of the issue at hand. Once they and your communications strategy and training consultant have hammered out a draft, it is time to get the [CEO's buy-in](#). With the messaging in hand, they can then move on to an interactive media training workshop for the spokespeople charged with delivering the message.

The second benefit involves a commitment to developing strong communications skills among company spokespeople. Some of us have natural talents as communicators; others need to commit more time and effort. No matter the level of proficiency, honing verbal and [nonverbal skills](#) are a large part of any media training endeavor.

The third factor is experiential — putting spokespeople through the paces of [simulated reporter interviews](#). Depending on their level of experience, questions from your consultant posing as the reporter can be straightforward (so as not to frighten or demotivate any novices who show promise) or challenging for the more toughened individuals.

From the above principles flow other, more all-encompassing, benefits, such as greater confidence and an enhanced reputation, both personally and organizationally. This leads to the achievement of business and public policy goals as well as superior career advancement.

3. Now tell me three ways you benefit reporters.

Smart reporters understand that media training is not their enemy. Savvy interview subjects help them do their jobs more efficiently. Here's how.

The first benefit deals with a typical reporter frustration: The need to sometimes [extract information and suitable quotes](#) from their subjects. An effective, well thought-out media training program teaches news sources how to respond appropriately. The result is a smoother interview environment. It's a time saver. No longer does the reporter need to painstakingly wring out news and quotes from unskilled sources.

Second, spokespeople who have experienced media training offer more formed and more informed stories. This helps the reporter not only write or produce the piece, it also strengthens their case when they pitch their editors and news directors. This, in turn, raises the odds that the story will appear in print, on the broadcast, or online.

Third, reporters stand to gain more bylines and airtime, thereby heightening their reputation and professional profile. They thus hop to the head of the line as candidates to appear as expert talking heads on television or to author books. There may be reporters who don't covet prime slots on CNN or MSNBC or their name on a book cover. If you find such a rare creature, let me know.

4. How do you get this positive message about media training across to reporters?

As with many things in life, much of it revolves around relationships. For example, I served for nine years on the [National Press Club](#) Board of Governors. That connected me with many reporters who covered a diverse array of beats and had different approaches to their craft. In turn, I am hopeful that my dedication there helped to lend an air of credibility to my work in the communications and media training fields.

It is especially important to make the positive case for media training to younger reporters just starting their careers. Explaining both sides of the equation not only helps my media training clients, it also paves the way for a smoother career path for new scribes. This again serves as

evidence that media training inures to the benefit of journalists, their sources, and the companies on which they report.

5. Do you tell clients and reporters different things?

If the question is do I slant the way I explain [media training](#) to each cohort, the answer is no. Such programs provide a means for enterprises to get their message out through the press in a clear, concise, and honest way. Neither businesses nor the media industry should have a problem with that.

Telling each group different things would fly in the face of honesty and ethical behavior. I want no part of such subterfuge.

6. How many consultants work to create an understanding that media training benefits both their clients and reporters?

The good consultants are experienced former reporters, so they get it. They have a solid grasp of the challenges journalists face and an appreciation for anything that facilitates that job (within ethical boundaries, of course).

Those media strategy and training advisors who've [never worked in a newsroom](#) probably struggle with the concept. Then again, someone lacking in newsroom experience has no business taking on media training engagements.

Fair warning: Vet your prospective consultants carefully. You would be wise to avoid anyone who has never worked in the hubbub of a newsroom when searching for an expert skilled at sharpening your spokespeople's communications edge.

Another advantage: Current reporters are more likely to view former newsroom contemporaries in a positive light given the latter's first-hand knowledge of journalists' trials and travails.

7. When you tell reporters that your services benefit them, too, do they roll their eyes?

Some do. The pros, however, get it. I recall receiving a note of thanks from a Toronto-based reporter on Twitter (in the days before I deactivated my account due to the cesspool of mis- and disinformation there) indicating that she sees the value media training brings to her job.

In fact, I've worked with numerous reporters serving in leadership positions for journalistic organizations. The intent was to help them understand how to respond to questions from their peers (and how to [deliver presentations](#)). They can be a touchy bunch, so I find it essential to toss some hardballs and gauge the reaction.

As an aside, I find it helpful to define what media training means when discussing the subject with reporters. The most common understanding in the business world is a program that demonstrates to news sources what they need to do to interact successfully with the press. Reporters, however, sometimes take it to mean a program that teaches them about their craft. That's a fair assumption. The takeaway: Define what type of media training you mean when raising the matter with the scribe tribe.

8. What do you really tell your clients about this in the privacy of an executive media training workshop?

There is no secret handshake or coded message in invisible ink. I lay it out as best I can as a former reporter, giving clients perspective into [how journalists work and what they need](#). My hope is that those viewpoints lend legitimacy to our work together and provide them with understandings that will facilitate their dealings with the press.

A workshop also allows time for [attitude adjustments](#) where necessary. If an executive walks into the room with an anti-press bias, I can work on that. Admittedly, however, attitude is one of the more difficult aspects to modify. In preparation for media training programs, I ask for participants' impressions of reporters. This tells me if I have someone with an attitude problem. If change proves impractical or impossible, it may be best to eliminate them from the spokesperson ranks.

9. Isn't it all just about the money?

It may well be for some consultants, I suppose. And I don't mean to belittle the value of professional fees. That, after all, is how consultants put bread on the table.

The fact is experienced, ethical communications strategy and training consultants understand that there is more at play than collecting the cash. Clients pay a not insubstantial professional fee for the value their consultant brings (if your "consultant" is too budget-friendly, you're likely dealing with a fly-by-night generalist or an unemployed freelancer, either of which may take on a project for which they are unqualified just to rake in the revenue; for more on how to separate the wheat from the chaff, see [A Buyer's Guide to Communications Strategy Consultants](#)). In return, the client deserves — indeed, has the right to demand — a concomitant return on value.

Don't make the mistake of confusing this with the need to toil long hours just for the sake of punching the clock. Sure, some projects are time consuming. But your consultant is there to work smart, not long. So beware of any consultant who tries to charge by the hour; this is not a metered taxi service.

10. What's the big deal about benefiting both camps?

It's about trust. Reporters and their sources must work collaboratively if solid First Amendment journalism is to thrive. It is imperative to work in alliance to knock down mis- and disinformation peddled by autocrats and grifters.

Sure, there are competing interests and inherent tensions. And it is true that my clients pay the freight, so they are my first obligation.

Yet there is a bigger picture here. It's all part of living in a [society with First Amendment rights](#) — rights we must work consistently and diligently to preserve. And it's about maintaining an ethical perspective, something that should be top of mind in any business deal.

We increase the odds for success when both sides respect one another and avoid any hint of preconceived mistrust. Yes, media training done right aids both reporters and those they cover.

The Bottom Line

The [media training principles](#) outlined above will do you little good if the result is inaction. Both communicators and reporters bear responsibility to build professional bridges. Here is a summary of steps that both interests can take:

Spokespeople, the next time you participate in media training:

- [Engage with an experienced consultant](#) who understands that a media interview is not necessarily a confrontational situation. Interacting with the press is a business deal. You have information the reporter wants; they have the megaphone capable of disseminating your message to the world.
- Remember the insights gained during media training experiences. Reporters have a job to do — a job that is vital to a free press so integral to our society. And you're there to collaborate with them as much as possible and principled.
- Assuming you were part of a credible and sustained training regimen, you learned that not all reporters are out to trick you, to play gotcha journalism, or to place your company in a bad light. Not to sound too corny about it, most pursue an honest search for the truth.
- Don't set yourself up for disappointment by expecting kid glove coverage. Resulting articles and broadcast packages are unlikely to appear as fawning puff pieces. That's not the media's role. The results may be uncomfortable for you at times, so it's up to you to broadcast the message devised in your media training program as powerfully and concisely as possible.

Reporters, you also have responsibilities. Adopt these ideas to better grasp the value of media training for you and your sources:

- Forge professional relationships with consultants who specialize in media training. Connecting with the right experts can give you insights you may not have considered before.
- Help educate them about the needs and preferences you have when interviewing sources.

- Realize that media training is not a subterfuge designed to pull the wool over your eyes. If your source has experienced an ethical media training program, they understand the need for integrity.
- Be careful not to default to placing all of your sources in the rotten apple bin. Yes, liars do exist. However, most of those you interview want to give you the facts, the perspective, and the lay of the land as they see it. Isn't that why you agreed to the interview in the first place? It's up to you to consider their viewpoint, then balance it with material you glean from other legitimate, trustworthy sources.

A solid, professional [media training regimen](#) benefits both spokespeople and reporters. Both parties would do well to keep that thought top of mind in their interactions with each other.

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 5700 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 traits and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio broadcasting.

Ed also publishes the **C-suite Blueprint blog**. [Follow him there](#) to receive notification of each post.

