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**MEDIA
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GUIDEBOOK**

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IN MEDIA TRAINING, A LITTLE REALISM GOES A LONG WAY

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Media training must be realistic, maybe even jarring at times to be effective. It's important to get across to subjects that reporters can be sharp, occasionally abrasive and even combative. And if you can handle that and not lose your composure and get your points across, you can handle anything.

Sure it's easy to sit down with a client and calmly discuss talking points for an interview and go over an agenda and strategy. Unless the subject is put through a realistic exercise, however, it's like trying to teach someone to drive an Indy car while they're safely seat-belted in the passenger seat of a BMW.

No, the best way to get media training points across is to place the subject behind the wheel, press the pedal to the metal and head for possible trouble and near crashes. The road looks entirely different when you're behind the wheel driving through downpour of questions, or being chased.

The best media trainers always start their sessions rough and then get softer as the training ensue.



EMULATING REALISM

Media trainers have gone to great lengths to create realism. Once the PR department at ABC actually created a TV set to look exactly like a television show that a senior ABC executive was preparing to appear on. Someone played the role of Jim Lehrer, asking the kinds of questions he might ask on the News Hours on PBS. That's realism and there's no better prep than that.

Another media trainer once flew out to Battle Creek Michigan to train the top executives at Kellogg's Company, putting each through a grueling simulated

press conference at which trainers played the role of feisty reporters firing a barrage of stress-inducing questions about the amount of sugar in children's cereals. It's amazing how sugar can make you sweat.

HANDLING STRESSFUL SCENARIOS

The theory behind subjecting media training subjects through stressful media experiences is that you can modify behavior by getting subjects to relax and function normally in the presence of once frightening stimuli. It's similar to the way behaviorists treat patients for acrophobia by having them experience greater heights for a short time, and then a little longer until they become relaxed in the presence of the stimuli that once caused anxiety. Once subjects experience performing in the face of adversary questioning, they're not going to be thrown by it. You can actually get subjects to smile disarmingly at a reporter accusing them of wrongdoing after you've inoculated that subject against debilitating, sometimes paralyzing stress by experiencing it in small doses.

The best media trainers always start their sessions rough and then get softer as the training ensues. What does this do? The subject begins to see improvement in him or herself. Naturally, the session is less intense so improvement is easier to achieve and record on TV as proof that media training works.

ALWAYS PUT ON TAPE

Never even think of media training without a camera crew recording the subject's performance. Many media trainers will do a five or 10-minute practice segment and then go to playback for critique. Nothing makes the point more effectively than showing a subject's strengths and weaknesses. Pictures don't lie.

Often a smart media trainer will actually edit the playback and produce a short before and after piece that makes an indelible impression on subjects who can see vividly what works and what they should avoid. Some media trainers actually change the color of the subject's clothes, knowing that most of us look friendlier in lighter colors.

Most of us are taught very early in our lives to look serious when the teacher is asking us a question. It's no wonder that friendliness under questioning doesn't come naturally to most people and therefore has to be practiced.

THE VIRTUE OF SMILING

All media trainers know intuitively that there is something about a smile that projects an image of self-confidence, openness and honesty. People who look grim, frightened or angry appear to be hiding something, or just look guilty. The person who smiles is sending an infinitely more positive signal that he or she has nothing to hide and, more importantly, is telling the truth. The trick is to smile under pressure and by doing so, the pressure abates in both the questioner and the person questioned.

Finally, no media training session is complete unless it encompasses the most commonly presented formats: the news conference, the buttonhole interview and the one-on-one TV talk show.

Each must be done realistically as possible with people in the background giving time signals and other cues to the interviewer, bright lights shining in the subject's face, lavalier microphone dangling, cameras moving in and out and all sorts of distractions usually found in TV studios.

For any crisis management program, media training is a prerequisite since there's no way a CEO can walk calmly out in front of a media phalanx and get his or her message across without first practicing in a realistic simulated news conference. If ever there is a time not to look rattled, it is when the business is itself rattling from a disaster.

Finally, there is one more thing about media training that should encourage all PR firms to make it part of their repertoire of services. It makes clients feel grateful and appreciative that you're really preparing them to be at their best, even at the worst of times. **PRN**

Thomas J. Madden is a former vice president at NBC and author of Spin Man, his widely acclaimed, nationally published memoir. He has been profiled in Time Magazine, Forbes and The Wall Street Journal. Among awards he has received is a Bronze Anvil from The Public Relations Society of America, of which he is an accredited member.