



Teaching Public Relations

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Teaching Media Interview Skills

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One of the classic original Bob Newhart Show scenes is when Dr. Bob Hartley, the psychologist, arrives at the studio for a television talk show interview. He is greeted by the host -- Ruth Corley -- who proceeds to assure him that the interview will be painless and then introduces her guest this way:

"I'm with psychologist Dr. Robert Hartley. It's been said that today's psychologist is nothing more than a con man, a snake oil salesman peddling cures for everything from nail biting to a lousy love life and I agree. We'll ask Dr. Hartley to defend himself after this message."

The camera then focuses on a dead-pan Bob clearly in shock. The interview continues with the host attacking Bob's credibility and Bob breaking every rule in effective broadcast interview answering skills when trying to answer the questions.

Obviously, the Newhart routine satirizes what happens when an interview turns into an exasperating experience for a legitimate and credible spokesperson. It does suggest in a very humorous manner that with proper preparation and training, even Bob could have entered the interview confident that he could have been a credible guest on the show.

The Challenge in Teaching Media Interview Skills

Most public relations agencies, corporations, the government and not-for-profits either provide internally or have access to professionals who offer media training designed to prepare a spokesperson for press interviews. Some even use the Bob Newhart spot as part of their training program.

How then should we, as public relations teachers, prepare our students to be at least familiar with this very exciting and challenging practice in our profession? The majority of our public relations textbooks include brief sections on interview skills suitable for a topic in public relations intro or technique courses. In spite of different formats, they agree that the most important interview skills objectives should be that the spokesperson:

- is prepared;
- is relaxed and not confrontational;
- is direct, honest and candid in answering the questions;
- avoids all off-the-record comments;
- keeps all promises, i.e. getting information to the reporter.

Our textbooks further advocate the "two-way symmetrical model" of public relations, where the process of developing media interview skills should serve both the interests of the press and the organization in a cooperative manner.

What is lacking in the textbooks cited -- which is critical in teaching media interview skills today -- is **how** to prepare a spokesperson to go on the offensive in the interview.

To be on the offensive is neither to be belligerent nor obnoxious. It is rather to learn **how** to seize the initiative in an interview in order to create the best environment to answer the questions most beneficial to the organization.

In short, what we need to do is to teach students how to prepare future spokespersons to "master the opportunity" in interviews and not sit back as our old friend Dr. Bob Hartley did.

Organizing the Class

This paper will share with you how I teach media training in both graduate and undergraduate public relations classes at Duquesne University of Pittsburgh, PA.

My approach is based on what I learned as a public relations professional at the New York Agency of Michael Klepper & Associates and subsequent positions in other companies where I specialized in media relations.

Prior to forming his own agency, Klepper was one of the architects of Bursten Marsteller's media training program. Klepper published his basic training philosophy in his book, *Getting Your Message Out: How to Use, and **Survive** Radio and Television Air Time*, Prentice Hall, 1984. (Although the Prentice Hall book is out of print, copies can be ordered directly from the Klepper Agency in New York).

In organizing my class, I introduce to my students a three-step process to begin to learn and appreciate the value of media training. The steps are:

- I. Establish Message Objectives
- II. Anticipate Questions
- III. Develop Positive Interview Answering Skills

In preparation for the class, I assign my students to read Chapter 9 in Klepper's book entitled "Effective Broadcast Interviews." In essence, I have adopted the training program Klepper and I used in the past for classroom use.

Master the Opportunity

STEP NUMBER ONE:

ESTABLISHING YOUR MESSAGE OBJECTIVES

It is critical that we stress when we begin our media relations class that for any interview to be successful, the spokesperson must be taught by a public relations professional the need to develop message objectives.

I open my class quoting Klepper's advice to spokespersons: "identify your communication objectives.

Decide in advance, what you want your viewers or listeners to take away from your appearance."⁽¹⁾

I further cite Klepper when stating to my class that the message objectives should be "as clear and specific and memorable as can be."

The following is an example from Klepper:

POOR	XYZ company is a good neighbor
BETTER	XYZ company is concerned about protecting the environment
EFFECTIVE	XYZ company voluntarily spent \$5 million last year on a program to clean the Hudson River, making us a good neighbor concerned about protecting the environment. ⁽²⁾

This exercise can open up a number of classroom discussion and written assignments in which you can teach students how to write message objectives in Klepper's crisp, clear and concise style.

After the students learn how to establish message objectives, I show my class, citing video tape examples of news spots and handouts of print news stories, how well-trained spokespersons succeeded in getting their message objectives either aired or printed.

In my most recent public relations classes taught, I used a handout of a May 17, 1991 *New York Times* story entitled: "Pollution From Toxic Chemicals Shows Decline in U.S. Since 1987" to demonstrate this skill.

The article summarized the Environmental Protection Agency's just-released Toxic Release Inventory report to the nation. The news story discussed the nation's progress in reducing pollution. It cited both accomplishments and failures and quoted a variety of spokespersons for the environmentalists, the government and industry.

Prior to asking my students to read this short article, I asked them to suggest objectives/messages for three spokespersons in anticipation of press calling for interviews on the released report. The students suggested the following: environmentalists: "The EPA program is a failure;" government: "Take credit for the report's success;" industry: "we care about the environment."

I then asked my students to read the article and together we compared their three message objectives to the position stated by the spokespersons. The students quickly saw that their objectives matched the spokesperson's and therefore learned the value of preparing message objectives for interviews.⁽³⁾

STEP NUMBER TWO:

ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

I introduce this step by asking my students to pretend that they are making a presentation to sell an expensive high-tech product. We discuss in great length the value of anticipating questions following the presentation and strategizing on developing the right answers. I then compare this exercise to a media

interview in which the spokesperson is also selling, but this time a position or product' s mention to be aired or printed by the media.

To teach the art of anticipating questions, I use a methodology similar to how I teach establishing message objectives. I also use video excerpts from television. news and print articles as case studies to demonstrate how a well-trained spokesperson succeeded in anticipating questions and then answering them in a way most beneficial for the organization.

For example, I presented to my class the following situation: You are a public relations professional whose job is to prepare Edgar S. Willard, Jr., chairperson of DuPont for a *USA Today* special question-and-answer article on the celebration of Earth Day, 1990. We listed and discussed the type of questions the reporter would ask him and tried to develop answers.

One of the questions that came up was "How is DuPont going to celebrate Earth Day?" Sure enough, this question appeared in the article, and here it is with the CEO' s response which the class did not guess but is a brilliant example of how to anticipate a question with a superb answer:

USA Today	Do you have any special plans for Earth Day on April 22?
Willard	I'm preaching every day is Earth Day at DuPont.(4)

STEP NUMBER THREE:

DEVELOPING INTERVIEW ANSWERING SKILLS

This is the section where the media interview skill presented in textbooks can be used in class, plus four additional suggestions that will make an interviewee even more aggressive in "mastering the opportunity." I share these with my students in a lecture format using video and handouts to generate discussion.

I. BE ASSERTIVE; DON'T BE PASSIVE. For example, we should stress in teaching that the spokesperson should be trained to learn how to turn a negative into a positive.

Klepper suggests: "...you can build positive answers to negative questions by using those questions as bridges to your communication objectives."(5)

To demonstrate an example of turning a negative into a positive, I show my class the video of the George Bush/Dan Rather confrontation on the CBS Evening News right before the 1988 Republican primaries began.

Rather pressed Bush on his knowledge about the "arms for hostage" deal, and this pressure produced a shouting match until the then vice president succeeded in turning a negative into a positive.

Most political observers claim this strategy helped the vice president overcome his wimp image and led to his victories in the early primaries.

Here are the three excerpts taken from the video tape which shows how Bush turned a negative into a positive.

Example #1

"I want to talk about why I want to be President. Why those 41% of the people are supporting me. It's not fair to judge my whole career by a rehash on Iran. How would you like it if I judged your whole career by those seven minutes when you walked off the set in New York "

Example #2

"I want to talk about the whole record, and you're not. You invited me here to talk about the record.. "

Example #3

"Everybody admitted mistakes. I admitted mistakes. I want to talk about the values we believe in and the experience and integrity that goes with all of this. And what I'm going to do about education. There' s nothing new here. I thought this was a news program."(6)

II. USE LAY LANGUAGE; SPEAK TO THE AVERAGE CITIZEN. It is critical that spokespersons answer questions in a language understood by the average citizen.

Klepper suggests that the spokesperson should "humanize" the company or organization. For example: "Don' t talk about saving 30,000 barrels of oil. Talk in terms of an extra three tanks of gasoline for the car of every viewer or listener."(7)

III. MASTER THE ART OF TRANSITIONING Establishing message objectives is not enough. In media training, I demonstrate in my class how the interviewee should always look for windows of opportunity to repeat the message objective which will improve the chances for the media to either air or print them.

I recently used as an example the 60 Minutes interview with Hillary and Governor Bill Clinton concerning the allegations that the governor was not faithful to his wife. Hillary Clinton mastered the art of transitioning. When continuously pressed concerning the allegations of her husband's affairs, she kept on transitioning to raise the point that there are more pressing issues to discuss and that hers and governor' s personal lives are private. She further answered that it should be the people who will decide when voting whether their refusal to discuss the allegations is appropriate. In essence, Hillary Clinton took control of the interview through the art of transitioning.(8)

IV. BE WILLING TO REVISE YOUR ANSWER. Students, like many organizational spokespersons, are naive in believing that the press only permits the interviewee one chance to answer a question. I enjoy stressing in class that if spokespersons are being taped they have the right to simply ask for a second chance. If the spokesperson is interviewed by a print reporter, he or she can ask the reporter to read the last quote in order to rephrase it.

Turning to live interviews, an aggressive spokesperson who is adequately trained can learn to be forceful enough to demand the opportunity to rephrase or clarify an answer.

Conclusion

I hope that I achieved a number of learning objectives in developing my media relations class. They are:

- preparation is the key;
- training can improve the interview;
- media training should be bias-free. It can be mastered by any organization regardless of affiliation or ideology.

My mission in teaching these classes is to present to students the fact that anyone or any organization, through proper preparation and researching the issue, can develop the art of media training and apply the principles regardless of the issue. I feel my students did come away from the classes feeling that they had learned a skill which can be used whatever their personal agenda is.

Ten Key Objectives in Media Training

- Preparation is the key.
- Develop three message objectives.
- Anticipate questions. Learn how to transition the message objectives into your answers.
- There is no such thing as "off the record."
- Stay calm.
- You have the right to rephrase your answers.
- Ignorance is an excuse as long as you promise the press to get back to them with the answer, and you keep your promise.
- Show emotion when it is a critical part of your message objective strategy.
- Don't tell the press that you've been trained
- The press is not your friend; be courteous, polite, but not overly friendly,

Notes

1. Michael M. Klepper, *Getting Your Message Out How to use and Survive Radio & Television Air Time*, (New York, Michael M. Klepper, 1984), p. 130. This book was originally published by Prentice Hall in their Spectrum series.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
3. *New York Times*, May 17, 1991.
4. *USA Today*, April 21, 1990.
5. Klepper, p. 132.
6. CBS Evening News, January 26, 1988.
7. Klepper, p. 139.
8. 60 Minutes, January 26, 1992.

EXTENDED BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTE: For members of the Public Relations Society of America, the PRSA information center located in New York keeps an updated file of articles and research materials on media training. The file includes

articles that appeared in business, not-for-profit and trade association publications geared specifically to the needs of practitioners and media interview guides donated by leading agencies, professional associations and in-house corporate and organization public relations departments.

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