

# The Sources **HotLink**

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Twenty-two, Spring 2002

## The Intangible Benefits of Media Training

BY MARK LAVIGNE, APR



Besides preparing strategic key messaging and practicing that messaging on camera, media training offers other more intangible benefits that I've seen in my 12 years in the

PR game.

First of all, the theory portion of a good media training course helps reduce news media illiteracy, which manifests itself in either clients being terrified of the news media, or too arrogant with them, treating them just like another marketing communications function for hire. Teaching these executives (who seem to never receive media relations training in their business school education) the difference between advertising and editorial, and the inherent danger of underestimating the power of the news media, tends to promote more humility. Explaining that an advertising buy does not guarantee media coverage, even in the smallest trades, is surprisingly illuminating for some of these executives.

Conversely, once trainees understand that information is a commodity, they tend to relax more as they fully understand their role in the two-way relationship between journalist and communicator. On-camera practicing of key messaging and general Q&A's reduces the fear, and/or promotes humility and increases media literacy. Also allowing trainees to interview their colleagues, to play journalist, helps them to better understand the role the news media does play and the challenges on that side of the fence. It can also better identify potential information quagmires, since no one gener-

ally knows their business better than the trainees, and all the areas that are problematic.

Media training can also greatly enhance the reputation of in-house media relations functions and officers by teaching potential spokespersons how difficult the art and science of media relations really is – that successful media relations is a complicated mix of newsworthy content, access, viewpoint and timing. The training can become a useful opportunity to fully explain media relations protocol, and how breaching this protocol can become quite career limiting! It also introduces the in-house media relations team to the executive/spokesperson team, and provides a full day where they can work together and get to know each other and respect each other's roles and responsibilities, opportunities and challenges.

One of the greatest frustrations of media relations specialists, and news media, is the slow response to interview or information requests. Yes, executives in private or public sector entities are as inundated as the media with information via E-mail, voice mail and hard copy, I call them the 100/50 club, 100 E-mails and 50 voicemails per day. But many times I've noticed that executives don't understand the

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## Media Training - Fielding Difficult Questions

BY ED SHILLER



You're nervous about facing the media, especially those tough reporters who always seem to ask loaded questions, twist your words or misrepresent your meaning, and you want to get media training that will help you avoid these pitfalls. All well and good.

But if you believe the object of the training is to learn how to identify a key message or two and then master such techniques as zooming, bridging or deflecting so that you will be able to weave those messages into your answers, even if those messages aren't relevant to the question, you will be sorely disappointed.

Such behaviour will make you appear unresponsive, defensive or manipulative – and this will merely reinforce whatever negative stereotypes the reporter has of you, your organization or your industry. And this, in turn, will severely erode your credibility and thereby increase the likelihood that the reporter will ask loaded questions, twist your words or misrepresent your meaning. In effect, you have contributed to the continuation of a vicious cycle.

The proper way to handle a media interview is to be yourself and directly answer the questions you're asked. There is nothing to be afraid of. If your organization is acting in a proper way and provides real benefits to its stakeholders, you have nothing to be ashamed

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2002 marks our 25th year  
linking journalists with the  
experts they need.

# HotLink Resource Shelf

## **In the News** **The Practice of Media** **Relations in Canada**

By William Wray Carney

The University of Alberta Press  
2002, 225 p., ISBN 0-88864-382-9

### **REVIEWED BY LYNN FENSKE**

Do you have a message to convey but panic at the thought of having to talk to the media? Never fear. Former journalist William Carney has written a much-needed guide that will help you overcome your fear and master the art of media relations.

"In the News, The Practice of Media Relations in Canada" gives everyone, from student to seasoned practitioner, a thorough understanding of who the media are, how they work and how to approach them with stories. If ever you needed a lesson or a reminder of how to be media savvy – this is it.

The first step, if you haven't realized it already, is to acknowledge media relations as "one of the mainstays of the communications business." Carney's introduction emphasizes that "more oppor-

tunities exist than ever before for being 'in the news' and using news media as a means to communicate your issues to the public at large or to very targeted groups."

Then he proceeds to give us an easy-to-read, comprehensive instruction manual on how best to capitalize on these opportunities.

Carney's book, by his own definition, "is research-based and provides both a practical and a philosophical guide to dealing with media and reporters." It doesn't read like a text book. It reads like a precise, how-to guide for people intent on adopting a media-friendly communications style that is ethical, proactive and gets results.

Carney acknowledges that sometimes media relations involve more than providing factual information to a reporter. When a more "thoughtful, strategic and planned approach" is required, Carney provides the means by which to formulate and mobilize a communications business plan, including the situation analysis, research, policies and procedures, media training and evaluation.

Then Carney takes the "mystery" out

of what drives the news. He gives clear instruction on how to find and write a good lead for a media release, how to make the best use of media conferences and attention-grabbing media stunts, while shedding light on many do-it-yourself techniques like letters to the editor, advertorials and community cable programming.

He continues the lesson by revealing the attributes of a good interview, how to conduct one and how to prepare for basic question and answer sessions.

The book comes to a close with a chapter on "The Fine Art of Complaining About the Media". After all, the media are people too and prone to making mistakes. How to correct those mistakes is Carney's final lesson.

I highly recommend this book for anyone involved in communications. Mastering the art and science of media relations is a powerful tool in your communications arsenal. The why and when of your talking to the media may as yet be uncertain. At least Carney is here to tell you how.

(See excerpt page 4.)

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## **Don't be Shy**

Spring has finally arrived and with it the second of our new and improved 2002 *HotLink* newsletters.

This time, public relations practitioners Ed Shiller and Mark LaVigne bring their considerable expertise in media training to your attention. I invite you to read their informative articles and don't be shy about contacting them for further instruction or consultation.

Advice on hiring a media trainer is provided by communications counselor William Wray Carney in a excerpt from his recently published book, "In the News The Practice of Media Relations in Canada". We'll be featuring more from Mr. Carney in future editions of *HotLink* and online at [Hotlink.ca](http://Hotlink.ca).

Don't be shy about contacting us at Sources. If your listing needs revision

or renewal or you would like to use one of our media relations services or purchase one of our publications, just give us a call. We're here to help.

Perhaps you have a specific question relating to media relations or a topic you would like us to cover. If so, please contact me at [lfenske@sources.com](mailto:lfenske@sources.com).

And what do you think of our electronic newsletter – *Hotlink.ca*? We're open to your comments. Got any friends or colleagues who would appreciate receiving our newsletter? Just E-mail us at [hotlink@sources.com](mailto:hotlink@sources.com). Until next time, when our focus will be on charities and non-profits, enjoy this issue of *The Sources Hotlink*.

*Sincerely,*  
*Lynn Fenske*

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## Media Training – Fielding Difficult Questions

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of and should welcome any questions about any aspect of what your organization does.

The purpose of good media training is not to teach you manipulative techniques. Quite the contrary, it is to teach you how to identify accurate, truthful and newsworthy key points about each newsworthy issue involving your organization and how to introduce that key point into an answer when it is relevant to the question. The objective is to structure your answers and deliver them so that you will not only be speaking the truth, but that you will also be seen as speaking the truth.

The reason for this derives from a fundamental fact of communications: The messages you actually convey in a media interview have less to do with the actual words you utter than with your behaviour. Thus, if you act in an unresponsive, defensive or manipulative way, the message you convey is that you are unresponsive, defensive or manipulative. In this case, it won't matter what you say, because people will not believe you; neither will they like or trust the organization you represent.

Still, facing a tough reporter can unnerve even the most truthful and honest spokesperson. Good media training will help you cope effectively with these situations, and having a clear idea of how to behave and what to say is a good way to begin. So here are 13 tips on fielding difficult questions:

1. Keep cool and remain respectful and polite, even in the face of extreme provocation by the interviewer.
2. Don't run on – when you've given the answer you want, stop talking.
3. Don't ever say "no comment" – it will make you look arrogant and untrustworthy.
4. Don't tell the interviewer anything you wouldn't tell the whole world – nothing is "off the record."
5. Don't disclose confidential information – but explain the reason why, and if appropriate, bring in other relevant information that will shed light on what the reporter is asking.
6. Don't concern yourself with the reporter's overt or hidden agenda, but stick to your own agenda of answer-

ing each question with a direct factual statement followed by a relevant key point. Therefore, only answer the question that's been asked – don't answer an anticipated question.

7. Don't guess at an answer – if you don't know, say so.
8. Don't get unnerved if the reporter repeatedly asks the same question – if the question is the same, so is the answer.
9. Don't get penned in by the way the reporter phrases a question – answer by giving what you regard as the relevant facts amplified by your most relevant and persuasive key point.

Example:

Q. With its monopoly over the sale of wheat, the Canadian Wheat Board seems to be getting richer and richer, either by raising prices to stiff the consumer or lowering them to stiff the farmer. Which is it?

A. Neither. The Canadian Wheat Board is a non-profit agency that markets wheat on behalf of the farmers of Canada to ensure that they receive the maximum price possible.

10. Don't speculate – just give the facts.
11. Don't respond judgmentally to third-party quotes – the reporter wants you to say something derogatory about the third-party, and thereby generate controversy. Instead, set the record straight by giving the relevant facts.
12. Don't repeat negative questions or derogatory comments – simply set the record straight by giving an accurate description of the situation.
13. Don't ask the reporter to clarify a question – if the question is ambiguous, choose the most obvious interpretation and answer that. Asking for clarification makes you look evasive.

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## Look what's NEXT...

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**Dave Drobis**, Chairman, Ketchum International

**Sally Sheppard**, Deputy Minister of Communications, Cabinet Office, Government of Ontario

**Peter Desbarats**, Professor of Journalism, University of Western Ontario

**Helen Howes**, Vice-President, Sustainable Development, Ontario Power Generation

**Lee Bennish**, Sr. Vice-President, AMEC Construction, commenting on AMEC's role in dealing with media at Ground Zero, World Trade Centre

For complete registration information go to [www.cprs.ca](http://www.cprs.ca) or call (416) 496-2010.

## The Intangible Benefits of Media Training

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rapid timelines that the news media operate under – they don't understand how quickly something ceases to be "news" or how quickly the media may lose interest in a proactive media relations venture. Once media trained, most executives appreciate the media's deadlines and respond in a more timely fashion.

The media training experience, when done in a proactive, co-operative style, can also serve as a team-building exercise. The on-camera experience, when done as a group, can pull a group together since it can be as fearful as climbing a wall or scaling a rope bridge, popular team-building exercises in the '80's and '90's. Media training often brings together product managers from different divisions who only see each other at sales conventions or work-related social gatherings.

As a general training tool, media relations theory and practical training can also form a healthy foundation of knowledge so an organization is better prepared for a deliberate response to a crisis. Then more focused, reactive media training can take place quickly, so rapid but proper response to the crisis can occur, therefore avoiding the widening of the credibility gap, from which there are the carcasses of many brands strewn in its wake.

Some executives I've media trained have shared anecdotes with me where they have successfully applied some of the theory and practical media relations tips to other non-media audiences, such as problematic teenagers or unresponsive customer service departments. And we all know how tough some non-media audiences can be.

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## Advice on Hiring a Media Trainer

BY WILLIAM WRAY CARNEY

*The following is an edited excerpt from the recently published book, "In the News The Practice of Media Relations in Canada" by William Wray Carney.*



Media training is highly recommended for any media spokesperson, whether a novice or a veteran. In-house communicators can provide media training, if they have media experience, or training can be provided by outside consultants.

The typical media-training package will be a one- or two-day seminar that includes media theory and practice. It should also include an examination of the organization's media policies and procedures and should provide some background on how the media currently perceives the organization or its issues. Good training will include mock interviews (on video) with selected spokespersons and critiqued for improvement (this can be done in a group or individually). The interview topic, which should be discussed beforehand, should be the area the spokesperson will be commenting on or the major issues facing the organization.

If you offer the training in-house, you must have a media background or extensive dealings with media; otherwise, hire a trainer. There are companies that provide media training (look in the Yellow Pages under Public Relations or Advertising). There are also community agencies that provide low-cost or no-cost assistance to like-minded advocacy groups, particularly those dealing with environmental and health issues.

If you hire an outside media trainer, you should follow some basic guidelines. First, do a reference check, particularly on the persons who will be performing the hands-on training. Find out their experience in media and their preferred training style – particularly how they handle the interview subject. Ask whether they can mock up different interview situations, such as the scrum, feature, live television, open mike and so on. Teaching or publishing experience helps, as does specific experience in media relations with your business or issue.

Some media trainers specialize in particular areas, such as government and

political issues, health and the environment. Your trainer should know your business and the issues you deal with; if not, he or she should do the necessary research. However, that research will cost time and money, and likely won't result in a good "feel" for your organization. You need to weigh your options carefully.

Determine whether the trainer's style fits your needs, issues and organizational culture. For example, if you are preparing for highly politicized public hearings on which your business depends and which you know will be high profile and contentious, you will want a politically savvy, tough-minded trainer who can offer support in other areas such as testifying and lobbying. On the other hand, if you are a non-profit group with a less confrontational style and more basic media needs, you will want someone lower-key who understands your values and concerns.

Check out the handouts the trainer intends to give participants. You should be allowed to see them but don't expect the trainer to give them to you: these materials are part of their business and the service they charge for. Handouts can range from copies of overheads to manuals; quantity doesn't matter much as quality.

Finally, check out the fee structure and what it covers. You can lower your costs considerably by sharing your research and the policies and procedures you have developed, but do expect the trainer to charge for preparation time. Also expect the trainer to ask some questions: what are your media needs and issues, will this be generic training or focussed on a particular issue? Give extra points to companies who ask for personality profiles of the interview subjects and who ask for briefing before they conduct training.

Costs depend on services purchased and the amount of time a company invests in providing the service. Fees can range from as little as nothing (from a company willing to do *pro bono* work) to \$150 (a typical one-day university or college workshop) to \$500 a day (generic training for non-profits) to \$5000 a day (high-profile, customized workshops). You can also expect to pay much more if you have a very ugly and very high-profile issue that requires extensive media consultation.

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