

Communication training can double your good press

In a 2006 university study, 39 speakers completed a five-hour communication training session. After the session, independent raters evaluated speakers on 10 vital criteria such as credibility, intelligence, confidence, etc. and reporters drafted stories based on their statements. The raters' evaluations and the reporters' stories both reflect significant improvement in speakers' ability following training. One of the findings on better news coverage is graphed below:

Communication training takes time and money. Is it worth it? Absolutely — I can tell you with confidence and specificity that communications training for your spokespeople can, as one example, double the amount of positive coverage your organization receives. How do I know? Read on

I know that training gets you better press not just from my own 10 years of experience as a speech coach or anecdotally from colleagues -- though these would verify the same. Rather, over the past several years, I conducted a study in which I employed budding journalists to write newspaper stories based on the press conferences of either a trained or an untrained speaker. The speakers were real spokespeople at Fortune 100 companies, the federal government and a nationally-known law firm who wanted to know the same thing I did: *How will media coverage change if they invest in a day of training?*

I found that trained speakers got better press as measured three separate and significant ways. Two of these effects will be addressed in future columns on this site, but today I want to tell you about the first. When I coded the statements in the resulting news stories, I found that the number of "positive statements" more than doubled! As is represented in the graphic to the right, newspaper stories based on untrained spokespeople contained an average of only about 2 statements positive to the organization. After the speaker was trained, however, the resulting newspaper stories contained more than 4 1/2 favorable statements about the organization.

What explains this more favorable coverage? During training, participants were asked to identify the most important "key messages" that they hoped would be reported in resulting coverage. Of course these key messages were positive, favorable for the company — the information the spokesperson wanted reported. Professional communicators sometimes refer to this as "messaging" or "staying on message." The spokespeople in the study were speaking on behalf of an energy company about a devastating fire at a plant and, thus, their key messages were things like company's concern for injured employees, past history of safety, investigating the cause, etc.

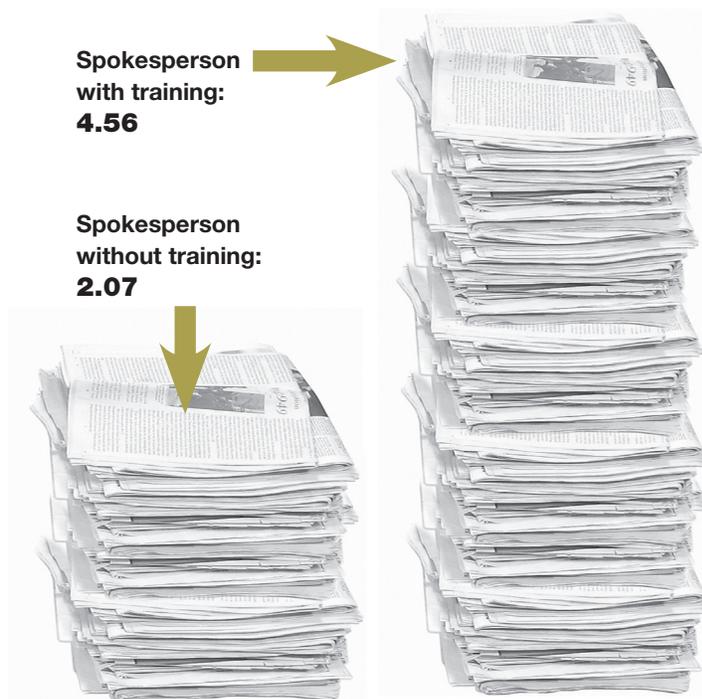
In training, participants also tried to anticipate what openings they would be given to articulate their messages and thought through what "bridges" would be necessary, if any, to link these messages to other information arising in the interviews. Participants were instructed to articulate their message both in their statements and, when appropriate, in response to questions, too. This ability to get from the reporter's agenda to the spokesperson's agenda is sometimes referred to by communication professionals as "bridging."

Of course, all of this hard work would have been irrelevant if the reporters chose not to include it in their stories. This was a real concern. After all, journalists are independent sorts of people, loathe

Positive statements in news stories

Spokesperson
with training:
4.56

Spokesperson
without training:
2.07



to being directed — manipulated! — by a PR agent. Yet the data above is explained by the fact that most of the journalists did generally as the trained spokespeople hoped and included the key messages in their stories.

Actually, the success of the trained spokespeople in getting their messages covered shouldn't have been a surprise. In this study — as in most crisis events — the spokespeople knew much more about the facts than the reporters. These spokespeople were simply in a better position to identify what the relevant, newsworthy facts were. In fact, when I polled the journalists about how well the speakers had done giving them information, and the journalists evaluated these trained speakers as significantly more useful than the untrained speakers. This seems to suggest that the reporters found that managing reputation did not compromise information but, in fact, helped foster it. In this way, the spokespeople served the ends of their company and the ends of the public at the same time.

Investing some time in communication training does pay dividends — specific, identifiable dividends. This article reviewed our finding that training increases the positive facts in newspaper stories. Tune in over the coming weeks to find out how else media coverage changed after training and all the other important things we uncovered . . .

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