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MARKET FOCUS: MEDIA TRAINING - Media training, anyone? It's a sideshow to media relations, but it's quite a show. Craig McGuire reports

CRAIG MCGUIRE - 11 Jun 2001 12:00

For as long as the US has had an effective media, there has been a need for media training. But while the PR industry as a whole has enjoyed a huge and widely recognized growth spurt, the revolution in the media training business has gone largely unrecognized.

There are many reasons for its relative anonymity. First, there are no national media relations training companies, and the small one-man

operations don't have the size or scope to make a splash. Second, media training is playing second string to the overall media relations business at agencies.

And, for clients, media training has typically been an annual or even one-time expenditure - and something that they are even loath to admit.

T.J. Walker, a New York-based media training specialist, believes the word "training" is itself off-putting. "Particularly at the C-level, they see 'training' as an insult to their experience and seniority. I prefer to use the word 'rehearsal.' When I point out that Broadway stars

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rehearse, they start listening."

Yet, media training is more in demand than ever before. The growth is linked to the same issues that fueled the PR revolution: the explosion of TV, radio and print-based business journalism; a greater awareness of reputation issues; and unprecedented global mergers and acquisitions.

"Directors take us all over the world to make sure their spokespeople are singing from the same hymn book," says Anne Ready, president and CEO of Ready for Media. "This month alone we'll head to Tokyo, Hong Kong and then throughout Europe for a client."

And now there's new media, which is redefining the business for everyone.

"For instance, rock stars are being shipped in droves to media trainers," Ready reports. "With all the digital cameras out there, they have to be prepared for impromptu interviews that will be thrown on the Web instantaneously."

Expanding brief

Just as PR is expanding, so is media training. "From a CEO's vantage point, media training can mean anything from a five-minute conversation, to a three-paragraph e-mail, to a seven-hour dress rehearsal," says Joel Drucker, an Oakland-based independent communications trainer. "So while 80% of CEOs say media training is useful, that's misleading. There's really no harmony to media training as a PR sector because it involves so many applications."

"Presentation training, whether it's for an analyst meeting or up on Capitol Hill, is taking media training as a discipline to the next level," points out Michael Kempner, president and CEO of The MWW Group. "People are also doing more combined media presentations."

Independents versus agencies

There are literally thousands of independents across the country, and the increased need for media training (plus recent layoffs at some network stations) has led to their proliferation. These hired guns range from 20-year veterans to moonlighting reporters.

A number of agencies also have specialist media training units and all report an increase in demand over the last few years. At Burson-Marsteller, Anne Strianese, EVP and managing director of media training, has a team of 14 and has seen the number of training clients increase from 167 in 1997 to 440 in 2000, a 163% increase. She estimates 680 clients in 2001.

Hill & Knowlton has possibly the largest media training unit in the country.

Including recent additions from the acquisition of regional companies like The Rockey Group and Socket, the team is now 40 strong and US director Derwin Johnson reports that training revenues are up 35% in New York so far this year, and are 40% over budget for 2001.

Strianese puts Burson's growth down to hard work ("we're available 24/7 as clients now demand"), but she also acknowledges macro factors at work.

"Over the past decade, more companies have recognized the need for media training of their own executives and third party spokespersons (physicians, celebrities, etc.)."

Even the near-mythical C-level client is on the rise. The number of CEOs coming for training increased by 168%, Strianese reports, from 37 in 1998 to 98 in 2000. "There's an increased awareness of the link between the CEO's performance as a presenter and the reputation of the company. Now, instead of a one-off program, we find they're coming back for more."

Strianese also believes the popularity of Webcast press conferences has

helped spur media training. Burson has developed a special Webcasting training session that combines training for media, satellite interviews and presentation skills.

Both H&K and Edelman acknowledge that they now scout for business independent of the media relations department. "A good media training unit can really crack open new business," explains Jeff Ansell, president of Jeff Ansell & Associates in Toronto and a former journalist who has spent time as an SVP at H&K.

Outsourcing

Many agencies use independents under their own banner either to bolster their own operation or to obviate the need for their own studios. "Being on a project basis, as opposed to retainer, you don't have to worry if the CEO likes the trainer, and don't have to 'yes' them to death to protect the status of the overall account," says Joyce Newman, head of The Newman Group, a New York-based independent.

Debbie Wetherhead spent 15 years cutting her teeth as a media trainer at agencies like Ketchum, Cone & Wolf and H&K. Even after she left Ketchum, she spent two years serving as a back-up trainer for the agency.

As an independent, she still augments her income by acting as a back up for two Atlanta-based agencies: Duffey Communications and ABOVO Marketing.

"I come in under their flagship as media trainer and work with the account rep to customize the program," she explains.

Many national firms are hampered by an "hourly billing mentality," claims Ansell. "I recently had lunch with an agency media trainer who's under pressure to bill 100 hours a month at dollars 280 an hour," he says. "They expect him to bring in dollars 28k a month, but it just doesn't work under that model."

Prices

Most agency fees range from dollars 2,500 to dollars 10,000 for the first person trained (on a half-day or day rate basis). Lesser fees are charged per additional employee trained. Many media training programs are part of an overall account relationship, so prices are sometimes discounted. Independents usually charge less, as they seek to build and retain client rosters. They also don't have the same overheads.

Sometimes travel and research is built into the price. At Burson it's only extra if the training takes place in a city where they don't have an office, while Edelman has a roadshow bus. But many of the independents retain their price advantage precisely because they are regional.

However, several independents report that they travel. Steve Dunlop, CEO of Dunlop Media, says referrals come from everywhere. "We started out only in New York. Now we get calls to do training around the country and globally." Ansell adds that he gets a lot of business throughout the states as well.

"The media training business is primarily made up of boutique firms," adds Jon Rosen, president of Impact Communications. "Geography doesn't really play a part because the practice is so highly specialized. If someone has great credentials, they can deal with any medium and any subject."

Ansell agrees that it's specialized. "There's no one size fits all. You need to go for the best in the area in which you specialize, whether it's crisis or product launch or pharmaceutical." Indeed, Edelman's media training unit is seeking to gain an advantage by bringing specialists aboard. "We just got an expert on dieting whom we now market to healthcare clients," explains Ann Koepel, manager of media training.

Sourcing a media alternative

But specialization makes it increasingly hard to find trainers. There

are three main sources:

First, look to your own agency. If it doesn't have an in-house specialist, it usually has a relationship with a local or specialist trainer.

Second, advertising in the directory section of PRWeek and other trade directories (such as the PRSA Green Book) is also a good starting point.

Third, and most vital, is word of mouth. "Get a personal referral from a client who has a long history of success," says Rosen. "Ask the media trainer to submit a list of references. Or find someone you trust and respect and ask who they use. If you call four or five people and the same name keeps coming up, you've probably hit the jackpot."

Rosen, a former journalist, believes that former poachers are the ideal gamekeepers. "It's important to make sure a media trainer understands your business or can learn it quickly," he says. "I got a call once to do media training for radio pharmaceuticals," he recalls. "I could barely spell it, and I certainly had to find out a lot about it. You have to hire somebody who understands how to find out what they don't know."

But there's more to it than just journalism experience. "Make sure the trainer has a history as a media trainer, client lists and the ability to establish rapport with a client on all levels - from the CEO down," Rosen adds.

Jim Cameron, president of Cameron Communications, is concerned about the lack of quality and standards in media training. Winner of a Peabody award at NBC News, and recently marking his 20th year as a media trainer, Cameron says: "Unfortunately, a number of media trainers are just unemployed journalists flipping back and forth. Talk about conflicts of interest! I even see, though more so overseas, reporters moonlighting as media trainers."

There is no shortage of horror stories. Dunlop recalls at a recent training seminar in the Midwest, how "one man raised his hand and asked, 'Our last trainer told us the best way to take control during an interview is to grab the mike out of the reporter's hand and talk directly into the camera.

Is that true?' Obviously, that's not true, but he asked me with a straight face."

Still, ignorance can be bliss for media training experts. "I don't think a day passes when I don't hear on the radio, see on TV or read in a newspaper a really poor interview by a CEO or company spokesperson," says Andy Bowen, VP of Fletcher Martin Ewing Public Relations. "So, as long as they keep pummeling their reputations, we'll be there to help increase their quotable quotients."

INDEPENDENT MEDIA TRAINERS

COMPANY/PHONE CONTACT LOCATION

Jeff Ansell & Assoc/ Jeff Ansell Toronto, Canada

905-707-7088

Cameron Communications/ Jim Cameron Darien, CT

203-655-0138

Dunlop Media/ Steve Dunlop New York, NY

888-376-1700

Joel Drucker/ Joel Drucker Oakland, CA

510-268-8200

Karen Friedman Karen Friedman Blue Bell, PA

Enterprises/

610-292-9780

Impact Communications Jon Rosen New York, NY

212-557-5610

Mitchell Friedman/ Mitchell Friedman San Francisco, CA

Communications/

415-824-1466

The Media Relations Michael Owen Schwager Fort Lauderdale, FL

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The Newman Group/ Joyce Newman New York, NY

212-838-8371

The Publicity Hound/ Joan Stewart Saukville, WI

262-284-7451

Ready for Media/ Anne Ready Santa Monica, CA

310-917-5533

Spaeth Communications/ Emily Rockenstein Dallas, TX

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