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# Practice makes perfect

Corporate reputation rests partially on a CEO's ability to communicate.

**Brittany Golob** investigates the benefits of media training on crisis communications

to put the training into practice.”

Recent crises have demonstrated, as have those in the past, how important communications is to a company's reputation and to stakeholders' trust in the brand. Yet, social media and the fast-moving nature of communications has made adept

**T**he two extremes of media relations, one an epic success and the other a spectacular failure, are constantly upheld as the holy grails of media training.

The latter refers to Tony Hayward's disastrous interviews following the BP oil spill at Deepwater Horizon. Yes, there were extenuating circumstances, but the mass media devoured Hayward like carrion crows in a killing field. The former acts as the 'how to' case in corporate communications akin to the reverence held toward the British army's dispatching of the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s – the situation is the gold standard in counterinsurgency warfare. Michael Bishop's astute handling of the crash of BMI Flight 92, 25 years hence, showcases the best in crisis communications.

In crisis and non-crisis situations alike, media training has become one of the most advantageous weapons in the corporate communicator's or business leader's arsenal. "Corporate reputation is massively affected by the way you handle media interviews," course director at Media Training Associates and author Tom Maddocks says. "A crisis is absolutely the wrong time to start thinking about organising media training – it's far too late. Time is of the essence at this point, and this is the moment

communications even more relevant recently. The horsemeat scandal earlier in 2013, for one, was a crisis defined by social media; as the #horsemeat tag became nearly synonymous with Tesco as Tweets ranged from humorous to outraged in response.

James White, MD of Media First, says the impact on Iceland's and Tesco's reputations differed – with Iceland losing esteem and Tesco drawing positive notice – because of each company's respective communications throughout the crisis.

A CEO communicating with the press or with stakeholders in a time of crisis has the weight of that company's reputation resting on his or her shoulders. But those who have prepared in advance are better placed to manage the crisis.

"People take media training courses because they know that their reputation is everything – and bad relationships with the media need to be avoided at all costs," Alex Singleton, a media relations and PR strategist, says.

Media consultant Helen Glanville adds, "Like marriage, the media is not something to be entered into lightly. You need media skills and a willingness to work at it and prepare thoroughly."

CEOs are often most interested in media training during a crisis, but as most involved in training ►





note, a crisis is a time to act, not practice. A business must have a crisis management plan in place before the crisis hits. Take BP, a case study in poor crisis comms during Deepwater Horizon, years later its intensive media training paid off when BP employees were taken hostage at Algeria's In Amenas oilfield.

As the company had undergone internal communications and media training, it was well-placed to respond quickly and authoritatively. Statoil, which had employees on the In Amenas site as well, had even done a hostage situation simulation some weeks before the incident. This allowed both company's to effectively communicate with their audiences throughout the incident.

It's not only in times of crisis that a CEO or spokesperson – often a head of corporate communications or other leader – must train for interviews or press conferences. Andrew Harvey, partner at HarveyLeach, says those unpracticed at the art of the interview can have a difficult time in front of the camera. “For anyone who has not practised it, handling an interview effectively is a genuinely difficult task,” he says. “In front of a microphone or camera, outside your comfort zone, in the hands of a broadcasting professional, it is little wonder that palms sweat and brains freeze.”

The internal audience is as important as the external. AGMs and board meetings are opportunities for regular enhancement of skills, but also hold the potential for regular stress about addressing stakeholders.

Singleton says, “AGMs can cause significant reputational damage if corporate communications departments haven't developed relationships with City journalists that allow them the goodwill to explain negative news in a long-term context.” This often comes down to the corporate communications team's own media relations and communications skills. Public relations and communications tend to be the instigating parties in acquiring media training for their corporate leaders.

But media training is useful for others as well. Middle managers and others in positions of leadership must be skilled communicators in order to effectively guide their teams. “We train thousands of middle managers – experts in the business who can give colourful detail about issues and bring them closer to the audience,” Andrew Caesar Gordon, MD of Electric Airwaves, says.

White adds, “It doesn't always have to be the person at the very top of the food chain; it's about putting up the most appropriate person.”

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In one such instance, during Travelodge's impending sale to a Dubai-based hotel group, information was leaked to the press before it was announced internally. But, the internal crisis was mitigated by an honest and clear media campaign by the Travelodge comms team and leadership coinciding with a frank approach to internal comms. White says, “Any crisis the company faces, if it's managed properly, can actually be turned into a positive experience for the company.”

The internal audience, thus, is as important as the external for communicators, and for media trainers alike. “It establishes their authority inside the organisation. If staff see their CEO stumbling through an interview it does not inspire confidence,” director at Bladonmore, David Ladds says.

The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer pointed to a decrease in confidence in corporate leaders. Only 67% of CEOs are perceived by their employees as a ‘steady, reliable source of information.’ This was among an overall declination of trust among employees in their company's leadership.

Internal comms expert and director at All Things IC Rachel Miller says, “There are various expectations placed on CEOs and one of those is that they are a credible voice representing the company, which in turn means employees. If the workforce see an incoherent leader blustering through a press interview, this can of course create negative perceptions of them personally, and by reflection, the reputation of the company.”

To avoid this, she says internal communicators should work with their corporate leaders so that they may develop confidence in front of the camera.

Harvey adds, “The result of the training should be not an enemy who has learned tricks, but an expert able to share his knowledge in a way that is interesting, relevant and above all clear. Which is precisely why media training has a wider value, helping professionals express themselves more effectively in all areas of their working lives.”

Crisis can be managed mitigated through communications. All it takes is a little practice. ■



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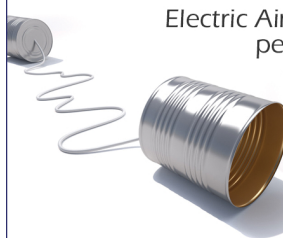


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