

## A Star Is Born

An in-house media training program produces stellar results.

By James H. Walter



**The voice** on the other end of the telephone sounded excited but a bit nervous. The caller was one of our physicians, an expert in osteoporosis. A producer from “Good Morning America” had done a Web search and came across references to the physician’s interesting research on osteoporosis in men. The question posed by the producer had the doctor in a tizzy: “Would you be interested in coming to New York later this week (a two-hour trip by car) to tape an interview?”

The doctor explained to us that she was clearly interested but concerned that she would be stepping way out of her comfort zone. She had never done an interview for national television and felt unprepared for the experience. She called us because a colleague told her we could help.

Our office of communications had started a media training program a few years earlier for faculty and staff, and the frantic physician was hoping we could get together on short notice to help her prepare. Hearing the magic words *network television*, we quickly agreed to meet later that same day.

Having designed our media training program with these opportunities in mind, it was easy for us to help the doctor. We applied techniques that calmed her down, boosted her confidence and focused her attention. In less than 90 minutes she was good to go.

The big day arrived, and her taped interview went without a hitch. She was ecstatic when it aired a few days later, and so were we. The editors even used her “home run” talking point—a comment we coached her to deliver after hearing her say it during the training session. Another satisfied customer!

### Getting Started

Our department began offering a media training workshop about 10 years ago. The motivations were simple. We wanted to show our value to the rest of the organization by helping our faculty and staff improve their performance during interviews. We knew that if our experts performed better, they would feel good about the experience and be more likely to agree to future interviews. By helping them, we would be helping ourselves.

After designing a straightforward curriculum that incorporated video clips and PowerPoint slides, we did some basic internal promotion that attracted a room full of interested students. The response to our first workshop was so encouraging

that we ran the program again about six months later.

All told, we have now trained more than 350 faculty and staff. Word of mouth has been a good friend of the program. We often get calls from interested employees who want to know when the next workshop is scheduled, many being referred by alumni of the program. It has led us to run the workshop, when time permits, for outside groups, enabling us to foster some wonderful relationships and build good will with community and professional organizations in the area.

### Two-Part Workshop

While we privately train individuals when circumstances dictate, most of our training is delivered in the form of a two-part workshop that we limit to a maximum of 15 participants.

**We knew that if our experts performed better, they would feel good about the experience and be more likely to agree to future interviews.**

In our experience, groups of 15 or fewer are more engaging. The more questions and anecdotes we receive from our students, the better. The workshop is offered once or twice a year, depending on demand.

We take a tag-team approach in running the program. The author, with a corporate communications background, shares the teaching duties with one of our communications officers, a longtime television health reporter for a local network affiliate before joining us at the UConn Health Center. The combination of experiences and perspectives goes a long way to establishing credibility with our students.

**Classroom instruction.** Part one is classroom instruction where, over the course of two hours, we cover the following:

- understanding the interview process
- effectively preparing for an interview
- controlling the interview through tactics and response
- delivering key messages

- speaking to reporters with less apprehension and more confidence

We start by stating our dual themes of comfort and control and liberally repeat them throughout the program. Experience has shown us that outcomes improve when interviewees are both comfortable in their roles and in good control of the process. The two go hand in hand; the interviewee cannot truly attain one without the other. Much of the classroom content is therefore geared toward improving comfort and control.

Throughout the classroom session we show clips of recent television interviews that feature our faculty and staff. We attempt to show a range of settings, including live broadcast, in-studio interview and typical local news story. Because the students strongly identify with seeing their peers on screen, showing a few of these clips is well worth the effort.

We have found over the years that most students come to our workshop assuming that all they need to do during an interview is answer the reporter's questions. We dismiss this notion quickly and with a touch of attitude! We emphasize the need to (1) identify two or three key messages prior to the start of the interview and (2) deliver them during the interview, ideally more than once. It may be simple to state, but our

experience has shown that novice interviewees need to practice this before it begins to sink in. In our view, getting workshop participants to understand and apply this one concept is perhaps the cornerstone to improving their performance with the news media.

**Individual studio sessions.** The group instruction is followed by a one-hour TV studio session with each participant. We attempt to schedule all the studio sessions within two weeks of the classroom portion while the information is still somewhat fresh. The studio session is where the students get to experience the lessons learned in class. We insist that all students must complete the classroom portion in order to get the practical training—no exceptions.

The individual sessions take place in the Health Center's television production studio where each student performs a series of three mock, on-camera interviews tailored to their field of expertise. Following each interview we play back the tape and observe the performance, pointing out the good, the bad and the ugly.

While we are fortunate to have a full-fledged TV production studio at our disposal, it certainly isn't a requirement. The practical sessions can be easily accomplished with a camcorder and portable playback equipment. In fact, the latter approach

## Find a **standout** person to fill your open marketing position.



**Forget generic job boards — post your opening on the AMA Marketing Career Network and get the candidates you're really looking for.**

- Marketers from entry-level to C-level specializing in branding, management, sales, communications and more
- Job database of over 42,000 truly qualified, marketing professionals

- A secure, cost-effective, fast and flexible online job listing environment

To learn more visit:

[www.marketingpower.com/findastandout](http://www.marketingpower.com/findastandout)



The AMA Marketing Career Network. Bringing Marketers Together.

more closely resembles what the student will likely encounter when the television interview is for real.

Each mock interview is designed to be more challenging than the previous one. The questions become increasingly difficult and we step up the off-camera noise and motion to give interviewees a sense of the distractions they might encounter. We never go over the top regarding the questions or distractions. The experience we create is designed to be realistic.

Much to the chagrin of some students, we continue to drive home the strategy of identifying and delivering key messages during the mock interviews. If necessary, we help them craft their points before the interview. We write them down and keep score to see how many the student actually delivers. It may seem a bit sophomoric, but it is an effective discipline.

## Special Considerations

**Training the top.** Though some top executives may express interest in being media trained, don't expect most to sign up for a workshop that has other participants in the room. Pride and ego likely prevent them from doing so. Some executives may think to themselves that attending a class will be perceived as an acknowledgement of weakness or a lack of experience. Whatever the reason, consider offering them a one-on-one session in the privacy of their office.

Do I get to approve the interview? This question was popping up every time we did the workshop—so we finally added it to the curriculum. After all, most of our students are clinicians or research scientists who live in a professional world of peer-reviewed journals and other similar publications. It's worth the time to explain how and why it's different in the world of consumer journalism.

**Media training students with English as a second language.** Many of our faculty and staff are foreign born and speak with a heavy accent and a limited English vocabulary. These challenges require some special consideration during media training. Rather than ignore the obvious, we have found that it is best to acknowledge these issues right at the start of the studio training. Speaking at a slow pace, using short sentences and avoiding certain words are just some of the techniques that we recommend to these students to improve clarity and performance.

## Three Lessons

**Don't preach to the choir.** The first few times we offered the workshop we included some material about the benefits of doing media interviews. Seeing it was a waste of everyone's time we decided not to bother. People sign up for media training because they believe in the value of being interviewed and getting exposure in the media. The motivation, of course, usually has to do with the desire for self-promotion, and that is fine with

us. If the institution or humankind benefits along the way, then the day just got better. We focus our instruction on improving the skills of our students.

**Keep it positive.** Every so often a participant will ask a question about how to handle a negative, or even crisis, interview. We've learned not to brush off these questions, but to keep the tone of the training on the positive side. Spending too much training time discussing negative interviews will scare some of the students and possibly discourage them from participating in real opportunities with the media. We emphasize that, far and away, the interviews the participants are likely to encounter will be positive ones where the interviewer seeks expert opinion and straightforward information about a particular field or subject. We also discuss our department's long-held philosophy of stepping in as spokespeople whenever media requests involve negative subject matter. This approach usually puts to rest any concerns our students have about being trapped in difficult or ambush interviews.

**Make 'em, don't break 'em.** We take a soft, encouraging approach during the studio sessions. While it would be easy to throw the kitchen sink at some of the students, doing so would not serve any useful purpose. We want our students to improve their interview skills and be motivated to the point that they will agree to an interview the next time we call with an opportunity. Giving them a hard time in the name of learning is simply counterproductive.

## Why It Works for Us

Something unexpected happened once we began to media train our faculty and staff. We saw that the program was becoming more beneficial for us than it was for our students. How?

Quite simply, the practical sessions allowed us to assess which students had natural interview talent and which ones did not. We also learned of some outstanding story opportunities that we subsequently pitched and turned into media placements. In short, our media training workshops became a great way for us to discover talent and stories that otherwise we may have never known.

Another pleasant phenomenon emerged as the workshops continued. We began to notice that, in an organization populated with experts in clinical care, research and health education, we were being perceived by our program alumni as experts in our own right. As a result, our department's credibility, value and reputation were strengthened. **MHS**

### About the Author

**James H. Walter** is the associate vice president of communications at the University of Connecticut Health Center. He may be reached at [walter@nso.uhc.edu](mailto:walter@nso.uhc.edu).