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The Art of Self-Defense

Media coaches show their clients how to cope with questions from the big bad press. Just what kind of tactics are they pushing?

By **Lori Robertson**

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In the early 1980s, back before she was a media coach, back before she told people how they should deal with the press, Carol Ann Kell was a radio reporter in Philadelphia. WIP's first woman anchor, in fact. Once, she interviewed a man from Houston on the titillating subject of "deregulation of natural gas," she recalls, tilting her head to one side and making a snoring sound. This was not a made-for-the-airwaves event.

The guy was smart, he really cared about this stuff, and he had spent a lot of money to travel around and talk about it. At the end of a half-hour, however, Kell couldn't use anything he said. "He didn't understand that reporters are generalists," she says. And besides that (and this is the death knell for anyone hoping to be the subject of a news story, especially a broadcast piece), "He spoke in paragraphs instead of sentences."

Needless to say, "deregulation" didn't make the day's newscast.

If only that guy had had a trainer.

Kell, like many media coaches, tired of the journalism life and decided to channel her talents into something else. She recalled that Houston man and some of her other interviewees who desperately needed lessons in mediaspeak. In 1985, after 13 years as a radio and television reporter, she started up her own consulting business. She's been at it ever since.

Coaching, or media training, is a popular afterlife for burned-out journalists who don't want to go into public relations exactly and who want to be their own bosses. There are coaches who do not have experience in journalism, but many--including all but one of those interviewed for this article--do. Kell says when she started out there weren't many of her ilk. "Now," she says, "everybody and his sister is hanging out a shingle."

And just what are everybody and his sister telling people about journalists? They offer clients an insider's

look at the media and explain why reporters do what they do. They offer advice on how to respond to questions and point out the clear no-nos of any interview. They're not secretive in the least. All of these media coaches readily and thoroughly answered my questions, and only one expressed a bit of Post-Interview Paranoia, nervous that I may have a predetermined skewering in mind for those who have switched sides.

Relax. This won't hurt a bit.

The first lesson the press can learn about media coaches: They're Not Really Evil.

Many journalists tend to view leaving the profession for a PR-ish job as the ultimate sleeping-with-the-enemy betrayal. It's as if the traitors quit the club and are now showing everyone the secret handshake.

After 20 years of work in TV news, including stints producing "The CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite" and both CBS' and ABC's morning news shows, David Horwitz jumped the fence for the media-coach pasture. He also does a bit of talent coaching for TV anchors and reporters. The business types love the fact that he has contact with the media world, but the journalists "are more suspicious of my going to the dark side."

Horwitz's dark-side work, however, can, at times, be a benefit to reporters (that's not always the case, as you'll see later). But, as the Scarsdale, New York-based coach recalls, "In the years when I used to have to stick a microphone in front of an executive...these corporate types could rarely do something that was what you wanted"--10 to 12 seconds, a sound bite. Instead, Horwitz would edit the tape and inevitably get a call from a PR person asking why the executive's remarks were out of context. Hey, Horwitz would reply, he couldn't do what I wanted.

Clarence Jones, author of "Winning with the News Media: A self-defense manual when you're the story" (now in its seventh edition), spent 30 years as a print and TV reporter before starting his own media consulting business in 1984. Newspaper people, he says, more so than television people, feel "that I have somehow left the priesthood." Jones, who worked for the Miami Herald and Miami's WPLG-TV, where he won three duPont-Columbia Awards, doesn't see it that way. He says about six times in his consultancy years a reporter has attended one of his seminars. "I think they were there to catch me teaching my clients to lie, cheat and steal." That's not, by the way, what Jones teaches.

Some reporters wonder why anyone needs a media coach at all, Jones says. But the trainers lay out good arguments for why their jobs are necessary. As Horwitz and Kell point out, many people don't know how to speak clearly and concisely (scientists, engineers, deregulation guys most definitely fall into this category). But there's something else that stops many from doing a good job in an interview: fear.

People are afraid--afraid of being misquoted, afraid of being embarrassed, afraid of not being able to answer the question, afraid of all the lights and cameras, afraid of the reporters. "I once asked a client, 'What's your definition of a crisis?' " says Len Biegel, a principal in the Washington, D.C., firm Weber Shandwick and head of its global crisis practice. "And he said, 'When the phone rings and there's a reporter on the other end.' "

That trembling executive may not have done anything wrong, but the media are powerful. If he messes up the interview, he's going to look bad. As Kell says, "Reporters have the power.... All I'm doing is evening

the playing field at first." (In the end, she says, the reporter controls how the story will be presented.)

Kell has a studio set up in her Washington, D.C., home/office, complete with cameras, lights and a backdrop of the Jefferson Memorial. Tellingly, she calls the interviewee's chair "the hot seat." Here, her clients can run through a mock interview and build up their confidence. "Having practiced it a little bit before is usually a good thing," she says.

One of Kell's clients is Carpenter Technology, a manufacturer of specialty alloys based in Reading, Pennsylvania. Katharine Marshall, Carpenter's director of communications, says Kell has trained a number of the company's managers on how they should respond to the media if, say, a fire or accident were to occur at their plants. "We were concerned that they would just ignore reporters' requests, even though they weren't necessarily time-consuming requests." Plus, many were afraid to talk to a reporter. "Part of overcoming the fear is understanding what a reporter's mind-set is and why time is important, for example," Marshall says. Also, "sharing partial information is OK. Better to do that than not say anything at all."

Certainly reporters don't want people to be afraid, but they may not be so gung-ho about having their subjects polished and primed in the coaching pit beforehand. Media trainers say that television news especially is grateful for guests who have been given a few lessons.

Not so, says Santina Leuci, head booker for ABC's "Good Morning America" who had worked to secure Connie Chung's interview last August with U.S. Rep. Gary Condit (see Free Press, October). "We prefer people to be unscripted and fresh," Leuci says. "I think people in certain situations, if they're coached, they're not giving their real response." Leuci says she could understand an ex-military official or an attorney who does more of the roundtable appearances or provides expert commentary being trained, but not people involved in news issues. "That's not news; that's like acting." She says she'd be "very surprised" if a lot of the guests on "Good Morning America" or ABC News had been coached.

As for that Condit interview--which is not applauded by the coaches in the least--Leuci says he was so scripted that the interview "was dead. There was nothing.... There's no answer."

The first lesson coaches teach their clients: Be honest, don't lie. (As Jones puts it in his ten commandments, under No. 1, "Be Open and Cooperative--Never Lie," and in a variation under No. 8, "If You Screw Up, Confess and Repent.")

If you don't get the repenting out of the way early, Jones and others say, the media will drag this thing out for weeks, replaying every little nondevelopment nightly on TV, until they get to the truth--which, the coaches caution, they generally will.

Kell adds to this tip: "Never say, 'No comment.'" That phrase always makes the interviewees look guilty, even if they're not.

If clients listen to their coaches, they know they can always return to their core messages rather than utter a stony-faced no-comment. (Here's the point in this story that raises the hair on the back of many a reporter's neck.) Before an interview, coaches suggest, their clients should determine what they want to convey and mold it into two or three distinct points. This is a beautiful thing--it summarizes the story, creates the sound bites the client wants out there, paves the way for a good headline. But then comes the second part of the advice: No matter what the interviewer asks you, your first priority is to get across your

messages. (Or, as some put it: You don't have to answer the questions.)

Whoa. They're telling people NOT to answer the questions! And, hey, isn't that a little contradictory to tip No. 1?

As the coaches see it, their clients want to get something out of this, too, not just give everything to the reporter. Says Horwitz: "I think a CEO has to go into an interview the same way they're going into a sales call.... You have to steer a conversation in the direction that will give you the results you want." If the CEO allows the customer (a.k.a. reporter) to lead, he says, "all of a sudden you're talking about your weaknesses instead of your strengths.... This is kind of like baseball--you never score on defense."

Sheila Tate, vice chairman of the Washington public relations agency Powell Tate and former campaign press secretary for President George Bush Sr., says one of the biggest misconceptions people have about the media is that the interviewee's role is passive and reactive, "that they sit down and answer a reporter's questions, period. The only reason to do most interviews," Tate says, "is because you have a story to tell and you want to get your message communicated."

Media coaches say you can answer the question, of course, but make sure you find a smooth transition from the answer to your message. Horwitz shows his clients in an exercise how this "bridging" works. He asks them to write down something they want to talk about. Then, he asks a completely off-the-wall question ("Do you know any women who have tried Viagra for sexual enhancement?" for instance). The challenge is to work the message into the answer.

Some clients freeze. Others realize they can go from Viagra to the new marketing plan in seconds. That's certainly worth the consultancy fee.

Another main coaching tip: Never accept a false premise. Tate says if the basis of a question is flawed, the interviewee has to correct the record first. Also, don't assume the reporter knows everything about a given subject. Before agreeing to an interview, do some research on the reporter's publication; ask questions about what the story will be about; be prepared. Horwitz says it amazes him how little forethought most executives put into an interview. "They'll spend days or weeks preparing a speech for peers," he says, "and then will decide to wing it with the Wall Street Journal.... Very strange."

More people are hiring coaches, however. Kell says that public speaking--including talking to the media--is increasingly a part of many jobs. And the nature of what appears on television is changing, says CNN national correspondent-turned-media coach Mark Bernheimer. Producers want talking heads. And many people who are expert on certain subject matter "know nothing about how to communicate" their wisdom, he says. (The coaching does not come cheap. According to the rates of Jones, Horwitz and the Los Angeles-based Bernheimer, a full day of training sessions can run anywhere from \$2,000 to \$4,000.)

Bernheimer is a newcomer to the coaching world: Last year he left behind a 16-year TV news career to start his company MediaWorks Resource Group. His Web site prods potential clients with a series of questions about the press. The most provocative in mid-February: "Do you know--What a reporter REALLY wants when he calls you for an interview?"

As a reporter, I thought, "No, I don't know. What does a reporter really want?" Bernheimer answers that "sometimes reporters go into stories without any idea what they're going to have when they come back," and other times they go in "with a preconceived idea of what the story will be about." He suggests that his

clients ask some questions before signing on for an interview.

If a reporter's point of view comes through clearly on camera, Horwitz suggests nicely and calmly emphasizing some points that are important to the interviewee. If that doesn't work, the source can flat out confront the situation, with something like, "I'm not sure you're hearing what we're saying here."

Alternately, go for the quote, Horwitz says. "Every reporter is such a sucker for a good quote." (Yes, we are.) The right bite "can get the reporter to redirect the story because the quote is so compelling," he says.

A good quote can also attract quite a media following. Kell once coached Randy Schwitz, who was executive vice president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association and is now an air traffic controller in Atlanta. In January 1998, the association issued a press release about the proposal to rename Washington, D.C.'s National Airport after Ronald Reagan (who had fired thousands of controllers during a strike in 1981). Schwitz was quoted as saying: "I'd rather have a hot poker in my eye than have an airport named after him."

That quote, understandably, played all over the place. "I was pretty surprised about the amount of attention" it garnered, Schwitz says. He says the media training taught him "to stay on point with whatever message you were trying to convey."

All of these media tips apply whether a client is the subject of a positive interview or under fire, coaches say. As Kell says, "If you don't tell your story, somebody else will." And there's no need--in fact, it's detrimental--to be mean to the reporter. "It's stupid," Kell says. "Why offend [the reporter]?... [Sources] might as well be friendly and get you on their side."

(I can think of a few news professionals I've interviewed who could use some media training themselves. Let's review: 1. You should talk. 2. Be nice.)

Even if the journalist gets angry first, says former media coach Matt Lundy, the interviewee needs to have "a smile on your face.... The last person to lose their cool always [comes] out the winner."

Eye contact and positive body language are important. Horwitz suggests gesturing even when doing a phone interview, to sound more at ease. On TV, coaches tell their clients to sit up straight and, if need be, to cut that hair. (Kell once persuaded a woman in her 40s to cut her long, flowing tresses, and "everybody was really impressed that that happened," Kell says.)

Lundy, who in the ultimate switch went from TV reporter to media coach for five years to TV reporter, is now news director at WDSI in Chattanooga. He would also tell clients not to get caught in the "Paul Harvey trap." Harvey often has long pauses, and in an interview people tend to rush into an answer rather than wallow in the silence. By doing so, Lundy says, "you're probably going to go down a road you don't want to go."

As with most advice, what coaches preach is much easier said than done. Witness Gary Hart, Gary Condit, Richard Nixon, Jim Bakker, Bill Clinton (in the Monica phase; otherwise, coaches say he was quite good), anyone associated with Enron.

Coaches say they can easily recognize who has been coached and who hasn't, and everyone has their favorite examples of people who bit the dust in the media limelight quite royally. Tate doesn't remember the details, but she does recall the incomprehensible jargon used by one young congressman on National

Public Radio. George Bush Sr. was refusing to fund something, Tate says, and this congressman got on the radio to talk about why Bush was in the wrong. "What do you think should happen?" the reporter asked. The response, as Tate recalls: "I believe we should detriger sequestration." Tate says she almost drove off the road, "I was laughing so hard."

Bernheimer adds one to the list: Hugh Rodham, Hillary Rodham Clinton's brother, "whose daily tactic was to get out of his car and to scream at the reporters there that...they weren't going to get any information out of him."

Bernheimer says a common mistake "is the assumption that refusing to talk to the media will make the media or the story go away. And if you think that's a good strategy, ask Gary Condit." (Condit said in a February 17 New York Times Magazine story that he refused to let the media into his private life on principle.)

Yet many high-profile people frequently violate the commandments of media training, including the ones about being open and honest. Why? Sometimes it's the lawyers' fault.

Lawyers never want their clients to talk. As Kell says, public relations people "groan" when they know a lawyer is involved.

"When I go into a crisis job in a corporation or a government agency," Jones says, "it is always the lawyer versus me." The CEOs "almost always take the advice of the attorney over the media consultant." Jones reminds his clients that if they are involved in legal action, they will be tried twice--once in a court and a second time in that almighty court of public opinion. An attorney is giving the correct legal counsel, he says, "but if you take his advice in the media trial, you will almost always lose that case."

Coaching can help take media attention away from how the message is delivered and focus it more on the message itself. President Bush, Kell says, is a perfect example of someone who turned his bad press around. (When was the last time a story commented on Bush's smirk?) Al Gore, on the other hand, was excellent at delivering the content of his message, but his manner wasn't always too appealing – "it was very studied," Kell says. Coaching can, it seems, backfire.

Or it can completely aggravate reporters. Dow Smith, a former news director who teaches broadcast journalism at Syracuse University, acknowledges that he'd like interviewees to have at least rudimentary speaking skills. But "particularly with politicians, they're so coached they don't even answer your question." On the Sunday morning shows, Smith says, the reporters will ask "awful" closed, yes-or-no questions, and the politicians will still respond with their preordained messages. "A well-armed interview subject can do a lot to frustrate you when you're trying to get a real story."

How can a reporter get someone to answer a question he or she doesn't want to? Smith and others say you just have to keep asking it in different ways. Other tips from the coaches include saying, "But that's not the question I asked you" (that's from Horwitz), or asking seemingly softball questions, which Kell says people often have a harder time with than the tough, pointed stuff.

What if a reporter simply asked, "So?" The Paul Harvey pause could set the interviewee off in unanticipated directions.

Face it: Many people simply aren't good pupils. Lawyers aside, do coaches ever watch their clients go

into an interview and proceed to ignore every bit of advice they've been given? "Most of the time," Kell says, laughing. "What do you do? You just keep trying."

Sometimes the culprit is social conditioning. "We are all supposed to answer the questions," she says. "It's counterintuitive" to tell someone he or she doesn't have to, "but some people really like it. They see it as a game."

Good thing some don't play as well as others. Imagine a world in which everyone comes clean right away, communicates in message points and sound bites, and is nice, polite and smiley.

How boring would that be?