

## Media Trainers Adopt High-Tech Tools

Web-based tools can help spokespeople enliven their interview styles.

*By Dave Wolkowitz  
for Office.com*

**March 2, 2001**— What do you think of when you hear the word "bridge"? If a smooth transition to a new topic comes to mind before that big steel thing you drive your car over, you're probably a media trainer.

Thanks to new technology-centric techniques, media trainers are doing their own bridging — to more effective training. They are able to enhance a session while it is being conducted and help participants review lessons to keep what they've learned top of mind. Doing this can bolster the impact of the company's carefully developed key messages and points of differentiation.

Matt Gonring, VP of corporate communications at [Baxter International Inc.](#) and adjunct graduate lecturer at Northwestern University's Integrated Marketing Communication program, believes Internet-based techniques can be particularly useful to people who want to be media-trained but might miss out due to budgetary and time constraints.

"The rules are being rewritten in terms of how journalists gather information and how they interact with sources," Gonring said. "Although in-person training is the preferred route, executives are busy people and don't often have time for half-day or day-long sessions. Internet-based training has limitations, but can fill some voids that might otherwise be ignored."

Gonring isn't the only person noting a need for better training in communicating with the media. Reporters have observed that many business leaders fail to convey their personality and offer anecdotal evidence. Forbes associate editor Luisa Kroll uses PR people for background, but prefers to conduct interviews that result in something other than regurgitation of press releases.

"Those who are the most insightful, the most pithy or the most expressive ... those are the people I get the best interviews from," Kroll said.

Redherring.com reporter Julie Landry puts it this way: "Instead of saying 'We are the robust e-business solutions provider,' explain some anecdotes about how the company has helped some people. I don't need to hear the spiel about why the company is so great, but want more specifics, color and detail."

When sources are more comfortable, they're likely to give a better interview to a reporter. According to T'Jae Gibson, group director of the media-training and message-development practice at D.C.-based Powell Tate, there are high-tech tools that can help spokespeople feel better prepared and more confident.

Gibson often conducts media training using PlaceWare, a Web-based conference application tool she also employs during actual interviews to increase spokespeople's accessibility and to improve the potency of presentations. Gibson says PlaceWare can be used in virtual media training and is ideal for training geographically dispersed spokespeople. She asserts that technology-centric media training techniques will become more popular as

reporters' and clients' comfort levels increase.

PlaceWare allows a conference leader — of a media-training session or some other type of virtual meeting — to control what other participants see on their Web browsers; perhaps the leader will want to display a PowerPoint presentation or other application. The leader can also activate a text-based chat feature and utilize white board-style drawing features or a laser pointer to highlight specific areas of interest. Users can discuss the presentation on a teleconference call synchronized to what's happening online. PlaceWare, which competes with conferencing solutions like [WebEx](#), has separate environments for small and large meetings, and offers reporting capabilities that link online behavior to identities by tracking IP addresses. All online and teleconference activity can be recorded.

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According to Gibson, PlaceWare's technology allows her clients to more easily focus on areas where they were off-message. Users can scroll through a presentation to the exact point they want to review, then hear the audio synchronized to the visual they are seeing on their browser. The synchronized recording can be viewed in a streaming format through PlaceWare. Gibson said her virtual media-training technique holds benefits beyond what happens during the actual training. It can actually make reviewing the training more effective by offering capabilities older technology couldn't.

"In the days when I would give every client a VHS tape of a three-hour media training session, they would rarely play the whole tape back unless they wanted a good laugh with their family and friends."

Speaking of VHS tapes ... when is the last time you found a CEO who enjoyed fast-forwarding or reversing through a media-training tape looking for spots to improve on? Never? That's what WordWave division president Larry Schwartz thinks. WordWave is a Web-based application that enables text-based, granular searches of digital video; it competes with companies like [Virage](#). The WordWave process works like this: Audio and visuals are recorded digitally, or a VHS tape is converted to digital and sent via the Internet to WordWave. After the audio is transcribed verbatim, WordWave synchronizes the transcription with the video. Users can then view the video online and use a search tool to find and view specific points in the video where search terms are spoken.

"It makes the use and reuse of the training video more valid," Schwartz said. "It becomes data that enables them to review specific data points."

According to Schwartz, the WordWave system can allow a PR person to review the most frequently queried words for special messaging focus in future training sessions. He also said the WordWave system differs from most speech-recognition software because it can achieve a near-verbatim transcription from

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a multispeaker environment. Although there are no up-front costs, WordWave costs \$375 per hour for synchronized, searchable video.

PlaceWare's pricing model is more complicated than WordWave's subscription fee. Gibson believes PlaceWare's price is justified by savings in travel time and expenses, as well as by the increased effectiveness of a robust online conference system over the standard teleconference call as a media-training tool.

For the version of PlaceWare best suited for PR firms — Conference Center 2000 — a "seat" at the conference costs \$600 annually on a contract for a minimum of 15 seats with unlimited usage. Single use "seats," without a contract, are available for approximately \$35 to \$55, depending on chosen capabilities. If users want to record their conferences, they pay \$1,000 per gigabyte (about 10 hours) of synchronized online graphics and conference call audio. PlaceWare will create a stand-alone file that does not reside on its servers for \$700, allowing users to view their conferences without being connected to the Internet.

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