



CEOs Say

Prepping Yourself For TV: CEO Edition

Klaus Kneale, 04.02.09, 7:44 PM ET

Scott Baxter was booked on CNBC in January to discuss the economic stimulus package's effects on small business, but when he got there he found his interview was actually a live debate with Reps. Maxine Waters and J. Gresham Barrett.

Baxter, chief executive officer of the high-end manufacturing outfit SA Baxter, says he survived because he had come prepared with "fun facts." He had rounded up some simple, poignant nuggets of information from sources like the Census Bureau and the Small Business Administration. As a result, he was able to stand up to the representatives without having ever seen the debate coming.

In Pictures: CEOs' Tips For Appearing On TV

That was far different from his first time on TV. Back then he wasn't nearly as prepared, and the interviewer "ate me alive," he says. It's hard to stay cool on live TV, Baxter admits, particularly when every little blip in your company's stock price shows in the corner of the screen while you talk. "But knowledge is king," he adds. Anecdotes aren't bad, but you look your best when you can rattle off impressive facts.

Bill Delaney is the senior vice president of communications training at Ketchum, the public relations outfit. He spent 25 years as a journalist in TV, print and radio before he took his present job. Now he spends most of his time preparing clients for television.

Delaney offers a list of the simple rules: Wear solid, preferably dark colors, because dots and stripes can create weird patterns on camera and light bounces off lighter colors more. Speak in straightforward, declarative sentences. Stick to three key ideas in order to remain clear. And no matter how busy you are, take 15 minutes ahead of the interview to arrange your thoughts.

Delaney doesn't think an executive should prepare for TV much differently from anyone else. The rules are essentially the same. But he does bring up two things that seem more pertinent to executives than to other interviewees.

First, avoid getting into debates with journalists. Delaney says a lot of clients fall into this trap. It rarely works out for the best. Your interviewer will usually have an agenda and will want to steer the conversation. If you know your own stance and story, you can construct the narrative together with the interviewer, rather than fight over it. "Use questions as an opportunity to tell your story," Delaney advises.

Second, don't go in with too much information crammed into your head. This can be a problem unless you really organize and focus ahead of the interview. Coming up with three key ideas is more important. It will help you avoid getting garbled or bogged down. Looking smart isn't as important as sounding clear.

Be flexible. West Shell III, the CEO of the online medical search outfit Healthline Networks, used to memorize the questions producers sent him ahead of interviews. But when the time came, the interviewer might not ask a single question on the list. Shell now focuses more on simply getting his point across.

In any event, be ready to admit when you don't know something, you're wrong or you've made a mistake. CEOs are not required to be infallible, Delaney says.

And above all, use your preparation to stay calm. That gets easier with experience. After all, you can't avoid knowing

that hundreds of thousands of eyes may be watching your every move.

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