

GREAT MEDIA SPOKESPEOPLE....IS IT DOWN TO GENES OR HAVE THEY LEARNED THE ART...?

With the media hotly anticipating the Duchess of Cambridge's first public speech this week and QLD's Great Debate between Campbell Newman and Anna Bligh, I have been thinking about the art of public speaking and media spokespeople in particular. What are the traits that define 'greatness'? Is this a 'gift' you are born with or something you can learn?

In researching this topic I landed upon a blog by Brad Phillips who is the author of the Mr. Media Training Blog and president of Phillips Media Relations (specialising in media and presentation training). His article focuses on the top six qualities make a great spokesperson.

His observations were astute and intelligent, saying irrespective of cause, ideology or style, media greats share similar traits.

What he then goes onto to say is that we all, almost certainly possess the same qualities and with a bit of polish and practice, can become good public speakers and spokespeople.

The first trait is authenticity. An audience might not agree with what the person has to say, but can tell if that person is authentic and believes in their own message. It shines through. This is very much the case when watching some politicians talk. You may not believe in their 'party', but if the person is a quality speaker, you just might be compelled to listen.

The second is natural passion. Phillips believes that the best spokespeople are those that live and breathe their message or walk the walk and talk the talk. They are the same on camera as off and their passion is the same at home as when they are delivering a speech or giving an interview.

Third is flexibility. This is very important. Not always everything goes to plan – be it technical hiccups or breaking / shifting news. The spokesperson will have far more sway with his or her audience when they show a calm persona and roll with the punches – perhaps even show a touch of humour.

Fourth is connecting with the audience. The ability to communicate directly with the audience in a style that is engaging – instead of perhaps saying the things people or those higher up want you to say. In other words, no lip service allowed.

Fifth is the ability to self-edit. This is a skill for spokespeople who are often required, in their communication, to simplify a message, rather than dumb it down. You cannot always say everything, as doing so will complicate, confuse and bore the audience to sleep.

Finally, the sixth trait is expressing points in a compelling manner. These people know how to make a mark with their audience using entertaining or interesting anecdotes, statistics and hard-hitting sound bites. They are very good at coining phrases that stick in everyone's minds.

Think about the political slogans and mantras of recent times, Obama's "Yes we can", Gillard's "Moving forward" and Newman's "Time for change". And then there's the case of incessant repetition – personally, I liken it to a shovel on cement. Have you noticed how certain political leaders of this country often repeat themselves when putting across a point.

So, you want to become a great media spokesperson but don't know where to start? Grab a phone book, jump online and explore the many local media professionals and consultants who provide media training courses – even if they don't advertise it, you just need to ask. If you are the nominated spokesperson for your company yet don't feel confident public speaking or talking to media, this will be money well spent and have you feeling comfortable in front of the camera or microphone in no time.

Finally, so how you think the Duchess went in her maiden speech? In my view, she didn't disgrace herself, but didn't impress either – points deducted from reading her lines. It was short, sweet and a good start.

Who do you think makes a great spokesperson and what is it about these people that makes them so believable? I would love to know... email me pip@pipmillerpr.com.au