

SEMINARS, WORKSHOPS

& TRADE SHOWS



Heather Thitoff, director of training for Damon's, works on speech text before beginning her training session with Tanny Feerer, of Damon's, right, and instructor Brad Ritter.

PART STORYTELLER, PART SALESMAN

*Coaching can help executives
communicate key company messages*

By Craig Lovelace ■ For Business First

When Heather Thitoff addresses the national convention of Damon's restaurant franchisees Sept. 14-16, she is hoping her message about the importance of food safety doesn't get lost because she speaks too quickly about it.

The director of training for Columbus-based Damon's International Inc., Thitoff has spoken on the issue numerous times, but didn't realize she rushed through it until she had her speaking style and delivery analyzed. "This is what I do for a living," she said, "and even though people know me, I want them to know how important it is to get my message across. If I don't look confident, I think (the audience) is going to be more distracted."

Damon's is one of several companies across Central Ohio that employ speech, language and communications experts to help executives maximize their time before the public, shareholders and media who want to hear from those in charge.

"Presentation style is more important today because people have higher expectations of executives. If they can't do it, they can lose credibility very fast," said Brad Ritter of Powell-based Brad Ritter Communications.

Ritter and others in his field counsel clients on everything from giving a keynote address to talking with the media during a crisis situation. Damon's employed him to train Thitoff and others on how to read from a TelePrompTer

and how to give a Power Point presentation while speaking.

Thitoff said she learned through a dress rehearsal of her speech that she spoke too swiftly and rushed the ending. "(Ritter) made me feel more comfortable about my speaking and style," she said.

Comfort level

Ensuring the speaker feels comfortable can be tantamount to success, area experts say. Methods used include dress rehearsals, videotaping the speaker and role-playing. Nancy Palmer, owner of Executive Expressions, uses what she calls the "blue chair" treatment, which involves a face-to-face discussion. Palmer gets the client to talk about himself as they sit in opposing blue chairs in her Worthington office. Afterward, she has the client take to a lectern and do the same thing.

"I would see this person emerge that wasn't like anybody I had just spoken with," she said.

Most everyone suffers from stage fright, and one sure way to overcome it is by practicing and being prepared.

Palmer relays a story of a Nationwide executive who was worried about being "grilled" by a gadfly shareholder during an annual speech he had to deliver. She told the executive to write down questions he expected, those he thought might be asked and those he wanted to be asked and then to write down the answers as well.

Bad examples

Palmer bemoans the state of communication as an art and said politicians and business executives do little to enhance it. Proof, she said, is seen in the responses executives have given trying to explain the multitude of financial scandals recently.

"I look at communication in all of this and believe this country has a serious problem because our language reflects our culture. They basically say whatever they mean at the moment," she said.

Palmer tells clients to make their speeches forthright, avoid delivering rote answers and interspersing warmth, intelligence and humor into the presentation because it provides more credibility for the speaker.

On-the-spot communication

Learning to speak before an audience is one segment of this industry; another large part is learning how to deal with the media.

Bill Patterson of Executive Management Associates in Columbus, said one study showed that three-quarters of business executives who were interviewed were scared of the media. He further says that he knows of no MBA program that provides training in speech and how to work with the media.

"Dealing with (the media) is very simple, but these people don't get any experience in college. And those are two areas no executive can avoid," he said.

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Brad Ritter

Brad Ritter Communications

Palmer echoed the comment, saying that when an executive speaks publicly he or she is both a storyteller and a salesperson, which heightens what and how something is said.

Patterson got his start as a crisis counselor who aided companies that fell under media scrutiny. A big part of his company is helping clients understand how the media works, what reporters look for and how firms get themselves into hot water.

Jim Vitak, public relations supervisor for Ashland Specialty Chemical Co., said Patterson's seminars in dealing with the media have taught managers at the company's 95 distribution and manufacturing sites across North America establish better communication patterns with newspaper and television stations and local communities, especially in emergency situations.

"We recognize that you operate a lot better with the cooperation of neighborhoods where you reside," he said.

