

25 years preparing with the best

In a market filled with ex-hacks working as sole traders, Electric Airwaves is unusual as a media training company with top quality studios, 50 working journalists and a 25 year heritage. But what makes it tick?

One of the first surprises upon walking into Electric Airwaves' media training HQ is to learn that it has state-of-the-art central London TV and radio studios - which are so high spec that the BBC rents its radio facilities. Today, Catherine Tate is recording a Doctor Who audiobook.

However, this is just a sideline for a company that in October celebrates 25 years' trading as the UK's first - and largest - dedicated media training company.

If you think of media training as a commodity, then don't be surprised when your spokespeople falter in front of the camera. By not getting the right support you are gambling with your reputation. Global brands such as Coca-Cola, Nokia, Hilton Hotels and around 30 of the FTSE100 know this and are putting their faith in Electric Airwaves - clear proof of the company's claim to be 'media training the leading companies'.

It also works with some of the biggest names in the public and third sector - from the Audit Commission, the British Council, English Partnerships and Westminster City Council to Cancer Research UK and Action Aid.

The company uses 50 print and broadcast journalists who are currently working rather than retired - who have up-to-the-minute experience of changing media trends and newsroom practice. Recent training assignments have taken them to North and South America, Africa, Asia and many continental European countries.

The man behind all this is Andrew Caesar-Gordon, a former government special adviser and corporate PRO, who took over the company five years ago.

'I am a PR man myself, so like to understand what agencies, their clients and in-house practitioners need,' he explains. 'We operate differently from how many PROs might think because we have spent 25 years investing in our facilities, journalists and training methodology.'

One problem with media training is that it is a fragmented sector with no barrier to entry and consequently there is a lot of poor quality training about. Caesar-Gordon acknowledges this and says that sessions should not be ego trips for media professionals more interested in the 'media' than the 'training'.

'It should not be about the journalist sitting on one side of a table amazing participants with "When I..." stories,' he says. 'Central to every Electric Airwaves training session is us helping PROs and their spokespeople to communicate in a credible and engaging way to achieve their communication strategy objectives.'

This focus has won plaudits. 'Andrew has turned Electric Airwaves into something quite special,' says Peter

Electric Airwaves Timeline

2008

Celebrates 25th anniversary as dedicated media training company

2003

Managing Director Andrew Caesar-Gordon buys out founding directors with bank and venture capitalist investment

2001

Former government special adviser and corporate PRO Caesar-Gordon joins as MD

1987

Company moves to purpose built TV and radio studios by the BBC in central London

1983

Sarah Dickinson establishes Sarah Dickinson (Electric Airwaves) Ltd as the first stand alone media training company

1975

Dickinson founds Ladbroke Productions (Radio) Ltd as an audio news release company



Bingle, chairman of Bell Pottinger Public Affairs. 'The company delivers much more than just media training, high quality though the training is. What is different about Electric Airwaves is that Andrew understands that media training is not a standalone deal but part of a client's wider strategic communications needs.'

Another facet in the success of Electric Airwaves is that its journalists have crossed the PR/media divide. 'We select them carefully, to ensure that they are empathetic to the needs of PR people,' insists Caesar-Gordon. 'We have developed a rigorous training methodology over the last 25 years and our trainers know how to train. Because if you can't teach, people won't learn.'

This philosophy - helping spokespeople to look confident while ensuring they have a credible story to tell - chimes with the needs of PROs, thinks longstanding client Andrew Baiden, MD of the Red Consultancy. 'Clients sometimes need to hear things from the horse's mouth, it is absolutely invaluable to have that sort of experience sitting next to you. The colour, stories and background that

Electric Airwaves provide are very useful,' he explains.

'We help people understand how they can present things to become more engaging,' continues Caesar-Gordon. 'We are helping people exploit a media opportunity rather than just answering some questions. Parroting your company's three key corporate messages just makes you sound like Gordon Brown. We train people to exploit the media opportunity not just "do an interview". We give people a compelling personal narrative that flows into the brand through the corporate messages.'

This help is tailored to suit a company's specific needs. For example, Electric Airwaves put together a bespoke programme, which combined elements of presentation and media training, for 42 of O2's comms professionals as part of the group's communications academy. 'The feedback was very, very good,' says O2 comms director Glenn Manoff. 'They found a way to reach the most senior and junior people. They helped us collectively raise our game.'

The media itself is changing and fragmenting. 'It used to be about the verification of truth,' says Caesar-Gordon.

Electric Airwaves | Key differences

- ▶ 2003's MBO heralded the move from a small business run by an ex-hack to the creation of a brand in its own right that is focused on facilitating client's comms strategy objectives
- ▶ A team of 50 journalists with a wide range of reporting specialisms means we can meet any client's sector needs
- ▶ Advice to clients: have a clear narrative - and preparation, preparation, preparation
- ▶ Participants need to embrace their role in the organization's communications strategy and deliver wholeheartedly for it
- ▶ Three TV and radio studios providing a genuine media environment in which to train

'But now there's a strong element in journalism of "show me" rather than "trust me" and as a PRO you can exploit that. We help people to identify how they will talk about the same things to very different and now often highly segmented audiences. We are fortunate that the people we are dealing with are bright, they get it - and we can open the door for them to be able to do just that.'

Alex Aiken, director of comms at Westminster City Council, believes that the company's attention to detail is key to its appeal for clients. 'Everyone from the chief executive to relatively junior managers comes back and says: "That was really worthwhile",' Aiken says. 'Electric Airwaves has improved the quality of our spokespeople. They test people quite cleverly but with due sensitivity.'

Caesar-Gordon believes that his role in the company - he carries out no training himself, but manages the trainers as well as bringing in new business - means he is able to concentrate on ensuring that clients get the highest quality outcomes and the best service possible. This helps make Electric Airwaves the professional, PR-savvy and outcomes-focused option for PROs and their clients.

And the training should not be seen as a one-off: chief executives frequently come in to the studios for an afternoon's refresher course if they have an announcement to make, for instance. 'That's the sort of progressive attitude to the media we like,' laughs Caesar-Gordon. 'It will make them better media performers.'

Such repeat business is testimony to the success of Electric Airwaves. 'We were the first media training company and we have the heritage: we've been doing this for 25 years,' he concludes. 'We've been building a brand for all that time, rather than running a business out of a back bedroom. And we've spent that time perfecting our methodology and processes to deliver, in a changing media and PR landscape, what our clients want.'

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media training the leading companies
1975-2025
YEARS