

Training media-savvy women experts



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*VIDM – Vaker in de media (More often in the media) – Training courses for female experts
Netherlands*

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In brief

VIDM (*Vaker in de media* – More often in the media) runs training course for women experts, to give them an understanding of how news is made, and how gender imbalances develop. The courses teach women how to build a media profile, how to approach media organisations, how to speak and how to present themselves in front of an audience. The most productive element of the course is the simulated panel discussions, which take place with journalists present. This not only enables the trainees to get direct feedback on their performance, but also builds up long-lasting relationships between women experts and media professionals, which both sides appreciate.

The result is that women experts gain a new confidence in going out and getting media attention. The courses are financially self-supporting from fees paid by trainees.

VIDM operates two websites. One of them (*vidm.nl*) finds journalists the right woman expert for their story, and the other (*vakerindemedia.nl*) enables women experts to subscribe for inclusion in the database.

Women lack charisma in media eyes

Janneke van Heugten, the entrepreneur who started VIDM (*Vaker in de media* – More often in the media) recognised that many fewer women appear in the media than men, and this is especially the case when it comes to experts. The exception is healthcare, where women experts do receive media attention. Over the past 10 years comments by media representatives have revealed a culture of favouring male experts over female experts. Their arguments include that ‘there are not enough female experts’, and, if they are, ‘they are not charismatic enough for the media’.

To tackle this latter argument, VIDM offers training courses and presentations to make female experts ‘media ready’. The training is specifically delivered to female experts and is tailored to allow them to overcome stereotypes, avoid the traditional subjects of work and family etc.

Simulated panel debates work best

VIDM delivers courses for female experts (divided into half-day and full-day sessions) to groups of between 10-25 participants. The courses provide information on the news-making system and processes, and explain how journalists select news and how they find people to be interviewed. Trainees receive information about the best way to create a public profile to make themselves visible and the best way to present themselves.

In the advanced classes, TV or radio expert panels are simulated, with media professionals present to give trainees feedback on their performance as experts being interviewed. These sessions have been found to have greatest effect, because there is direct interaction between women experts on the one hand and media professionals on the other – which is appreciated by both sides.

The visibility that the training aims to create for women specifically concerns prestigious roles, such as experts, and thematic domains other than those traditionally marked as typically feminine. It thus combats the segregation of women into a limited range of issues and increases the attention given to women’s social, economic and cultural issues.

The courses are grounded in the knowledge of the professional routines, social practices and relationships that are characteristic of media organisations: the way the news-making process works and creates gender imbalances in the visibility of experts is, in fact, the subject of some of the modules offered.

Making women experts more confident

The training develops women's ability to identify and address gender imbalances. Women who have attended the training have become more aware of the importance of visibility in the media, and have learnt how to interact with media professionals and journalists, and how to present, speak, and create a public profile. They start to approach journalists more often and become more willing to receive media exposure. One participant testifies:

"Janneke offered me great help in making myself and my business visible. Within a few weeks after meeting her my PR activities started to result in a radio interview (BNR) and several publications (Parool, Flair, Viva) due to her. I admire Janneke for her energy and expertise in her field."

The training's greatest impact on the wider environment is that it has made journalists more aware of their gender-stereotyped approach and of the fact that they have much more male than female experts on their contact lists. Since the training started, they are more willing to go the extra mile in the search for women experts. Attending the courses produces permanent changes: the journalists really get to know the female experts and they keep in touch after the training has ended. However the method did not seem to be appropriate for all editorial staff: some still deny that gender imbalances exist and do not understand why training and connecting with female experts are needed.

Women experts, in turn, are more self-confident and willing to share their expertise. They have the chance to develop an in-depth knowledge of the way news is made, which increases their chances of gaining exposure media and helps them to perform in the most effective way.

The training has attracted media attention to the subject of gender equality, and leads to requests to make presentations – and vice-versa.

Women experts can subscribe for inclusion in the database on the website vakerindemedia.nl, and journalists can find them free of charge on the website vidm.nl.

VIDM also celebrates role models by making two annual awards, Vrouw in de Media (Woman in the Media) for the woman who is most visible in the media, and You Go Girl for the woman who builds her own media visibility most strongly.

A bottom-up approach

The success of the training comes from the bottom-up approach it takes. It supports female experts from 'non-traditional female subjects' to learn how to demand and use media attention. It gives women the tools and confidence they need to appear in the media, and so the media receive more requests from these women to be heard and to be part of expert panels. The training thereby indirectly addresses the reluctance of the media to acknowledge that there is a problem. Offering sessions that involve both media professionals and female experts directly allows for an interaction that both sides find positive.

The training is efficient in terms of financial resources allocated, since participants pay for themselves, and in terms of human resources involved. As for its sustainability, the practice does not rely on external funding, so its continuation depends mainly on attracting participants' interest. There has as yet been no internal or external evaluation, but the courses could be made more efficient by running the training within media settings in order to reduce costs, as journalists would not need to claim travel expenses.

The main problems have been the time it takes to get in touch with the right female experts, the time it takes to find journalists and editors willing to donate their time – and obtaining external funding has proved impossible.

The VIDM training teaches the lessons that all-female courses have a larger impact because the participants tend to be women already focusing on equality issues. But training alone is not sufficient, and attention needs to be paid to changing the culture from all angles. A well-balanced approach is essential to gain media professionals' trust: the most productive stance is to highlight gender imbalances and criticise the media industry without being too tough or showing an 'activist' approach.

Contacts/Further Information

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Further information

Website for journalist



Website for female experts



Website



Video



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EIGE's collection of good practices



EIGE's approach to good practices



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Training media-savvy women experts - Netherlands

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