

Making smarter use of the media

For local authorities, NHS trusts and other public sector bodies, there has probably never been a time when greater transparency has been expected by government and demanded by the electorate.

The tragic Baby P case is only the most high profile recent case to hit the headlines. For example, the media, politicians and public also wanted more answers over the deaths in the Mid-Staffordshire hospitals, and from the local authorities that continued to invest council taxpayers' money in Icelandic banks even after strong warnings about the financial risks.

In many cases, elected representatives were unable or unwilling to give answers on what can sometimes be technical or professional issues. This leaves a gap that can only be filled by allowing greater access by the media to appropriate council department heads. In any case, the traditional guideline that salaried officials and civil servants keep in the background, leaving media comment to councillors and MPs, has become increasingly eroded over recent years.

At a national level, the Phillis Review of 2003-4 called for the government to improve its communications in the regions, partly by nurturing its relationship with the regional and local media. In its 2009 response, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications said that special attention should be paid to the training and guidance available to regional press officers to ensure that they have a better understanding of regional and local media.

In an increasingly unforgiving media environment, 'no comment' means 'guilty'. The answer should be to give all key department heads, as well as councillors, some broad practical experience of effective media handling techniques; this can then be supplemented with more intensive coaching if circumstances require. We frequently carry this out on a one-on-one basis with senior individuals, as well as the traditional small group workshop. The benefits from really effective training of the highest quality can be huge in terms of improved media impact.

Time for a more sophisticated approach to media training?

Too often, the requirement for 'media training' comes to the fore when there is 'a problem' that has to be handled, or a position that has to be defended. This inevitably leads to an 'us and them' mentality, with the media seen as the enemy.

In fact, the media should be seen as a hugely powerful way to communicate with stakeholders of all descriptions, in positive as well as negative situations. This requires a less combative, more sophisticated approach to media training – too often, participants in training courses are told to ensure that they stick to their key messages whatever the question – all very well in theory, but in practice, it can really annoy the journalist, viewer or listener.

After all the debate about the 'spin culture', we believe that audiences have become fed up with those in authority who are too 'on message' and never seem to deal with the real issues – it is sometimes as if they live in a parallel universe where targets are always being met, the right decisions are always being taken, and everything is just dandy.

Nowadays, just saying the right thing isn't enough – the tone has to be right. You can mention all the key messages you like in a radio or TV interview, but an hour or two later, most listeners or viewers will be hard pressed to recall more than a single one. What they will remember is the impression that individual created.

Think of it as the 'BLT factor' next time you are watching the typical corporate spokesperson being interviewed on television – do I believe him, do I like him, do I trust him? If the individual can convey authority, the impression that they know what they



Tom Maddocks in the studio with a typical group

Abuse death questions for head of Baby P taskforce

NHS targets 'may have led to 1,200 deaths' in Mid-Staffordshire

'Negligent' authorities ignored bank warnings

£10m deposit just days before banks collapsed

are doing, and come over as a reasonable person, trying to do a good job in maybe trying circumstances, that is likely to engender far more support for their organisation than a lot of point scoring messages.

The more that officials get used to working with the media in normal circumstances, the less of a stretch it is if they do have to deal with a tough issue or a crisis. So the head of environmental services who is a regular guest on local radio phone-ins explaining the latest recycling initiative will find it much easier to deal with the hard questions on another occasion if the bins aren't emptied and residents are up in arms.

It is also possible that more effective use of the media, leading to a better informed public, would help councils with NI 14, the directive that seeks to increase efficiency by reducing the amount of avoidable customer contact. This is something we have also been seeking to address by the launch of our sister company Pitch Perfect Productions, (www.pitchperfectproductions.co.uk), producing cost-effective website videos. These should be relevant not only for the corporate sector, but also for public sector bodies to communi-

cate with stakeholders, and raise public awareness of services, processes or initiatives. To take the environmental services example again, many of us would welcome a video on our local council's website to clearly demonstrate which types of plastic packaging and other disposables we can and can't put into the recycling sack or box without causing the system to break down.

After several years as a reporter on BBC2's The Money Programme I set up Media Training Associates in 2000, and it is now one of the UK's leading media training consultancies. We work with many high profile organisations in both the private and public sectors, including FTSE 100 companies and government agencies, bringing high level journalistic expertise to help those we work with understand what will and won't impress the journalist.

Unlike many journalists who perhaps do a little media training on the side, we provide a clear framework to understand what the reporter is looking for, the tricks and traps, and – crucially – the techniques to really prepare effectively for an interview, to get the most out of any media encounter. For example – the six key

questions you should ask before you agree to do any TV or radio interview.

There are four broad areas where we can help boost expertise and improve communications skills:

- Media coaching and training – we carry this out in-house or in the studio, giving immediate, honest, constructive feedback, to help you make substantial, speedy progress, with a creative focus on what you really want to get across – clarifying or giving emphasis to the right key messages;
- Crisis media training – we run specific courses with tough interviews based on an evolving scenario that would be realistic for the organisation concerned. This would include 'doorstep' interviews, and techniques for dealing with aggressive reporters;
- Presentation skills coaching – working with senior individuals to improve their presentation style, whether addressing internal or external audiences;
- Refresher training – working with people who have a degree of media experience, but who may have fallen into bad habits. We can bring them up to the next level with more advanced interview skills – and greatly improve their effectiveness.

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