

Introduction

Your ability to manage your local media will determine how people feel about the quality of your services. Research by MORI suggests a direct correlation between the negative coverage and negative perceptions of your services. The second edition of this booklet will give you some clues about how you might manage your news more effectively. We hope you will find it useful in presenting your council in a positive light.

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Don't panic!

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Don't panic

A six point survival plan for handling calls from the media

What's the story?

What's the journalist interested in? Why call you? Do you know anything about it? Get as much information as you can and keep a note.

What's the deadline?

Find out what the deadline is. It's best to know what deadlines your media work to. But ask anyway.

Create thinking space

Say you're in the middle of something and you'll call them back, either way. Use this time to collect your thoughts, key facts and to focus your attention.

What's the benefit?

Weigh it up. Look at the benefits to the council in responding. Look at the best and worst case scenarios. Now make a judgement about how you will respond.

What's the message?

Media relations will work better for the council if you are continually pushing consistent lines (inconsistencies can help to create a negative press). Try to isolate a few key messages and repeat them.

Say it but don't deviate

You've weighed it all up, you've got a key message and now it's time to deliver it. So don't be drawn into areas that will create the kind of press you could do without.

Back to basics

If you are going to manage the media successfully you need to be clear about a number of things:

What do you want?

This is always a good starting point: what exactly do you want from your media relations? Here you will need to be realistic. You might, for example, say that you want all of the bad news to go away. But if there is conflict within your authority, if you are generating real problems, then it won't. Set out some specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound goals. And keep them under review.

How are you seen?

In any area of management activity there will always need to be a judgement around cost-effectiveness. Media management can be particularly expensive because it can obsess councillors and senior managers. If you are going to spend money, time and resource on this area you will need to set a baseline – how are you seen at the moment? And then: is it so much of a problem that you are prepared to spend money on sorting it. Certainly, MORI assert a relationship between the way that you are presented in the media and the perceived quality of your services. You could look at this scientifically through independent research. Or you could carry out a content analysis of the last six months of media coverage. You should try and get an outside perspective – your coverage may look bad inside the building but outside it may not even raise an eyebrow.

Do you have the right skills in place?

There are still a number of local authorities that don't have a communication function. If the answer to the previous question is that you have a problem worth sorting then you will need to invest in media management skills. But you will also have to ensure that those people have access to decision-makers at the right time. The later you leave it, the less the impact that media managers will be able to have on the column inches. If you really want to manage the media then skilled media handlers should be part of the decision-making process.

How do you manage your news?

Crucially, what are your protocols? Who is allowed to talk to the media, are they skilled, are they clear about what they should be saying, when they should be saying it and so on. You should have a clear policy. Journalists can thrive in organisations where no-one is quite clear who is allowed to speak and on what basis. Some will be tempted to use the media for managerial or political outcomes, and they may do so in an unplanned way. Fine. But it may come at a price – the reputation of the authority.

Who are your key audiences?

You should know whom you are talking to. You should know how they see the world: their hopes, fears and dreams. The biggest challenge is to represent your news, as they would see it. So a council's economic development policy is only meaningful when it talks about jobs for local people. It's also a cue to avoid complex language and jargon. You'll understand it but if you're going to use

the media then you'll need to use the words that their audience uses. That's not to say that there isn't a space for jargon – there is – but it tends to be in the specialist press.

What do you want them to know and feel about you?

In outcome terms, what do you want your key audiences to know about you and what do you want them to feel about you? Write this down. Again, put your ambitions through the reality test. But this is about focus. It's not particularly hard to get media coverage – councils are the staple diet of most local news media – but media management can be most effective when you are trying to achieve a particular outcome.

What are your success measures?

All of which leads to success measures. You need to know whether it is working. There are all sorts of ways of measuring this. You might count column inches, balanced for positive and negative news. You could add up how much it would have cost you to get the equivalent amount of advertising coverage. But these can be a bit spurious unless you are clear that these are the OUTCOMES you actually want. The real measure of success has to be whether it has delivered what you wanted in the first place.

Getting your messages right

Your messages – the key things you want to say to an audience – should relate to the outcomes you are trying to create locally. As such they should be tied clearly into policy and performance – what you are trying to do and the services that will produce that outcome. You are trying build awareness through your messages and help to bring about outcomes that are useful to your council.

Make them part of what you do

It's better to have messages about things you are doing – that people can see – than messages embedded in a future that may or may not be. If there's a consistency between what you say and what you do you will add weight.

Make them real

Talk about things you're doing rather than always focusing on your plans for the future. By and large the media are focused on NOW. And, in truth, most of us are too.

Few and often

It's better to have a small number of messages that you use repeatedly – in press releases, interviews, marketing material, letters to service-users and so on – rather than a plethora of random thoughts.

Keep them consistent

Say the same thing over and over again and you will build awareness

– tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. Deviate and you create differences that both damage awareness-building and make room for journalists to look for inconsistencies.

Make them talk to people

Use phrases that sound like someone has spoken them. Avoid missionese: “we want to empower local communities” might look good on your mission statement but it doesn’t exactly talk to people.

Make them fit the space

Remember that you want these messages to fit into a paragraph or a sentence over and over again. So keep them short, to the point, and active – “we are doing” as opposed to “it is being done.”

Idioms, alliteration, simile, metaphor

These are all devices for making your words speak to real people. Look for memorable forms of words that connect to your audience. And spend some time developing them. Resist the urge to make it up as you go along. It’s likely that you’ll expose inconsistencies in your organisational thinking.

Get beyond the rhetoric

If your messages are to really work then they need to operate by demonstration rather than assertion. “We want to empower people” will be real when you repeatedly show that people are being empowered. Words are cheap and easy; it’s actions and reality that most of us notice.

Delivering the message – working with journalists

It's important to understand how journalists work and think. This will help you to more effectively plan how you will use them to get your message out. It will also help when it comes to dealing with them. It will help you to get more out of any interview. And it will make it easier for you to sell them your ideas. And remember, if a journalist phones you – they're looking for something.

It's important to understand what motivates journalists

Keeping power under scrutiny – there is still a sense that journalists wield the sword of truth. They will be seeking to scrutinise your executive and ask the kinds of questions that they believe local people would want answered.

- **The by-line** – journalists do like to see their name in print.
- **Time** – journalists (and all media) are driven by deadlines. You need to know what those deadlines are.
- **Accuracy** – getting the story right is important. Journalists will keep notes and tape-recordings. These can be called upon to help them substantiate their stories.
- **Keeping ahead of the game** – there is an insatiable demand for news. Journalists must keep ahead of the game by developing contacts and having reliable sources for news.

- **Progression** – better jobs, more money – just like the rest of us.
- **Autonomy** – a sense that they can personally pursue a story to a conclusion. They can be very tenacious when they feel it's necessary.
- **Writing** – it's the activity that defines them.
- **Meeting people** – the ability to meet people, get on with them, understand them and use those relationships is crucial. This works both ways – you can develop mutually helpful relationships.
- **The product** – although sales of newspapers or ratings in audience surveys are not at the forefront of most journalists' minds, these issues will concern editors and owners. That in turn will have an impact on people further down the line.

Coordinate your relationships

It is likely that a number of people in your council will have a relationship with journalists. It makes sense. But you should all be saying the same thing in the same way. Journalists will look for inconsistencies. And they will notice subtle shifts in what you say – “we are thinking about” “we are looking into” and “it is being considered” are all different. You will also want to share with each other anything you have gleaned about the journalists you are talking to. It can help you to make the most out of the relationship.

Six sources of your news

Press releases

This is what you tell them so it should be in your favour. But there can be times when because of poor coordination you are sending out apparently contradictory stories. Badly drafted releases can also give out unintentional stories.

Reports

Your public documents. Think about what words, phrases and ideas journalists could alight on and consider whether advance press releases (accompanying your documents) can help you to get the news coverage you would like.

Passing remarks

Either deliberate (as in leaks) or inadvertent, the most innocent of remarks can spawn stories. Think about who in your council talks to the press, who should talk to the press and how they can be appropriately briefed before they do so. Leaks are harder. They can be part of the game of changing the climate of opinion.

Speculation

Journalists will occasionally speculate on a story – possibly building on a passing remark – here you have to be careful. You might find yourself making an unforced error.

Inconsistency

When you say one thing and do another. Or when you say two things

that don't add up. The answer lies in coordination and in thinking about how one policy might be viewed in terms of another.

Taking a lead from the nationals

National stories will create local media coverage. Journalists will often ask, what if that happened here? So try to keep abreast of what's happening in the nationals and how local media people might pick stories up and run with them.

Interviews

Interviews are about eliciting information and understanding. That means asking questions. Here are some techniques that journalists will use when asking you questions.

People tell me...

A journalist may claim that other people are saying things that you ought to respond to. “People tell me that you’re doing this...” This may or may not be the case. But you have a choice – you can either use it as an opportunity to say what you might have said anyway or you can use it to avoid speaking on the subject. You might say “Well, I haven’t heard that.” Or, “that’s not what they tell me.”

Is there not a danger?

This is a good question for putting a proposition to you. It can be used to get you to admit the possibility of something. For example: “is there not a danger that if you simply do nothing that x will happen?” The reality is that there is always a danger of something. That doesn’t mean that it is likely. But beware, saying “yes, that’s possible” to anything could mean that the question turns into your quotation. For example: Question: “is there not a danger the move to executive arrangements could cause further confusion in Dempshire council?” Answer: “yes, that’s possible”. This could become: “a council chief executive said today that the move to executive arrangements could cause further confusion in Dempshire council.”

Be clear about what you ARE saying and about what you're definitely not.

Surely you agree ...

Listen out for questions asking you to agree with a particular point of view. If it is put to you that you should agree with a statement you might find that becomes your point of view. For example: "would you not agree that children spend too much time watching television?" If you said yes, this could become: "Sarah Smith, a local councillor, today said that children spent too much time watching television."

If you don't agree, don't.

Beware flattery

Flattery can be a tool for creating the right climate for asking difficult questions. It can be deployed to help you to lower your guard. If you come across flattery in any working relationship you are wise to assume that it's there for a purpose. So, if a journalist flatters you (and it isn't hard to flatter any of us) assume that they're trying to find something out that you may not want to divulge and take it into account before you answer.

Apparent stupidity

Another ruse is for journalists to pretend that they really don't understand a particular issue. You might, for example, be asked questions which are either simplistic or stupid or blatantly obvious. Doing so can make it easier for interviewees to let their guard down

and say too much, over-simplify or patronise. Crucially, you shouldn't say anything that you wouldn't otherwise have said.

Anything you say can and may be used ...

Assume that anything you say in front of a journalist could be used in a story at some point. Knowing this will make you take care. Passing remarks can be dangerous. And if a journalist visits your office it's worth remembering that they will be listening out for interesting insights or comments.

Deny it if you dare

You may have to face pointed assertions in the course of an interview. These come in the form of clear questions such as "this latest budget will mean cuts in staff, won't it?" Assertions are easier to work with if you are happy to simply confirm or deny the proposition. Then it's simply a case of saying what you think and living with the consequences. But you don't have to deal with the assertion. It's often better to avoid confirming or denying. And at worst, avoidance can help you out of the holes you might dig for yourself.

That's just news sneaking up on you

The longer the interview goes on the more a journalist can find out. Asides, passing remarks, and even interruptions can speak volumes. It can open up the possibility of odd questions being introduced when you least expect them. The interview can literally sneak up on you. So beware.

On or off the record

For the record: off the record means that anything you say can be used but not attributed. On the record means that anything you say can be used and attributed.

Health warning: not everyone shares these definitions so it is important that you agree the ground rules with the journalist at the start of the interview – retrospective retractions usually don't work.

Oh, there was just one thing... watching out for Columbo

A Columbo is when the journalist will ask a key questions when it is least expected (after the TV detective). When your guard is down you may be asked an apparently innocent question. It could be when the journalist has put the tape recorder away. Again, assume that anything you say may be used and say nothing you wouldn't have said anyway.

Making the most of interviews

When a journalist wants an interview, you should think about these questions.

- **What's the story** – the what, why, when, where, when and how?
- **What do they want** – what story are they looking for?
- **What do you want** – decide in advance what points you want to make. Think in particular of the people that the local media are talking to. You should be talking to them too.
- **What's your key message** – have a *top line*. What are you saying to whom and why?

What about the stress?

Interviews can be stressful. In fact, stress can be a great liberator of the truth. When we are under pressure we will tend to think more quickly, we may begin to panic, and we may lose sight of the reason we are in the interview in the first place.

You should therefore know:

- Whether you can manage stress
- What you are going to say
- What you will say if it becomes overbearing
- Whether you are actually hiding anything
- And what you will do should it come out

Some ways journalists can add stress

- **Overcueing** – nodding too frequently. This can make us feel the need to keep speaking (when we really ought to stop, or speed up).
- **Undercueing** – saying little or nothing in response to our comments. This can make us feel insecure (we like nods to tell us we're getting it right). And the danger here is that you keep on talking in pursuit of nods, which may never come.
- **Interruptions** – asking the question again whilst we are answering it. This can be legitimate (we may be avoiding the point) but if you want to avoid the point it's best to keep going. "If you'll just let me finish" is a popular phrase at the moment.
- **Appearing uninterested** – not appearing to engage in the interview. This can make us seek approval (what do I have to say to engage this person) and potentially lead us into areas that we really don't want to talk about.
- **Repeating the question** – it's a good way of bringing you back to the point. Again, if you know what you are saying, don't allow repetitions to take you away from what you were planning to say anyway.
- **Sudden changes of tack** – this can be very disconcerting. Planning what you intend to say will help protect you.

Being proactive – getting your story covered

Sell stories that help you

Getting your name in the papers is not difficult. Getting media coverage on your own terms is more tricky. Before you start calling the media with your good stories make sure that doing so will help rather than hinder your organisation.

Sell stories that help the media

Remember they've got a business to run too. Understand it. Know who their audience is and what kind of newspaper, radio station or TV programme they're trying to be. Once you do then you'll be able to suggest stories which meet their and your needs. That way everybody wins.

Remember they're people (see motivations above)

Journalists are pretty much like the rest of us. They have ambitions too. So if you can work out what those ambitions are then you can help them and yourself at the same time.

Wait until the time is right

There's nothing worse than trying to sell a story to a journalist when their deadline is two minutes away. Not only will they be distracted, not to say rude if you don't get off the line, they'll also think you understand nothing of their business. And that will make it more difficult to sell then and later.

Consume what they produce

There's no point in phoning a journalist to sell a story if you've never looked at their magazine or never listened to their programme. You won't know how they do things for a start. And secondly, if it slips out that you know nothing about it you'll look pretty stupid.

Look at how they use your ideas

When you've sold an idea for a story to a journalist check out how it's used afterwards. That will give you clues on their approach. It will also give you something to talk about the next time you call them with a new idea.

Get face to face

It's tempting, not to say easy, to spend your life on the phone. But personal contact, sharing space and talking eyeball to eyeball, does make a difference. A coffee can give you thirty minutes of finding-out-about-someone time; a lunch can give you an hour and a half. And you can do a lot for your business in that time.

Think ahead

Journalists need to keep abreast of the news, developments, trends and so on. Do some thinking ahead. If you're pitching to their future markets (where they and their editors think they ought to be going) then you could be helping them by giving them leads and useful ideas. Features editors sometimes have future features lists and they will, if you ask them nicely, send these to you.

Understand their woes

Contracting market share, increased competition, and squeezes on journalists' time and money, means that life is tougher than ever. Understand what that means to the people you're trying to sell to. If a newspaper has less staff to cover the same, if not more, news you can help bridge the gap. And doing so allows you to show your understanding side.

Keep it simple

Nobody knows your subject like you do. And probably nobody is as interested in it as you are. Simplify your ideas and remember to look at them from other people's point of view. Simplify to sell. Thermodynamic nuclear physics only means anything to people when you talk about bombs.

You should try to boil your ideas down to a single sentence written from the point of view of someone who might read about it. Try to put your audience (the media's audience) into your thinking. What difference will it make to the everyday lives of ordinary people (if that's the audience)? Remember, the journalist you are speaking to will think that way all of the time.

One way of developing this way of thinking is to look at some story ideas and think about how you would want to read about them. Look at each of these four stories and imagine that you are a journalist writing them for your local paper. In each look for the strongest angle. You might also want to think about the kind of picture you would use.

- Council plans to close three community centres have been leaked to the local paper
- Ex-mayor arrested on fraud charges
- Three local people missing after a ferry disaster in Greece
- Local man wins the pools but discovers the agent did not submit his coupon.

This should give you an insight into how journalists think.

Making yourself quotable

Make it feel real

You could put your message in the first person – “I’m doing this,” or “we’re doing this because.”

Keep the language simple. It’s easy to lose people in complexity. Unless you’re setting out to confuse you should try to make your words as ordinary as possible.

Talk in threes

Three part lists are interesting. Remember: education, education, education. Try to package what you say into groups of three. We believe in x, y and z. We expect it when we listen to leading people.

Tell them what it is and what it isn’t

This is saying “it’s not this, it’s that”. It’s easy to get a grip on an idea if you know what it is and what it isn’t.

Members allowances are not about paying ourselves more money, they’re about recruiting the best people to do the job.

Alliterate

Lots of words in sequence beginning with the same sound help get a message across. Six swans set off to swim. You know the sort of thing.

Use metaphor

Your council will be complex and take a long time to change but if

Manage the media

you tell journalists that it's a supertanker and when it changes direction and gets on course then there's no stopping it they'll know what you mean. Try, as we haven't, to avoid hackneyed metaphors. If in doubt, take a look at any reference text on idioms.

Simile

The same thing goes with simile. If people know what something else is like then they're more likely to understand it, particularly if they know the object well. "Trying to understand Single Status is like trying to knit yoghurt." But choose one that benefits your message and puts you in the right light.

Build rapport through language

Use words that your audience or readers use and like. The chances are that they will be ordinary words that are focused on people. Local expressions can also help you to connect with people who live where you are.

Don't bamboozle

Big words are easy. Dictionaries are full of them. But if you want to communicate you need to use language that other people understand. Leave the technical dictionary at home and connect using ordinary language.

Remember feelings

Emotion can help get a message across. Councils work in some of the most difficult areas of social life. Don't leave your emotions behind. Find words which make an emotional connection.

Try to keep it bite-sized

If you've only got one paragraph make it count. Or if you're on TV and you've got ten seconds that's only thirty words. Work out what you're going to say in advance, write it down and edit it into shape. When you come to say it for real (without notes) it's more likely to be tight and effective.

Check out the reaction

All effective communication needs feedback. Once you know how you've come across you'll know whether or not you have achieved what you wanted. Invite honest comment – it's the only stuff that counts.

Real text

It can be difficult to get yourself away from written text, particularly if you spend your life drafting reports. There are a couple of ways of getting there quickly. First, tape record yourself (and others) speaking (with their permission) and transcribe what they say. You will find that people speak in badly constructed sentences, change the point half way through a sentence and put in all sorts of asides. You will also find speech mannerisms (you knows, erms etc) all over the place. That exercise will help you to reshape your own words if you apply what you have learned. A second route to being quotable is to read other spoken language – speeches (the government's websites are full of them) and screenplays (bookshops are full of them). Both will help you to sound real.

Getting your message on air

Time is limited

Broadcasters tend to squeeze their news into tighter packages than newspapers. Complex ideas are simplified and turned into pieces lasting seconds. What you say will be hacked about and processed. So be prepared for what you want to say. And what you don't.

Be ready for the experience

You can reasonably expect to find out who the interview is with, if someone with an opposing view will also be there, and whether it will be live or chopped about and mixed with other people's views. Technology has made it possible for remote studios to be sited anywhere. You might never meet your interviewer face to face. It'll feel like talking into space with no cues from your interviewer (it spoils the play back).

Do as much thinking and preparation as you can beforehand, but avoid referring to notes. On TV it looks like you are not sure what you're talking about, and on radio it sounds like it. Remember, you are there to entertain as well as inform. If you are dull, or insist on explaining minute detail, you will quickly be dispatched.

Going live

This can give you more space and more control, as what you say goes out unedited. Make your point in the first answer as there might not be another chance. Everything else should support that

initial point. Watch out for silences during the interview. Journalists and presenters can use eye contact or nod agreeably to encourage you to fill them up. You could leave yourself exposed by saying things you hadn't planned to.

Recorded interviews

Journalists will be hunting for soundbites of no more than 20 seconds. And they'll ask lots of different questions until they get them. Make sure you stick to your line. Re-word your answer so that it fits each question. At best your contribution might be two or three of those soundbites.

On site

Journalists who come to you are looking for sights and sounds as well as your words. They'll want everything placed at their disposal to get the job done swiftly. They may move the interview spot to a location where your words have a backdrop. Think – if you're saying that your organisation does not pollute and there's a belching chimney behind you (even if it's not yours) do you think you will be believed?

Studio discussion

Get your view in at the earliest part of the discussion. Your chances reduce as the programme drifts on. Don't get too distracted by the specifics of the question. Mould the answer you want to give so it looks like it's a natural response, using a couple of words from the question.

Consider the aftermath

Get someone to tape your contribution so that you can review it and learn. If your comments have been genuinely misunderstood or taken out of context ring the journalist and tell them. But don't phone if you simply don't like the angle they've taken – you'll be wasting your time.

Create opportunities

Keep on top of current affairs and offer yourself as a commentator on news topics if you have something to add. Local TV and radio especially are always hungry for a local angle, and even national programmes with daily schedules to fill will listen to a likely contributor.

And finally...

Broadcasters are always looking for “light and shade”. They know that too much hard news depresses the listener. There will always be a space for the funny story that's not all that new, just untold, for the fascinating and for the feature. Non-news radio is just as hungry for material. Invite programmes to come and do a feature, or even a full show, about the human interest side of what you do.

Managing the media in a crisis

There's a temptation in a crisis to forget every rule in the book – such can be the pressure, the pace and the panic around you. But if you are the chosen communicator, the one person who needs to keep a bit of detachment and an eye on the big picture is you.

What is a crisis?

It's best to treat anything that will significantly affect confidence in your organisation as a crisis. That could be anything from a physical disaster to a fraud.

Be ready for it

Take time out way before it happens to think about some scenarios that fit the descriptions above. Two things are certain in life: death and disasters. Get ready for the one you can do something about.

Write down and prepare for possible scenarios

What is the disaster top ten at your council? Write them down, prepare the positions you might take, identify who would deliver them, develop protocols to ensure that only the right people talk to the media during this time and try them out for size. Don't wait until the worst happens before you have to deal with it. That would be a disaster.

Have physical contingency plans

Press calls can come in hundreds, you could be knee deep in TV

crews. Who will help, will your phone system cope, where will you put people? Who will organise it? Waiting until they arrive is too late.

Say sorry

You don't have to take responsibility for the event. But you can still express your sympathy. Think about what local people would expect you to say and say as much of that as you reasonably can.

Keep talking

What the media want is information, information and information. And if they're not getting it from you they will go somewhere else and you've lost your role as messenger. Even if information is sketchy keep giving updates when you can. If you promise regular briefings make sure you deliver.

Keep control by being flexible

If the story is big enough you'll get a media camp on your doorstep. Why not give them a facility that keeps them warm and better-tempered, and out of sight? Build relationships where you can. They have a job to do and they will do it no matter what. Work with them to try to get the best for both sides.

Be honest

If you lie it will at some stage come out. If you don't want to make a particular fact public, don't. But where certain truths are inevitable, say them. If they're dragged out of you, or exposed after the event, it could damage your organisation.

Keep in contact

Stay in touch with the managers of the crisis, with what the media are saying about the crisis, and with others issuing information about the crisis (such as police or fire PR). Where there are a number of agencies involved you should be clear about what lines each organisation is taking and where those overlap. It can be easy to inadvertently lay the blame at the door of another organisation – journalists can force you into being more straightforward than you might have planned.

Stay on top

Keep on top of the main questions in the story: What has happened? A summary of the crisis from your organisation's perspective – but be prepared to redirect the questions someone else should be answering. On a breaking story the media will take information from anyone. In a fire they'll ask you about how it was tackled and the fire service about what your organisation had inside the building – and they'll use the answers that anyone gives them. What is your organisation doing about it? Right now, later, tomorrow and next week. Who is being put up to talk? If you are doing all of the above, you could be too busy and fraught to look and sound calm. Give the job to someone who is good at it and close to the crisis. If the crisis lasts for any period of time, be prepared to put up fresh faces to satisfy the media's immense desire for re-versioning stories.

Build relationships

Whenever you are in the midst of a crisis you should try to build relationships with the journalists there. They are your routes to your

key audiences. Treat them well, try to make their lives easier and understand the pressures they are under.

Think about what they will need and give it to them

Journalists will need interesting key facts about your organisation: make them available. They will need access to phone points, fax machines, the internet, a place of private interviews, a place to film, staff who understand what's going on, food, drinks and so on. You will be in a better position to influence them if you are able to provide all of this and more.

Managing issues – releasing news on your terms

Every council needs to manage bad news. If you are going to manage your bad news you will need to think about the following.

- **Taking stock** – what are the bad news issues emerging in the next six months? The first rule of skeletons is to check the cupboard.
- **Planning** – think about who will handle them and how.
- **Timing** – what's the best time to release the news so that it will do the least damage to your council? But be careful. Apparently cynical manipulation of timing can be damaging.
- **Credibility** – how can you manage bad news to enhance rather than diminish your credibility? Remember, that when you lose credibility it's very difficult to regain it.
- **Protocols** – who is permitted to talk to the media? Make sure those people are trained and prepared for difficult interviews.
- **Corporate action** – it may be expedient for different departments to manage their own news and to take the heat of blame away from themselves, but in the end, it's the council that will be judged. Think about the impact of news management on the council's reputation.

- **People** – think about the impact that your bad news will have on people. And frame your version of events that takes as much account of how people might feel as possible.
- **Emotion** – what is the emotional content of your bad news? Take account of this when you lay out the story as you see it.
- **Impact** – how will the media react to it? You can get a feel for this by looking at how other similar stories have been handled.

Media management tools

Press releases

A very reliable tool. The news written from your organisation's point of view. One problem for councils is both the number that get sent out (the media can't print them all and they won't always print the ones you want) and quality (not everyone works to the same standards). It might be worth auditing who sends out what and to which standards. It's worth re-shaping the same release for different media – they see the world differently.

One to ones

Are good for personally selling stories. And high credibility people (chief executives, leaders, senior councillors) can add weight. But they can be costly in terms of time.

Briefings

This is where you get journalists in for “private chats”. They can be highly effective and used to great effect if journalists get a picture both of what's coming up and how senior people think. They often work best when different media are handled separately (then you can sell “exclusive” lines).

Press conferences

Are less effective than often assumed. They are good for getting lots of journalists in the same place at the same time and so are cost-effective. But then they all get the same line at the same time (and

lose the exclusive edge). Using them at all can add a layer of seriousness that may not be intended. Be wary: lots of journalists in a room can have a pack mentality. On the other hand no one may turn up at all – leading to embarrassment all round, particularly if partners are involved.

Leaks, passing remarks and helpful papers

Slipping ideas into journalists' ears, preferably unattributably. These can help you to present the news as you would like to see it. Journalists might like to have “useful papers” sent to them. But there are always risks. Most media management is reputation risk management. These approaches can raise the stakes.

Hitting back – when the media get it wrong

If the media inaccurately report what you say

The Press Complaints Commission's guidelines so far as newspapers are clear. "Newspapers and periodicals should take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material including pictures. Whenever it is recognised that a significant inaccuracy, misleading statement or distorted report has been published, it should be corrected promptly and with due prominence." Similarly, the broadcast media are obliged to be impartial and to correct any inaccuracies. But the onus is upon you to both detect these inaccuracies and to ensure that they are corrected as soon as possible. If the inaccuracy is reported on radio, for example, you should contact the news editor and request that the matter is put right in the next bulletin. Expect to argue your case.

In newspapers you should seek a retraction or an apology in the next edition. Again, you will have to push your case. Take care not to sound threatening. Wielding the "Press Complaints" stick is unlikely to help you. It is better to calmly present the facts and ask that those are corrected. In the event that the newspaper refuses you may then wish to take your case to the PCC.

Keep a file of negative stories written about you and use that to rebut any repetitions of these. Sometimes newspapers will dredge up copy from the past as a way of building a current story.

Always keep the outcome in mind. It is possible to create a running story by continually challenging misleading copy. Think about whether it's best to let the story lie.

Keep a file

You should keep a file of inaccurate reports and be in a position to use them if necessary. Journalists will be able to access file copies of previous stories about your authority. So if you have been accused of being in the top ten of incompetent councils in one paper, you might find that cited by another the next time a similar story is written.

Keep your judgement live

You should never find yourself in a situation where you automate your rebuttal process. It's best to make a judgement on a case-by-case basis. Journalists will encourage you to respond because it can help to keep a story alive. Sometimes, it's best to let things die a natural death because doing so will cause your reputation less damage than otherwise.

Look at the genesis of negative news

Check out how negative stories got into the media in the first place. You might find that the source is inside your own building. This should not be a witch-hunt but an attempt to tighten your processes and protocols to make your media management more effective.

Selling the need for a media strategy

A planned approach to the media will help you. In truth, you will already find it difficult to manage the media on a day to day basis anyway. Many reasons:

- Different parts of the council will brief against each other
- People will leak – sometimes for political gain
- It's easy to be inconsistent
- The local media will use issues to beat you (and improve their ratings)
- Councils do not always have clear protocols on who should talk to the media
- People trail ideas as a way of testing the water
- You still have the day job to do

The reality is that you cannot take away bad news.

If you take on board what MORI says – that there is a strong relationship between media coverage and perceptions of the quality of your services – you might find it helpful to try to get all departments and all parties signed up to media protocols that allow you to make the best use of the local media. It's likely that you will be starting from a negative position:

Councils do not have a great press

The media like bad news (because we do).

Your media strategy should address:

- How are we currently presented in the media?
- Why?
- How do we want to be presented, to whom and through what?
- What bad news should we factor into the equation?
- How can we manage our big issues?
- What might others say about us?
- Who should ensure consistency in our proactive news management?
- Who should talk to the media?
- What is their current competency?
- What should we do, where, when and how?
- How should it be resourced?
- How will we know it is working?

*Special thanks to Leigh McGowan
for his helpful suggestions and unfaltering wisdom.*

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Don't Panic!

● A guide to managing the media ●