

Don't fear the media

In the second of our in-depth series about the media, **Anna Averkiou** explains the importance of cultivating effective relationships with journalists to stand you in good stead in a crisis

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, THE relationship between your organisation and the media is one that needs continual attention to work. Get it right and you will be rewarded with a mutual understanding of each other's needs in a crisis situation and ensure that your voice is heard. Get it wrong, and it could irreparably damage your reputation and, in some cases, your ability to continue to operate.

As in any successful relationship, there has to be a certain amount of give and take. Recently, the media as a whole has gained a bad reputation. Journalists are often seen to be opportunist, muckraking, unscrupulous and exploitative – particularly during a crisis. Yet, this is a profession that has traditionally – and still does – pride itself as being the Fourth Estate. The phone-hacking scandals in the UK, the rise of the citizen journalist, celebrity fawning and obvious product endorsements, belie the reality that most journalists abide by a strict code of professional conduct and genuinely want to get at the truth, inform, expose injustice and make a difference.

The recent *Filkin Report* in the UK criticising the “close relationship” between the Metropolitan Police and the media is regarded by many on both sides as patronising in the way it suggests that hapless senior officers are being seduced into telling all by

flirtatious, evil reporters who buy them drinks.

“The majority of press adhere to a high standard and are ethical. They place integrity as a core element of their work and know that the privileges of a free press and democracy come with responsibility,” says Dominic Cooper, General Secretary of the Chartered Institute of Journalists, which has its own

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Code of Conduct that members abide by.

“There can be a natural fear of getting involved with the press. However, this is largely misguided because those that descend upon an incident or place to report need to get at the truth and need accurate information from all parties involved.”

While mistakes have been made, a good relationship can be of great mutual benefit –

whether it is to give out public information about safety procedures, provide reassurance or to put

one's case over during a major industrial or operational accident where emotions run high and false accusations are rife.

The fact that you are already doing everything possible to prevent a disaster, with crisis plans in place, up-to-date and rehearsed is a key point to emphasise in your favour in an emergency. However, as stated in my last article, it is crucial to factor the media into your crisis planning from the start, because protecting your organisation's image is just as important as ensuring all the operational procedures are in place.

It is a myth that journalists only focus on bad news – it just has to be interesting to as many of their audience or readers as possible. When teaching journalism I tell students that if the story makes them go “wow!” it is worth covering. But one cannot escape the fact that sudden life and death events, accidents, natural disasters, attacks and human interest stories have fascinated people since the dawn of time.

“Rather than try and shy away from this fact and keep the press at a distance, organisations should gladly embrace their participation and work together to get the right message into the public domain,” advocates Neil Hall, a former assistant police commissioner and now consultant in critical incident management, CBRN and maritime counter-terrorism.

“As a way of preparing for, and familiarising personnel with this, any future training and



exercises should include media participation as an integral part. This will ensure the necessary level of co-operation required from both sides is achieved and ensure a common mindset that has not always existed before, but must do so in the future.”

Two of the essential qualities of an effective journalist are healthy cynicism and an enquiring mind. These are what make them question and want to get to the bottom of a situation, find out what has happened, and who, if anyone, is to blame.

During workshops I often come across key operational staff who regard the media as ‘The Great Satan’. Having played strictly by the rules in real life, I must admit to having a great time during scenario-based training in playing the ‘bad journo’ to see the results of their attitude (the secret is not to rise to the bait – and then I start behaving!)

Start to build relationships by identifying who you want to reach with your message – customers, stake-holders, donors, partners, decision-makers, competitors. Think about which publications, websites and broadcast outlets they use to get their information and make a note of the journalists who are producing it. Prioritise them into a manageable list and get in touch.

Once you’ve established a connection, cultivate the relationship. Few journalists get the time for long lunches – but a quick meeting, drink, the odd phone call to keep them apprised of what is going on will usually prove mutually worthwhile. Alternatively, visit their workplace and take the opportunity to see inside a newsroom. This will give you a feel of the pressures the journalists are under – particularly their deadlines for when a story must be finished. The sooner you can give them information, the more likely they are to use you in their piece.

Ensure you have all their contact details – mobile, office, email, social media etc. Journalists move around, so it is important to keep tabs on where they are working so you can get hold of them in an emergency. Provide them with all your details and a list of other potential contacts within your organisation authorised to talk to the media. Many news operations work 24/7 so don’t be surprised if you are called at unusual hours for a comment on a story related to your area of operation. Always try to co-operate and be available. In the event of a crisis, you will be able to call them and explain the situation. They will trust you far more than someone they’ve not had dealings with.

Most journalists guard their contacts jealously – their reputations are built on the



Many NGOs are aware of the impact the media can have in helping to raise awareness and funds and will find out in advance what journalists need to cover a story – other organisations should be no different. Here, Isaac Mwaura, Chairman of the Albino Association of Kenya, launches an ICRC advocacy report highlighting the occult-based killings of albinos in parts of Africa

ICRC

quality and range of people they have personal access to. However, it is important to be even-handed. You will often see the same person quoted or speaking on the same issue across a broad range of news outlets because they have proven themselves as articulate, reliable and helpful contributors. In larger news organisations, your details will often go into a shared contacts area with a note of your expertise. In quieter times it is a great way of ensuring good publicity for your organisation.

Talk to news editors; let them know you are putting your crisis plans in place and find out their needs during a crisis story. They can then ensure their reporters know where to go to for information and have background info at their fingertips. Remember that the first reporters on the scene are not always specialists.

BBC News Correspondent, Clive Myrie, says the epic scale of the drought in the Horn of Africa meant he needed guidance to establish the best place from which to start telling the story in a way that viewers could understand and, hopefully, empathise with. “With this kind of reporting it’s often best to link up with NGOs who’ve not only been active on the ground and know the lie of the land, but have a good reputation for always acting in the best interests of the people they are trying to help,” he explains.

He admits that working for the BBC does provide an advantage: “Credible people and sources want to talk to you and help you, so you don’t have to go too far to find them. But the BBC’s reputation is an added burden on you as a correspondent – you have to get

the story right and be fair. These are added incentives to seek out the best and most reputable help on the ground on any story.”

Many NGOs are fully aware of the impact the media can have in helping to raise awareness and funds to support a relief operation and will find out in advance what the journalists need to cover a story. Save the Children had already informed its BBC contacts that it had a big programme going on in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya and was willing to put up senior spokespeople for interview.

“We knew they were keen to link up with us so we worked with them,” explains Mr Myrie, adding: “They were also our link to the UN agencies who ran Dadaab on the ground and who, in turn, provided UN vehicles and security to get around. In addition we were given access to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees when he visited the camp. Linking up with Save the Children also meant we had access to their Chief Executive when he visited and, luckily for us, access to his plane, which meant we could travel with him to the north of Kenya to see the effects of the drought there.”

If you are based abroad, get to know the local correspondents and stringers (freelancers) for the international news players such as Reuters and the Associated Press. They usually work across all media platforms and their work is syndicated to – and picked up by – news outlets throughout the world. In a crisis, they will be able to report based on first-hand knowledge rather than speculation and hearsay.

Human rights

Equally, where operations are monitored by local authorities, field workers can face arrest or worse, if they speak out about human rights abuse or corruption. A quiet tip to a trusted journalist will enable them to do their own fact-finding, without it publicly originating from you or your organisation. The issue will get the public attention it needs; the journalist will get their exclusive.

If there is a story to be told, journalists will tell it. Rather than endure a love-hate relationship, get to know them and establish your credentials and values before an incident happens, so you will be taken seriously when it does. CRJ

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