

Building media relations and spotting opportunities

Lsect College Media and PR Conference

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I want to start by looking at the new world of austerity we face and asking a few questions about what this means for Marketing and communications. There is greater need now than ever before for PROs to consider the college's status and reputation and the assessment of impact. Turning the "failed" Ofsted report into a success story, for example, really matters when you have the threat of cuts and withdrawal of resources from other cash-strapped agencies.

We have come full circle with the coalition government – back to the constant drive for "efficiency" cuts that dogged colleges for years under the Tories and early years of New Labour throughout the 1990s.

The message then was a simple one, and it has become the message of today: "Good press and media coverage and good marketing are or should be the same thing". You have to ask yourselves whether the nicely-tuned marketing packages, telling good stories, really stand up to close scrutiny and are sufficient in today's climate. I will argue that marketing people will need to acquire the tools of good journalists and vice versa.

To do this, you need to get right in there, be trusted by department heads and managers to dig out good stories that are backed by hard evidence and to be sensitive to the insecurities of staff and managers at

all levels who fear job losses and feel suspicious about anything appearing in print. Indeed, at times you will share those insecurities.

This atmosphere ground down many colleges in the 1990s, when the drive was for a mere 1% efficiency cuts per year. So how much more will the old paranoias resurface now? This is not a history lesson but a simple suggestion that, when building marketing campaigns and the rest, you take a very much more hard-nosed look at what is going on around you. For those marketing and PR people who do so, there will be big prizes. The alternative may be unwelcome merger or closure.

I assume most of you here are familiar with the rudiments of marketing and the need to know:

- who your customers are
- which individuals and organisations, broadly speaking, will buy your services
- how big the opportunities are before you
- where your customers – learners etc – are located and
- which parts of the service are likely to grow and which to decline

And, of course, we are not just talking about students (or learners, if you prefer) but private companies, charities – the whole third Sector bit – and

local authority services – all in need of learning support, management training and continuing staff professional development.

Such fundamentals of marketing are common sense and do not change over time.

But what does change is the relationship between marketing and PR, press and media communications. There is a cyclical relationship between the two – at one time they are aligned, almost synonymous; at other times they are worlds apart. You may argue that they serve a common purpose. At their best, of course, they do. But, as you'll appreciate, they have different roles:

- Marketing is epitomised by the excellent 30-second cinema ad that encourages young film-goers to sign-up for an IT apprenticeship through the college.
- PR is the handling of the disastrous Ofsted report or great feature in the local paper, which the press officer has fed to the media, such as the success of those IT apprentices.

But, of course, the distinction isn't quite this clear cut. In 30 years as an education journalist, I have seen the relationship between them change, depending very much on the levels of resources available and the extent to which survival is threatened.

In times of austerity, there is a tendency to market products aggressively, while going on the defensive over shortcomings that need the careful intervention of good journalism.

And we have seen nothing before like the levels of austerity bearing down on us now. But there are similarities with the Thatcher/Major years. For example:

- For Cameron's Big Society, read John Major's Back to Basics
- For deficit reduction, read 1% year-on-year efficiency drive (actually 4-5% annually after inflation) that led to whole subject areas being axed and huge staff losses

We can learn much from past eras. And the successes and failures of others, some quite recent, just might bear fruit for us tomorrow. In the next few minutes I will look at some of these and make a series of points which I suggest become even more pertinent in an age of cuts. So, as I talk, bear these points in mind:

- Consider what promotion and marketing means in a time of cuts
 - focus on the consumer, the student
- Good press and media coverage and good marketing are or should be the same thing

- Focus on the evidence of good practice that comes from your professional valuation of impact
- Turn bad stories to the good (e.g. recovery from poor Ofsted reports)
- Look to the evidence of successful PR in other colleges
- Encourage staff and managers in the college to get involved and come up with good stories
- Teach enthusiasts among staff and students the rudiments of good journalism; encourage them to do press, TV and radio interviews and media relations
- Be a trouble shooter, remembering that good PR helps morale and boosts confidence
- Keep a directory of college expertise for Journalists

As I said earlier, some of you will remember the previous age of austerity in the mid-1990s when the Government hammered the sector with those year-on-year “efficiency” cuts. There are similarities now with then, most notably in the way colleges had no money but lots of freedom. We heard then about all the promises to cut red tape, reduce the size of government and set colleges free – after all, that was what

college incorporation and freedom from local education authority control – under the FHE Bill 20 years ago this month – was all about.

If we have time, we can look in detail at some of those cases a little later. But first, I want to focus on more contemporaneous issues. Ask yourselves how you would have tackled them? There are three, one higher education, one FHE and one FE. They are:

- 1) University of the Arts London
- 2) London College of Communication and
- 3) Bexley College – which offers a model basis for a strategy

The University of the Arts London repeatedly came bottom in the annual national student satisfaction survey. This was surprising given the glowing comments that many students and alumni made repeatedly about the colleges they studied at. A PR quote was drafted for the Rector which said that it was disappointing but that the points raised by students were being addressed - explaining also how this would be done. But they realised that it was also important to have a string of good news stories throughout the year to counteract that perception - so that when the poor survey results appeared, they seemed out of synch with reality.

What marketing and communications staff realised was that they had been complacent and that satisfaction expressed anecdotally would not translate directly to the more probing national survey unless they did something about it. Also, they realised how important it was to get students to say nice things about the college and to put them on the website and in media. These may all appear obvious points to you, but it is clear from my inquiries that not everyone is doing it even now. The University still has a good reputation and you can't be sure how the bad survey results affected student recruitment. But nor can you rest on your laurels in the new more aggressively competitive environment that higher student fees and greater cuts will bring.

London College of Communication has had some bad press recently.

One story was about students rioting after a lecturer had resigned because, he said, his PR course was inadequately resourced, with too few specialist lecturers. It was a student that leaked the story through social networks but no-one in the press team was asked to handle it – the press office was on the "at risk" redundancy list and the head of media had resigned. So the Head of College dealt with journalist enquiries direct and totally bypassed press and communications. The story that appeared in the Times Higher and elsewhere was really negative and attracted lots of nasty blog comments.

So what happened? The story eventually went away and the lesson, maybe, is that bad news might seem terrible but in the bigger order of things it's probably only a blip. The management approach was to come down hard on the most militant protesters (an injunction was served against them). The college feels this was the appropriate way to address their concerns. I'm not sure that's the right approach but the bigger question is: How do you avoid getting there in the first place?

Bexley College – I think the answer lies in Bexley College's approach. The story here is that Ofsted made a scathing attack on standards of leadership largely because lessons were only satisfactory to good – in other words not good enough. Needing someone to blame, in the inspectors' view, it had to be about poor leadership. Too often in such circumstances, what you see is the head quitting. In this case, however, the governors rallied round and through good PR, turned the attack back on the inspectors. And they achieved much more in the process, going on to expose weaknesses in the FE White Paper of the day which proposed a maximum 12-month turnaround for "failing" or inadequate colleges – an absurdly short time, as soon became apparent.

In the end, Ofsted did take on board many of the points the college made, especially in relation to colleges in educationally selective

boroughs. The principal also got loads of supportive letters and emails from other principals.

The media coverage included explanations of why everyone from staff to governors felt so hard done by, i.e. a college in one of the most deprived areas of the Thames Gateway was said by the LSC and others to be improving, only for a group of inspectors with experience largely of leafy-glade sixth form colleges to come in and damn it.

The reason why Bexley succeeded in achieving so much was that it used very effective PR, which it extended into subsequent marketing campaigns. It did the trick in several ways:

- 1) Pitching the critical stories and a commentary by the principal at the right level of press and media – local, regional and national – as appropriate
- 2) Nurturing the personal contacts the PR had already made with key editors for whom he had done favours in the past
- 3) The college was honest in saying that it was not suggesting it was blameless but that there were extenuating circumstances – Ofsted had failed to give due recognition to appalling levels of deprivation and underachievement in the borough.

4) It was also understood that this was an issue with which almost every principal in the land would identify. And they did – rallying round with messages of support which strengthened the morale of staff and governors in the process. Moreover, it became a national cause celebre since it focused on the iniquities of the White Paper about which others had grumbled but not acted on

5) The canny PR supplied the media with the “Bad News” story that critics always insist dominate the media. Only this time the bad news was deflected away from the college to an issue of national imperative that Bexley’s failings – if indeed that’s what they were – had exposed. And subsequent results, improvements and recruitment showed that the media treatment did the college a great deal of good.

Now, is that good marketing or good journalism/PR? Well it’s both.

Again, we see the tools of two trades as synonymous.

I was editing the TES/FE Focus at the time and welcomed the commentary/viewpoint from the principal who made the point that: Bexley College had “...a mission which matches the one set out for colleges in the recent further education White Paper: namely that ***we should help our students gain the skills and qualifications needed for sustainable employment***” (perfect big message stuff).

And she hammered home the point that the White Paper proposal for a turnaround within 12 months was absurd as the viewpoint said in the final three telling sentences:

“Bexley College has just announced an exciting partnership with L’Oreal to launch the first foundation degree exclusively focused on salon management.

“For a global cosmetics giant to choose us speaks volumes about what we have achieved and what we are capable of achieving post-Foster and in the light of the Leitch review of Britain's skills needs.

“It would be wrong if similar partnerships did not come to fruition in future because someone had pressed a stop-watch after 12 months, leaving a large amount of hard work unfinished.”

Of course, these words were crafted – not the principal – but by the PR, who patiently nurtured the local, national and specialist press to give positive coverage. The college might have made it without, but not in so sustained a way.

Clearly, any organisation needs a crisis management set of procedures, with scenarios, people to contact in an emergency, suggested statements, etc.

You will get people posting stories on social media and Twitter which are hard to control. Again, there is so much stuff posted on Facebook etc that it may not be significant, but it needs monitoring.

The media shy or intransigent head or principal is difficult to deal with in any walk of life, as we've seen with BP and Exxon, not just colleges, and this takes more than a good campaigning or PR approach to handle.

Whether you are talking campaigns or day-to-day marketing/PR, I suggest several things:

- Use your students as ambassadors – let them speak for the college
- Know your college's weaknesses as well as its strengths – be a trouble-shooter
- Keep control of the media outflow – but not as a control freak
- Draw support from partner and stakeholder organisations and the wider world of FE (Association of Colleges etc)
- Focus campaigns around big issues – legislation demands, Big Society, sustainable skills, skewed with a local emphasis
- Turn bad stories to the good
- Look to evidence of successful PR in other colleges

- Measure everything against the evidence of the impact the college makes
- Present everything as a positive gain or a solution to problems
- Remember, good press and PR can be synonymous with good marketing

This approach is not rocket science or complicated to grasp – it's the usual tools of the trade: patience, trust, confidence, professionalism, clear communications etc.

Links for Bexley College stories:

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2033177>

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2033178>

<http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=2270873>