

## **Handling the Media**

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### **Some essential points**

- 1 Have a press officer
- 2 Undergo media training – how to handle the press generally; how to conduct interviews - press, radio, or TV
- 3 Always prepare;
- 4 Engage: do not be defensive

### **What a press officer brings**

- A good Press officer should give practical and experienced advice, especially helpful when a delicate or important issue or story has to be addressed.
- Use the press officer proactively. Act on advice as to how the press or government will react to a policy. A good press officer will bring a dose of reality. Too often, the Bar is over confident of the rightness of its position and under estimates at its peril how smug and self serving it can appear to others.
- A good press officer should challenge your assumptions and instinctive views. The Bar Council's senior press officer is always present at meetings of our weekly General Management Committee. That means he is aware of our policy discussions as they develop and will intervene if he sees that a particular line is likely to attract attention and put out the advantages and the pitfalls. Timing of announcements can also be important.
- This can then lead to the planning of campaigns.  
Last year we had two campaigns of note. They were quite different in nature.

### The Manifesto for Justice

This was based on the alliance we formed with seven other groups, Citizen's Advice, Justice, Legal action Group and others in advance of the general election. The Bar Council marshalled this under the firm hand of our press

officer. We produced a Manifesto for Justice setting out the importance of the rule of law and effective access to justice. We gave it all MPs and many in the House of Lords and the press. It achieved three things:

- 1 it attracted favourable publicity;
- 2 it educated and informed;
- 3 it showed lawyers in a positive light, as lawyers looking to serve a wider public interest.

#### Handling the fee crisis and practitioners' refusal to work

This was at the time of the so-called strike (July – October 2005). The government without warning cut criminal fees for barristers. Many at the criminal Bar declared an intent to refuse new work. We had to explain our case to the public. We placed articles in the national press and in local papers. We procured interviews with regional and local papers for the circuit leaders and members of the young Bar. We gave participants media training. This achieved a favourable press and we got across the message to the public of the importance of publicly funded criminal work and how inadequately it was paid.

- A good press officer has contacts, not just with the pure legal press, but with home affairs and features journalists. He may be able to interest them in meeting you for a drink or lunch to chat generally about current issues. This leads to wider exposure of the Bar's case, not just on the self-serving matter of fees, but on a much wider field of rule of law and access to justice issues.
- This range of contacts can lead to the placing of articles either then or later when an issue arises. So the chairman of the English Bar has a programme of regular one to one lunches with journalists from national papers.
- The press officer acts as a filter – you can insist on all enquiries being handled by the press officer. You may not want to do this all the time – indeed there are advantages in certain journalists whom you know and trust being able to contact you direct – but there will be occasions when you will want a shelter to hide behind. If a sensitive issue arises, this can be invaluable.
- The press officer helps you develop and then stick to a strategy.

- Dealing with interviews: a good press officer will find out in advance if at all possible what the line is in which they are interested and how long it will take.

## **Media Training**

This is important.

- Basic “do’s and don’ts” are taught.
- Always make plain at the start of an interview if you are talking on or off the record. If you are then use the opportunity to find out their angle. Give them background – things they have not thought of try gently to steer them to see in advance why you think a particular point is worth making. They will then be likely to ask you a question to elicit the answer you want to give. You will not be off piste.
- We have to learn how to deal with the printed media and interviews on radio or TV. You may be asked to go on live in which case you will have perhaps two or three minutes to get it right. Or it may be a pre-record which will then be highly edited to use just one or more excerpts either on their own or inter cut with other pieces or as an introduction for an interview with the relevant government minister.
- Sometimes time is short; the journalist, printed or audio-visual media, just wants a quick quote. All this requires some formal training if you are to make the best of it. The training I and others at the Bar council have had has been invaluable.

## **Preparation**

Preparation is all.

- Interviews. If you have some advance warning, even half an hour, of the act you are about to give an interview or be asked for a quote, think hard what are the core points you want to get across on the issue. Think of some short pithy phrases. Use plain English and avoid jargon – the public do not understand it and you will lose the audience.

- Put points down on paper. Then refine them and put them in order of importance. Preferably only one or two lines each. If you have time, type them in sixteen point. Limit it to one side of A4.
- Unless it is on TV this is not an unseen exam. You can have the bullet points in front of you in the radio studio or on your desk; they make you focus beforehand. Help you think of a snappy turn of phrase. Their mere presence can be a comforter which stops you drying in mid stream!
- If it is a feature piece for the press for an article the interview may last twenty minutes to an hour. Then have list of topics and principle points.
- Above all this is your chance to put the case for the Bar.

### **Engagement**

- Above all, do try to engage positively. Do not be overly defensive. The journalist will have prepared questions. But take the chance to put across your own agenda and shape the interview by stressing your policy goals.
- If you have established a good relationship with a journalist and know that you are off the record then speak frankly, explain the difficulties you have with a section of your constituency and why it would be better for you to steer clear of a topic. Even perhaps, that you are anxious not to inflame matters, or whatever. But engage.
- Get their trust. Encourage them to ring you up for background briefing. The more you do this the better the chance that they will at least not set out to put a dagger through your heart if the going gets rough. So try to build contacts.
- Sometimes I was telephoned by certain Sunday journalists on Fridays. They wanted background briefing or a lead. If it related to legal matters I could sometimes suggest someone else they might ask or give them a titbit to follow up.
- If meeting for lunch or at an event, I talked about a wide range of topics: Sentencing policy; reform of crown court procedure and legal aid would be

rather specialist ones where the job is to educate and inform as openly and frankly as possible.

Equally, I would talk about the Terror legislation, control orders and detention without charge or The Identity Card Bill. These are wider political issues in which one is seeking to engage their interest in matters of importance to society and democratic values.

## **Conclusion**

Engagement with the public on wider issues of concern is valuable: the rule of law, identity cards, terror legislation etc. The Bar is rightly seen as having an authoritative voice in such matters. Make the most of it. Be fair and independent. People are usually interested in what you have to say if it is balanced and not strident. Do this well and you will receive a more sympathetic hearing when the issue is more personal to the Bar, such as fee rates.

Above all: engage!

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