

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CASE IN THE MEDIA

by Peter Bartram

Question: what have the following got in common – lawyer Shami Chakrabarti, doctor Vivienne Nathanson, architect (Lord) Richard Rogers? Of course, they're all eminent professionals in one discipline or another. But there's more than that – they are all supremely expert at putting the views of the organisations they represent in the media.

Chakrabarti is a familiar face on tv and in the press defending human rights as director of Liberty. Nathanson is a fluent exponent of complex medical issues as a head of ethics for the British Medical Association and Rogers has been an eloquent spokesperson in roles such as chairman of the Urban Task Force and the Design for London Advisory Group.

Professionals have traditionally been valued for their expertise. But, in a world which values openness and transparency more and more, the best are becoming known for putting their views effectively in the media. With the growth of more kinds of media in recent years, many different kinds of professionals could find themselves in a position in which they need to provide information to journalists. Perhaps they have to speak about their own firm – or perhaps they're being called on to help put the case for a client.

But the sad fact is that, although more professionals are becoming adept at putting their views, many more still have much to learn. Some professionals welcome an opportunity to speak to the media – others are less enthusiastic and some are quite frank about thinking it's a waste of time. Further, many

professionals seem to be under the mistaken impression that they've done the job of dealing with the media once they've hired a PR consultant.

But that's not the case and there are many reasons why you, as a professional, might need to speak directly to the media.

The first reason is because you know more about your organisation, or about your part of it (if it's large), than anyone else. Briefing an intermediary takes time you can ill afford – and no matter how good the briefing, the intermediary still won't understand the subject as well as you do. Besides, journalists prefer to interview senior people rather than PR professionals. What the top people have to say has the ring of authority. What helps to give them that authority is their position in the organisation, the relevance of their experience and their expert knowledge.

As a professional, you may also be a key decision-maker in your firm. And those who take decisions can explain the reasons for them better than those who were not involved directly. Besides that, it's the professionals who are actually doing the job, facing the competition and meeting the people with whom their organisation habitually deals. You're more likely to have first-hand knowledge of all the circumstances, within your organisation and outside it, that influence its decisions and policies than an hired PR gun. And, finally, in many cases, it's the front-line professionals who are the only acceptable spokesperson to the media. They don't want to interview PR consultants or junior staff.

There are professionals around who have horror stories to tell about being misquoted, misrepresented or worse. So it's not surprising that some are apprehensive about the idea of being interviewed by a journalist. They would

be less worried if they understood four key forces which drive journalists – and how to turn those forces to their own advantage.

The first force is a passionate desire by journalists to serve their readers (or viewers or listeners) well. Only one thing makes a commercially successful newspaper, magazine or internet site - readers. Or, in the case of radio and TV, listeners and viewers. We could call readers, listeners or viewers the “audience”. Without an audience there will be no sales revenue (if the publication is sold) and certainly little advertising revenue. Successful publications - and successful journalists – know instinctively what their audience wants. The journalist’s primary task is meeting the audience’s needs, rather than helping you to put your message across.

This means that when you’re planning to meet a journalist, you need to make sure you understand the content, treatment and style of the publication. Then you need to shape your message to match those three main criteria.

Content is about what’s in the publication or on the radio or TV programme. In other words, the subject matter. For example, are there regular “departments” or columns in the publication dealing with specific topics? Treatment is about how that subject matter is dealt with. What level is it pitched at? For example, is it general or specialist? Purely factual or opinionated? Is it overlaid with the publication’s or programme’s point of view? Does it have lots of examples and quotes? Style is about how the material is presented. For example, are there lots of pictures, and if so what of? Does the publication use cartoons, graphs, technical drawings? Has the publication or programme been styled to appeal to a particular audience?

The second journalist driver is the urgent need to get a good story. Journalists don't actually shout "hold the front page", but a strong story, especially an exclusive, still makes the adrenaline pump faster. It's always difficult to interest journalists in a tired old piece of information. But it's never hard to interest them in a genuinely "good" story – one which is timely and relevant to their readers' interests.

So if you have what you consider to be a "good" story - one that you're certain they will go for, and which serves your objectives - consider carefully how to make the most of it. You need to market your story effectively. For example, there might be one main publication that covers the audience you want to reach. You might gain most coverage by giving the story to that one publication - the fact that the story is exclusive increases its value.

Alternatively, there may be several publications - each with a different focus - that reach your audience. Tailor your story to each. And parcel the story up. Try to make sure that each publication gets a bit of exclusivity.

But a word of caution. In the long run, you must be seen by journalists to be fair and even-handed. Journalists can resent favouritism - especially when they're on the wrong end of it. In a market served by several rival publications, they all ought to receive fair treatment from you.

The third journalist driving force is a desire to beat rivals. Newspapers and magazines – and most radio and television stations - are commercial organisations like any other business and are in competition with one another. Journalists generally relish the competitive cut and thrust involved in beating rival publications to a story.

There are times when you can turn this to your advantage. For instance, if you're known as a reliable and interesting source of comment about your industry, there could be times when you can help a newspaper scrambling to catch up with a rival that has got a story it missed by providing new facts, background information or informed comment.

That paper will be looking for a new angle or fresh material in order to take the story further - for example, by putting it in a broader context or perspective. Or it may be seeking to "rubbish" the rival's story. Being available and having something useful to say can put you into the news in a way that can be helpful to your organisation. It doesn't matter that the original story was not your own. The door may even have been opened by a competitor. But if you have information that can take the story further, or provide a better example, you can secure valuable coverage.

The final driver for journalists is the absolute imperative to hit deadlines. Time is a tyrant for most of us. But in no industry is this more the case than in radio or television or in newspaper and (to a lesser extent) magazine publishing. When a story is breaking, a journalist needs information and comment fast - it could be in a matter of minutes. If you become known as a spokesperson who provides reliable information quickly, journalists will turn to you. And you could receive positive and helpful coverage for your firm.

The converse is true. The biggest story since World War II that arrives after the presses have started to roll will not make it to the paper. (Although it might make it to the next edition, if it is a morning or evening paper with several editions.) But, in the case of the majority of trade newspapers or magazines

that only have one edition, if it isn't a big story, it may be too stale to use by the next issue.

Taking all four points together, the key is that understanding what drives journalists, and being genuinely helpful - even when there doesn't seem to be any immediate publicity pay-off for you - will build a fund of goodwill that could eventually translate into more extensive and more positive coverage for your organisation.

And it could help to convince you that there really is much to gain by spending time meeting the media.

- Peter Bartram is the author (with Colin Coulson-Thomas) of *How to Make Your Case in the Media: the complete guide to getting your message across in the press and radio and TV*, published by New Venture Publishing. You can read the first chapter free online at www.makeyourcase.co.uk