

The Michael Bland Alumnus

An ongoing series of tips, thoughts and ideas exclusively for those people who have trained with the Michael Bland Communications Consultancy - and for selected clients and colleagues

14 May 01

Yes, but what does it mean?

I just wanted to be home. It had been a long, wet Sunday spent visiting family on the South Coast and we were on the final run into London. And there it was - a warning sign which simply said:

Faulty Bridge Joint 2 miles

I didn't *need* to know that there was a faulty bridge joint two miles ahead (or perhaps it was two miles long?). I didn't *want* to know. What I and a million other motorists *needed* and *wanted* to know was: what did it *mean*? Was the bridge closed? Partly closed? Likely to collapse as you drove over it? Did it mean long queues?

We could all guess that it wasn't going to be good news. The Department of Transport was unlikely to say 'Great news, guys, there's a faulty bridge joint up ahead and you're gonna just love it!' But we did need to know what the implications were. And they forgot to tell us.

But then, how often are we all guilty of telling people what we do, what we make, what we offer without telling them the much more important news: *what it means to them?*

Get the most out of those conference slots

I recently went to a meeting of the Professional Speakers Association where, among other things, we were advised to insert a newsworthy paragraph into any speech we give – and to use that para as the basis of a story to the local and trade media. Just draft the release and let the organisers do the work as they benefit too.

I've been teaching clients and PR pros to do this for years – and it works. Hang the news peg onto one of my 'PR devices' (*attack, warning, forecast, quotable quote* etc) and off you go.

As this advice was being doled out at the PSA meeting it reminded me that I've given a few conference speeches myself lately and forgotten to exploit this PR opportunity. Don't do as I do.....!

Stress and the ‘R’ word

A recent TV highlight was watching ‘Hard Talk’ with Tim Sebastian interviewing heart surgeon Sir Magdi Yacoub – both giants in their arena and princes among men. Sebastian makes the Humphrys and Robinsons of this world look like those inconsequential, yappy little dogs that shut up when you give them a good kick – and Yacoub has a power and depth that you can feel even through a TV screen.

Sebastian’s final question was to ask Yacoub how his own heart was coping, bearing in mind his incredibly punishing schedule. The reply:

*‘My heart seems to be fine because when you are enjoying something I don’t think your heart objects. It’s when you are resenting something, when you are unhappy...it’s the sort of frustration and **resentment** which actually does the damage.’*

In all my teaching of stress management I’ve looked at many of the causes but not fully appreciated, until I heard the great man, just how great a poison *resentment* is.

If we can identify areas of resentment in our own lives and either do something about them or learn to accept them better, our hearts will be a little happier!

24 May 01

I’m in love!

If we were single and had just met the love of our life - and we were about to meet a friend in the bar...

...how long would we wait before we told them?

Even if their first question was ‘Who do you think will win the election?’ It wouldn’t take us long to get on to our burning news!

We need to remember this when we’re doing a media interview! Of course we should address the interviewer’s questions first. But our love of our product, company or cause should feel just as urgent as a new romance and we should be itching to share this love with the journalist as quickly as possible.

First, an insincere apology

Up to a year or so ago I used to teach people on crisis courses to get their message of human concern and sincerity in right at the start of the interview. But times have changed. The currency of the early ‘human touch’ has been debased by a string of trained seals spouting their carefully rehearsed and utterly soulless ‘apologies’ at the start of any crisis interview.

So to stay ahead of the game, as always, I am now advising people to get the ‘human face’ message in as early as possible but *not* regardless of the first question. Good example:

Question: ‘Can you tell us what’s happened here?’

Message: ‘Unfortunately there’s been a large explosion and we’ve mounted a full scale rescue operation. We’re very concerned for the victims and their families...’

Stress: one thing at a time

During WWII Herbert Morrison arrived unannounced at Churchill’s bunker demanding to see the Prime Minister immediately. Churchill’s aides explained that he was temporarily indisposed but Morrison insisted that he must see him IMMEDIATELY.

So an aide went and knocked on the lavatory door, where Churchill was deeply ensconced, and explained that Mr Morrison wished to see him at once. There was a pause, a puff of cigar smoke, and the famous gravely voice rumbled:

‘One shit at a time.’

It’s a great recipe for less stress! One thing at a time. Living in the present – not the past or the future, but here and *now*.

Deepak Chopra only lets his staff tell him what he is doing the day before he does it. And one of my clients writes down absolutely everything that he needs to do as the thought comes into his head – that way he doesn’t worry about the ‘unknown.’ Whatever method we choose, we should address the fact that one of our biggest stressors is worrying, totally pointlessly, about the undefined and seemingly overwhelming pile of work and stress that lies ahead. It’s true what they say: worrying about it won’t make it any better!

18 June 01

Boxing Clever

As a boxer and martial arts enthusiast I’ve always kept my pugilistic skills under wraps when handling media interviews - despite the occasional strong temptation to deck one or two of the nastier interviewers!

But it struck me recently how appropriate boxing is as an analogy for succeeding at media interviews. Questions and punches have similar effects: they throw us into ‘defence’ mode and, if not properly handled, can do us a great deal of damage! But if we know what we’re doing, when our opponent throws a punch we can choose to block it, duck it or step back from it - just as we can with a question.

Then, having dealt with the punch/question, the skilful boxer/interviewee steps in and lands a counter-punch/message before moving quickly back out of range and putting the guard up ready to counter the next attack. This approach can help us to see hostile media questions not as threats to be defended but as opportunities to strike.

Anyone for Tyson?

Best Practice – Crisis Management

The company mentioned most often on my crisis communications workshops is Boots. Time and again, when faced with negative publicity, the company has turned it into a positive story – thereby enhancing their reputation which, for a company like Boots, is everything.

They understand the vital importance of treating perception as reality. If people think that something is wrong - *even if it isn't* - their concerns, anger and fears are legitimate responses and must be treated with respect. Only when you have been seen to take your audiences seriously can you then start to communicate the facts.

This process of giving ground first is harder than it sounds! For a start it's anathema to most top managements as they have no understanding of communication psychology. And it can be expensive, as in the case of Boots' withdrawal from sale of all its cot mattresses following a completely unfounded scare story.

There were no legal or scientific reasons to make this sacrifice but Boots understood that the action would put out a subliminal message of reassurance and care for the customer. The resulting benefits to reputation were worth many times the financial cost of the withdrawal programme.

Sounds obvious? Believe me, when I was at Ford if I'd suggested to the top management that they should recall a perfectly healthy car in order to enhance corporate reputation they would have sent for the men in white coats! Crisis/issues management of the Boots variety is an expression of corporate and management culture, not a PR stunt, and helping to inculcate that culture in top management is the toughest task a PR professional can face.

12 July 01

Crisis Planning – Loss of Right Arm

One thing I'm sometimes guilty of myself is not putting enough emphasis on cyber threat when preparing a crisis plan. Of course, items like 'computer crash' and 'denial of access' should feature in any modern business continuity and crisis communications plans - but we may not realise just how big and awful the threat may be.

When E-bay was recently access-denied for 48 hours it knocked \$2 billion off the company's market capitalisation overnight. And added to the financial damage is the fact that so much of our crisis communications now depend on electronic means.

Have you thought through how you would communicate with crisis audiences – quickly and effectively – if your systems were down or corrupted? It's a contingency that needs to be added to the existing crisis plan...unless of course you've already done so?

Proudly Announcing the Launch of a Sow's Ear

It really is true that there's (almost) no such thing as bad publicity (unless your name is Ratner!). While not recommending that we actively court it as it can backfire (eg Benetton losing 80% of their US outlets as a backlash to their outrageous advertising), our mind set when faced with negative publicity should be one of 'OK, didn't want this, but now it's here how do we *use* it?'

Good examples are Skoda making a virtue of their joke image to focus people's attentions on the improved product; and haulier Eddie Stobart, whose name on the trucks started as a joke on a kid's TV programme which voted it the most boring thing in Britain and grew – with a little help from Eddie Stobart - into a worldwide cult following.

Sharing the Problem

It's amazing how often companies and organisations fail to involve their critical audiences early enough and widely enough in a growing issue. I often cite the example of how Rhone Poulenc defused a major environmental scare issue by simply inviting anyone with a concern to come into the plant and see for themselves – or Pepsi Cola, who removed fears of syringes being found in its cans by letting the TV news crews film the canning process.

A recent example (and one which is all the more amazing as it comes from a British Government, who are my regular winners of the Exxon prize for not understanding how to handle a crisis) was the issue of embryo research. This highly controversial process was let in almost without a murmur because the Government involved all parties in the debate – early, openly and throughout.

13 August 01

Creativity and the Silly Season

As it's the Silly Season let's not get too serious. Instead here's a true story:

Back in the 1970s a young man was bumming around Europe, playing his guitar in bars for drinks and meals. His aim in life was to write comedy sci-fi but he didn't have a plot to work on. One night he wandered out of a bar somewhere outside Innsbruck and into a field, where he lay on his back, watching the stars wheeling above him in his semi-drunken stupor. In his hand was his faithful companion: 'The Hitchhiker's guide to Europe.' Looking up into the teeming galaxy he thought: 'Someone ought to write a Hitchhiker's Guide to the *Galaxy*.'

His name was Douglas Adams and the rest, as they say, is history.

As you probably know, he died a couple of months ago, aged only 49, but he left the legacy of a creative masterpiece. And the way he stumbled on 'Hitchhikers' contains a number of important ingredients of creativity:

- A **desire** to create something
- A **need** to do so (ie in his case, broke)
- What Andy Green calls 'the **incubation** process' – ie bumming around doing something else but with the germ of the idea planted in his subconscious brain
- An **altered state of conscious** (in this case drunk – or rather, half drunk but still conscious and thinking)
- **Two** completely **different**, and seemingly irrelevant, **concepts** coming together at once – as they do in lateral thinking.

Later in the creation of his masterpiece another ingredient came into play:

brainstorming. He and the producer, John Lloyd, sat down together to bounce off each other the silliest sounding number in existence. They hit on 42, which is how 42 came to be the mega computer, 'Deep Thought's' answer to 'Life, the Universe, Everything.'

This is just one example of how, when we spot an interesting story like that, if we ask ourselves 'what can I learn from this?' we can glean our own constant source of useful tips and ideas. The process applies to crisis management, media interview skills, PR campaigns – and indeed to life, the universe, everything...

A word of warning, though, about creativity – on which I am giving a talk to the IPR in London on the evening of 9 October:

Ultimately, while it is useful to study some techniques and borrow some ideas and ways of doing things (properly structured brainstorms, for example), I don't believe that creativity can be made to happen by analysis and guidelines alone. Like mirages, PR 'evaluation' and the structure of the atom, the more we analyse it the more it eludes us.

After all, in 'Der Witz und Seiner Beziehungen,' Sigmund Freud wrote the most comprehensive and conclusive analysis of what makes people laugh.

But then, as Ken Dodd says, Freud didn't have to play the Glasgow Empire on a Saturday night.

5 October 01

What's' in a Name?

I was at a meeting at the Confederation of British Industry this week, and sitting in their headquarters reminded me of an episode a couple of decades ago when the government introduced one of those sneaky taxes and disguised it as a 'National Insurance Surcharge.'

The CBI led British industry's campaign against this measure for many months – but in vain. No-one could get excited about a 'National Insurance Surcharge.' It just wasn't emotive enough and no-one out there cared about companies having to pay more into the national pot.

Then some bright spark at the CBI gave the surcharge a new title: 'The Jobs Tax.' Given the new title, the media, trade unions and public went mental about this iniquitous measure and within weeks the government was forced to abandon it.

There are many other examples of how a little extra concentration on the right nomenclature has radically changed an organisation's fortunes. As I teach on the crisis workshops it can also help to minimise negative associations with your own company's name – for example, who can say which companies were responsible for the 'Braer,' the 'Erica,' 'Flixborough' and 'Milford Haven.' By contrast we all know who was behind 'Perrier' and 'Exxon Valdez'!

So when (if!) you next have a quiet moment, think about some of the issues and campaigns you're involved in and see if a subtle change of name will make a difference.

It worked pretty well for the man who thought of calling French Connection UK by its initials!

31 October 01

Stress: A Sad Reflection

My wife recently booked a course of sunbeds at our local gym and was asked if she wanted the powerful, and more expensive, version which takes seven minutes - or the cheaper one which takes 15. When she asked what the difference was the assistant replied: *'Most people choose the powerful one because 15 minutes is a long time to lie down.'*

I remain convinced that we bring most of our stress on ourselves!

26 November 01

Urban Myths and Creativity

I don't know about you, but I've often heard that, according to aeronautical science, a bee can't fly. A recent article in Physics World has debunked this as an urban myth,

created by one scientist who did some inadequate calculations on his table napkin at a dinner party and ‘proved’ the poor old bee’s inability to stay airborne – another case of a reputation being damaged by junk science!

Another great urban myth is the one about NASA spending millions of dollars investing in a pen which could write in space – while the cash-strapped Soviets used pencils! I’ve heard that one loads of times but it’s bunk – at least the part about the NASA investment is. The pen came about because of its creator’s dream to make the ultimate pen, one which could write not only in space but also under water and on almost any surface – all funded by himself. He was at a dead end with the technology and was on the point of giving up when, he says, his dead father came to him in a dream and gave him the solution.

Whether we believe it really was his dead father or some other workings of the unconscious brain will depend on our personal beliefs, but whichever way we look at it, it demonstrates our amazing ability to get answers to things when we feed a problem into the computer between our ears and then relax and switch off. If it was good enough for Archimedes to work out how to measure the gold content of the King of Syracuse’s crown while relaxing in a hot bath, it’s good enough for us. But just remember to put some clothes on before running off down the street shouting *Eureka!*

1 January 02

The ‘Fishing’ Question

A favourite journalistic technique is to make an assumption implicit in the question in order to get a reaction out of you. There was a classic example of this last week in the TV profile of JK Rowling, the ‘Harry Potter’ author. She complained that a journalist had telephoned her father with the question: ‘*Why does your daughter hate you so much?*’ when she in fact has an excellent relationship with her father.

That was a cunning piece of fishing. The journalist had no idea how the father and daughter got on – but if there *had* been a difficult relationship between the two then there was a good chance that the father, assuming from the question that the journalist already knew there were problems, would confirm it by, for example, asking: ‘How did you know?’ And if the relationship was good the father would react vociferously and give some more interesting and loving quotes than if the journo had simply asked the standard: ‘*How do you get on with daughter?*’ – a question which would have received a well-rehearsed and unquotable answer.

So if a journalist implies knowledge of your darkest secrets don’t automatically assume that they really know something. Remain non-committal. Of course, if they actually *have* uncovered some dark skeleton in your cupboard then aren’t you glad you did the crisis training?!

More Internet Crisis Tips

And talking of crisis, here are some more thoughts on the continuing theme of how we can deal with the threat to reputation caused by the power of the Internet and the increase in anti-capitalist paranoia:

Philip Morris is changing its name to *Altria* – another of those meaningless titles that sounds like an anonymous small car. Perhaps the ‘Alt...’ bit is meant to make people think of ‘Altruism.’ But silly name aside, New Scientist magazine recently spotted a smart move by (presumably) the company: according to *registrations.com*, all the negative domain names like *altriakills* and *altriasucks* have already been registered, making it a little more difficult for activists to stir up hatred on the net.

And then there’s the bold move by Shell to host its own web site for critics to have their say. Showing that you are listening to your detractors or in any way appearing to help them is hotly resisted by most managements and their advisors on the grounds that ‘it’ll only encourage them’ – this said in the extraordinarily naïve belief that ignoring will make them go away. Of course, being nice to them won’t make them go away either. But it does make it a bit harder for them to hate you.

And finally...

True story: a trade association for funeral directors was recently looking for a training course for its members for which part of the brief was ‘getting them to think out of the box’!

4 February 02

‘I Qame, I saw, I conquered’

I’ve devised a new and very simple acronym to help you succeed in a broadcast media interview. It’s ‘**QAME**’, and it stands for:

- Question
- Answer
- Message
- Example

Just remember each time you receive the **Question** to provide an **Answer** - but don’t stop there; giving an answer provides a platform for your **Message** which, to be credible, needs to be supported by a specific, detailed **Example**.

It couldn’t be more simple - but it works!

More on ‘Nutters on the Net’

We’ve been looking at ways to combat the damage done by people with a grudge spreading untruths about you - particularly on the Internet.

- One pre-emptive ploy being used by some organisations is to get into bed with potential enemies early in the game. A good example of this is **npower**, who have set up an environmentally friendly wind farm project in conjunction with Greenpeace. It may not stop the Greens giving you a rough time over environmental issues - but a venture like this will surely help to soften their antagonism.

- And do remember that the traditional media can be even more important here. The real decision makers and major shareholders still rely on the standard media for their information more than they do on the Net. So the developing of sound media relations and professional media PR are more important than ever.

Anyone got any other ideas or tips on the topic that they can share?

14 March 02

Issues Management: Sharing the Problem

One way of helping to defuse hostility is to give your potential antagonists as much ownership of the problem as possible. Issues are less black and white when you have responsibility for them!

I've mentioned human embryo research before and it is no coincidence that this high profile issue has sailed through the House of Lords with such ease. In a rare example of good communications and sound practice, all parties to the debate have been involved in discussion and able to have their say. Remember: the sooner you involve people in the issue - yes, including the pressure groups - and the more of an open house you make it, the less they will suspect your motives and want to campaign against you.

Crisis Preparation - Hot Lines

I never cease to be surprised at the number of organisations, including some major ones, who don't have a crisis hot line service on standby. In a crisis your phone system could be overloaded with a deluge of calls, resulting in thousands of frustrated, angry and misinformed customers, relatives, local community etc.

It is too expensive to keep a small army of people and phone lines on standby in-house just in case a crisis strikes - and impossible to suddenly set up a hot line facility on the spur of the moment. Most companies link up in advance with a tele-marketing or opinion research company, who have the staffing and facilities to run this vital service for you in an emergency.

Stress - What Is It Trying to Tell Us?

American athlete Marty Liquori once said that what is pain to a novice runner is merely information to an advanced runner. As with pain, so with stress. When suffering from a stress response our natural tendency, understandably, is to focus on doing something about it. But we should also remember that stress is information, so an alternative - and perhaps more useful - first response could be: 'What is it trying to tell me?'

24 May 02

In the Beginning was the Boson

Millions of research dollars are being spent on the search for the Higgs Boson, a fact which is of orgasmic importance to a physicist - and a major yawn to everyone else. British scientist Peter Higgs postulated in the 60s that the existence of a hitherto undiscovered subatomic particle could explain some of the greatest mysteries of science - such as where matter gets its mass from. Ever since, the hunt has been on for the 'Higgs Boson' and the boffins believe they're getting close.

But how to excite the rest of the world - especially the cynical, simplistic media - when to explain the workings of bosons and 'dark matter' takes a lifetime? Simple: some genius has re-named the Higgs Boson '*The God particle.*' Now they're taking notice!

When preparing our messages it really is worth the investment of time and effort in creating phrases like these.

'Same Clowns, Different Circus'

I spoke last week at the conference of the Global Public Affairs Institute (I didn't know there was one!) and a fellow speaker made an important point about reputation: With this craze to re-name our companies with titles that sound like cheap after-shaves (*Accenture, Consignia, Diageo, Altria* et al) we must remember that we are throwing out decades of investment in building name recognition and association. If the name stinks, then maybe change it - but before following the herd with a name change we should first make a serious assessment of the value of our existing one.

Creativity: Turn it Upside Down

Often one of the simplest and most effective creative devices is to turn the problem upside down. Text usually has more punch when the original sentence is reversed ('*Ask not what your country can do for you...*') and a glowing example of this approach is the soccer world cup stadium in Japan.

The traditional problem with building sports stadia is that if you have an open roof the players and crowd are exposed to the elements - but if you have a closed roof to protect them the grass doesn't grow. So the Japanese have built a closed stadium - but the whole pitch is moved in and out on rollers. It grows happily outside the stadium and is rolled in for the soccer matches!

22 July 02

Football On The Brain

There was much huffing and puffing about the way that referees and linesmen appeared to be biased towards South Korea in that country's home World Cup football matches. But for those of us who are interested in how the brain works there were no surprises.

I am quite sure that the officials really believed that Totti took a dive, and that the ball crossed the goal line before Spain's disallowed goal - when video replays showed that neither event actually happened.

There was a similar episode in the Seoul Olympics when all three judges gave a points decision to the home fighter in front of his home crowd in the final of the heavyweight boxing. The judges were almost certainly honest people – and from visibly independent countries – but the replay showed that the American ‘loser’ had landed *three times* as many scoring punches as the Korean!

The phenomenon is not specifically Korean, but the officials’ brains will undoubtedly have been re-programmed by the force and energy of the supporting local crowds in these travesties of sporting justice. Their brains will have unconsciously created a new ‘reality’ to suit the conditions in which they found themselves.

The lesson is powerful: we communication professionals are in the business of influencing people’s attitudes, beliefs and understandings – of effectively changing their ‘reality’ – and we must be aware that the brain unconsciously selects the stuff it *wants* to see and hear in order to reinforce that existing, already flawed, ‘reality’.

So success for us stems from understanding the minds of our audiences and working out what they want to hear. Simply throwing our own messages at them is usually counter-productive – and yet the majority of our profession does little else!

Research Proves...

Here’s an example of how a ‘scientific reality’, which is highly relevant to comms professionals, has been created from a complete myth. The phenomenon is explained in this article which I wrote for *Profile* magazine and am sharing with you here ahead of publication:

‘Research proves that PR people are better in bed than anyone else. It doesn’t actually - well, not as far as I know - but as there are so many urban myths based on ‘research’ floating around I thought it would be fun to start a new one. Pass it on.

One of the most trenchant of these myths popped up again in *Profile* magazine in April in a piece about media interview skills: ‘*Keeping in mind that content only accounts for seven per cent of all impact (the rest is in the voice and looks)...*’

Sometimes the figure is five per cent, sometimes eight. And every time I see it, which is often, I ask the author for chapter and verse on the methodology because I simply don’t believe it. Three decades of training and listening to several thousand presenters tells me that ‘content is king.’ Of course, good voice, appearance, body language and – essentially - eye contact are very important aspects of presenting and being interviewed, but what matters most are the words and word pictures you use.

We can make research tell us anything we want and I have long suspected that these highly unlikely figures about content v manner were either flawed or taken out of context and then seized on as ‘proof’ by those who want to teach us to wave our arms around and wear power red.

Of the dozens of times I've asked people for the source of the 'content' figure, some simply haven't replied, most have said 'Oh, I saw it somewhere' and three have quoted a source but not actually been able to provide a copy of the paper. Needless to say, the three quoted sources were all completely different. One was allegedly Pittsburgh University in the 1970s and another a study done on communication in singles bars (where no-one could hear what was being said above the noise, so non-verbal communication was more than a little useful!).

A third pointed me to the work of Albert Mehrabian of UCLA, going back to 1967 so, finally nearing the source of this particular Nile, I had an e-mail correspondence with Dr Mehrabian. He said that his research did indeed indicate that only seven per cent of impact came from content – *but that his studies were conducted purely on the conveying of emotions, without there being any change in the actual words used.*

In other words, if you say to a friend: 'I feel bad' in a flat tone of voice and without expression, it will have less impact than if you use the same words – 'I feel bad' – in a quivering voice while wringing your hands and crying like Paul Gascoigne. Pretty obvious stuff, you might say. But what the good doctor did not cover – nor seek to cover - was the impact of saying, for example, 'I feel bad, my cat has just been run over and she was my best friend for 13 years.' As I long suspected, content wasn't given a look-in in this seminal and influential piece of research.

With this myth finally nailed it seems certain that your choice of messages and words is the single most important element in effective communication. If the messages overcome the audience's 'So What?' barrier and the words convey the messages you're most of the way home. Indeed, really good content is often best delivered in an understated tone, with no rhetoric or body language and with the nearest PowerPoint where I wish they all were: on Mars.'

23 September 02

Watchdog Has Been To The Vet

Is it my imagination, or has 'Watchdog' calmed down a bit since the dreaded dominatrix, Anne Robinson, went off to make someone else's life a misery? I have always told people to appear on the programme, preferably live, when under attack as a 'no comment' or a written statement only makes you look more guilty. The latter would be read in a tone of voice which made the authoring company sound insincere – but I recently heard Paul Heiney read out a statement (from 'Yes!') in a quite human and convincing way. I still wouldn't hop in the sack with them but it is good if they are giving their victims more of a say and it just might make more of a case for a written statement in exceptional circumstances.

In Bed With The Enemy

And talking of sleeping with the enemy, some major firms such as Sainsbury's, Mothercare (surely the most touchy-feely brand name ever) and Marks & Spencer have joined forces to form the Ethical Trading Initiative with a number of the NGOs who often attack them. This body is devoted to find ways to ensure that workers in supplier companies are given fair wages and decent working conditions. This is a

good example of the important crisis/issues principle of not just doing something but *being seen to do it*.

Creativity: 1+1=3

Another great example of how focusing on a random thought when in ‘creative’ mode can lead the thought process to a new idea or solution relating to the problem or challenge that was already in your mind. Much of lateral thinking and shamanistic scrying is about this process, which speeds up with regular practice as the super-computer of the brain learns the programme. In this case, I came across a description by Douglas Adams about how he was trying to think of his next novel while listening to Procol Harum’s ‘Grand Hotel.’ Amazed by how the music suddenly burst into a grand orchestral crescendo in the middle of nowhere, he thought it the sort of music you would listen to while watching some major event like...like...the end of the universe? And thus was born ‘The Restaurant at the End of the Universe.’

21 October 02

‘Lord Make Me Chaste – But Not Yet’

(attrib St Justinian)

While most academic research into communication is inadequate and misleading, especially when its proponents seize on a few questionable statistics as ‘proof’ of their preconceived views, every now and then one comes across something really thought-provoking and I am grateful to ‘The Tipping Point’ by Malcolm Gladwell for its description of a fascinating experiment of which I had not previously heard:

In the 1960s, social psychologist Howard Levanthal tried out different types of brochures to encourage seniors at Yale to go for tetanus shots. These ranged from a ‘high fear’ version with lurid colour photographs of ghastly tetanus effects on people to a ‘low fear’ version which simply spelt out the facts in a bland text.

So far so good. My own ‘EP Hierarchy’ theory was seemingly endorsed by the subsequent finding that a much higher proportion of the ‘high fear’ recipients intended to go for an anti tetanus shot.

But when, a month later, Levanthal measured how many students had actually gone and had a shot, only a tiny three percent had done so! So he then re-did the experiment, using the same leaflets but this time including a map showing where the campus health centre was and the times that vaccinations were available. This time there was a 28 per cent turnout which was, interestingly, spread evenly among the different ‘fear’ groups.

Even more interestingly, the students studied were seniors who already knew where the health centre was!

So, what are the implications?

First, my EP Hierarchy approach (latest checklist attached) still holds good for its main purpose, which is getting journalists to buy quickly into a story or press release.

The average journo will fall much more readily for gory photographs and dire warnings than for a sea of text and under statements. As far as the straightforward PR element of our task is concerned that's 'job done.' We've created the awareness and it's up to the sales and marketing people to go in and finish the job.

But is that enough? Could we do more in our messaging to achieve what Gladwell calls the 'stickiness' element?

OK, as so often, the research was conducted among students, whose average age, intelligence (especially at Yale) and motivation to get off their backsides and get a tetanus shot are not representative of the public at large. I don't know about you, but if someone convinced me that I could avoid a horrific illness with a simple injection I'd get out the Yellow Pages and pick up the 'phone to make an appointment at once.

How we formulate our messages depends on the particular audience – indeed, I once knew an agency which got a brilliant response from the law firms they were targeting by placing ads consisting of lots of small print!

But the results of the Levanthal research have certainly made me resolve to pay more attention to 'stickiness' elements. A classic example is the 'Dos and Don'ts' or 'Top Ten Tips' included in a media story – or 'Here's All You Have to Do' in a piece of marketing copy.

5 January 03

Crisis: Are You Regulated?

In an age when people believe you can make life better by regulating everything, the threat of reputation damage by regulatory authorities grows ever stronger. Sure, we need rules and regulations but to some extent we have created a monster that needs feeding. Last year was a record one for investigations by a number of regulatory bodies. And when they pounce, they seize the high ground, both emotionally and in terms of communication. Whether you are guilty or not, you will need a response plan in place. So, new year's resolution: check vulnerability to blitzkrieg from the OFT, FSA, Information Commissioner (data protection legislation) etc etc etc and work out how you will respond to rescue your corporate reputation.

Creativity: Give That Brain a Break

I can't over-stress the value of the 'brain break' in a brainstorm session. This is when each individual can choose to leave the group, go into a quiet corner and switch off; stop trying; feel like you're taking a bath – or have a little meditate if you know how to. Then re-join the group and see what happens. The brain break allows for some all-important 'incubation' to take place and gives the group energy a lift when the person re-joins the group. Like all aspects of brainstorming, this calls for good group leadership and clear structure. Sticking the whole team in a room and getting all excited for an indefinite period isn't brainstorming.

Energy: Another Body Miracle

To avoid our bodies needing to be the size of Canary Wharf, a protein folds itself up into the minimal possible space. If you wanted to know how it does so you would need the processing power of all the world's supercomputers running for several times

the age of the universe to work it out. Another new year's resolution: Respect that body and look after it – it's a miracle! Have a good one.

24 February 03

Crisis: 'Nobody's Perfect'

One of the problems organisations create for themselves is not being able to admit to weakness. If we give the impression that we're perfect, then there's only one direction to go in our public's mind when things go wrong: downwards! By contrast, London Mayor Ken Livingstone, whatever one might think of him, was refreshingly honest about the outlook for the introduction of congestion charging. After he had warned of potential chaos we were surprised and relieved when it all went relatively smoothly on the day. Sometimes our pride or defensiveness can make us overlook two invaluable crisis/issues management tools: a tactical lowering of expectations, and the device of sharing the problem.

Media Interviews: 100 Ways to Say 'No Comment'

Similarly, I was impressed by the honesty of TV host Lisa Rogers when asked a rather personal question about her love life in an interview. 'I can't answer that question,' she said. 'I'd have to lie to you and I don't want to.' She almost made the interviewer feel she was doing him a favour by saying 'No Comment'!

And talking of succinct sayings, when the rail safety watchdog was reorganised, several commentators complained that it had kept the same top people despite a series of rail crashes. Their abstract outpourings fell on deaf ears until lawyer Louise Christian stole the media show in four words: '*Same clowns, different circus.*' She may only have spent a few moments thinking of this zappy, media-centric way of saying it - but that extra bit of thought paid handsome dividends.

Stress: The Bocuse Recipe

After Paul Bocuse had built up his reputation as probably France's greatest chef, he went on a foreign tour to demonstrate his skills. '*Who does the cooking in your restaurant while you're away?*' asked a journalist in Singapore. '*The same people who do it when I'm there*' came the reply. What an example! In a field noted for its high stress and hands-on dedication, here was someone who had risen above them all while letting someone else do the stressing. We are indoctrinated from birth to believe we have to do more to get more. But if we're cunning enough, we could often do *less* to get more!

2 May 03

A Crisis By Any Other Name

'Escalation procedures' is just one example of the human need to put things into convenient boxes which are of little or no use in real life. Most managements define different categories of crisis and stipulate different levels of response according to the anticipated impact. Great in theory, seldom any use in practice as no one has told crisis that it has to conform to a category, and the actual damage will depend on too many intangibles (eg whether it is a slow or busy news day). I was heartened, therefore, to discover that the London Resilience Team, a group of the top crisis

experts charged with planning for a major disaster, agonised long and hard before coming up with their official definition of a ‘catastrophic incident.’

It is: *‘You’ll know it when it hits you.’* And as for escalation procedures: their policy is to treat everything as ‘Gold’ (ie call everything out) and then stand resources down if not needed, rather than start small and escalate as you go along. They are absolutely right and tuned in to the reality of crisis, which doesn’t fit into convenient definitions; and until you’ve had a chance to conduct your strategic assessment you won’t know how serious it is or what level of response is needed.

Over-communicating In A Crisis

I am indebted to Francis Thomas at Lego for this tip: if we’re overloaded with unnecessary internal e-mails on a normal day, just think what it’ll be like in a crisis! Urgent memo to add to our crisis planning: strict instructions on e-mail protocol in a crisis and the need to keep crisis traffic to an essential minimum – and normal traffic to zero (and, preferably, leave it there!).

New Radio PR Opportunity

There’s a good new broadcast PR opportunity in the form of BBC Radio 2’s Jeremy Vine Show. This is the replacement for the excellent Jimmy Young Show and, unlike its predecessor, it involves panel discussions and phone-ins on hot topics of the day. The programme broadcasts at lunchtime weekdays to an audience of five million, providing an excellent chance to suggest a hot topic to them and field a spokesperson. I’m doing it for ‘Pipedown,’ the campaign to reduce piped music in public places – a cause close to my heart.

And Finally...

Of no particular relevance, but you might appreciate this entry from the Baptism Register of Chiswick Parish Church, 1 July 1798:

‘Baptism: Thomas William, the illegitimate Son of Maria Haws and the Soldiers of Kew Barracks.’

4 June 03

Some Tips From The Front Line

Last week I spoke at the **Survive** business continuity conference and found myself following Brian Cass, the MD of Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), the medical testing firm which has been besieged, intimidated and beleaguered, and whose staff and families have been physically assaulted, by animal rights activists. He had some interesting insights to share.

One was, once again, that big crisis plans are a waste of time and that successful communications come from rapid decision making by a small, flexible team (you still need, of course, to prepare such resources as your audience checklists and communication methods in advance). Lego’s Francis Thomas, who spoke with me,

said that he was with British Rail when the hurricane struck in 1987 and paralysed the rail system. They had 23 detailed crisis plans in place – and none of them worked!

The HLS case study also confirmed the ‘(almost) no bad publicity’ rule. In four years of constant headlines generated by hostile pressure groups, orders have increased by 70% and revenues by 60%. As Brian Cass said, there isn’t a customer in the world who hasn’t heard of Huntingdon Life Sciences!

He was asked about employee stress and counselling, and made the interesting point that, while counselling was available, there was very little uptake. The adversity generated a strong team spirit and wartime group support ethic. There is no doubt that determined and supportive leadership helps, too. I still argue for measures to prepare for and handle the stress involved in a crisis, but counselling alone is of little use unless the fundamentals of good leadership are in place.

New Risk Management Standard

Did you know that there is now a Risk Management Standard, which has been put together by the Institute of Risk Management (IRM) and others? This sets out a framework that directors and managers can use to monitor risk in their organisations. I’ve looked through it and find it rather insipid – but in this age of standards and lip service, it could be useful, when the Thought Police come to take you away, to be able to say that you have been following a prescribed procedure to prove that you have the ‘right’ processes in place. There’s a free download on the IRM website: www.theirm.org

The Power Station In Our Heads

Did you know that the brain takes up 3% of our body mass but uses up 20% of our energy? And that’s when it’s working normally! A major theme of my stress and motivation workshops is the need for us to take control of our personal energy management. Energy is vital to our physical and mental wellbeing and to the effectiveness of our immune systems. Whenever we let our brain overheat with what Wordsworth called ‘*the fretful stir, unprofitable,*’ we are wasting valuable energy unnecessarily. Lots of it.

15 July 03

Cash In On The Silly Season

When you read about Portsmouth Aquarium providing its Otters with fish-flavoured iced lollipops in the hot weather, you know the silly season is here. That’s the period from early July to early September when Parliament isn’t sitting and half the business world is on vacation and in a state of ‘don’t do anything till after the summer’ paralysis. So there’s not much news around and the journos are desperate for a story. The shortage of other news greatly increases your chances of coverage in this period. But don’t make the mistake that I once did when I was PR boss of the IOD and sent a reminder at this time to my media list assuring them we would be available for comment throughout the ‘silly season.’ Most responded gratefully with requests for

statements but the Sunday Mirror published my memo and added: 'So if you want a silly comment, you can ask the Institute of Directors'! Thanks Guys.

Keeping Media Interview Skills Sharp

Media Training is like flying training: one lesson is not enough! The skills learned have a half life, so if you don't do regular real interviews after training you need to do a refresher session every six months or so. There's no need to spend a lot of money or go through the theory all over again. You just need an hour per trainee with a professional interviewer - and if you don't want to invest in a TV set-up, a tape recorder will do. A useful tip here is to use one of the key journalists with whom you most want to have a good relationship to do the interviews. Almost all journalists will freelance, and nothing cements a relationship like a (bona fide) payment! In the process, the journalist gets to know you and your organisation better, too. The same goes for paying journalists to write your case studies and contribute to publications such as the house journal or web site.

And Finally...

How's this for a re-branding exercise? An Italian 'greasy spoon' café near to the Institute of Public Relations has had a face lift and renamed itself '*Via Agra.*' Most uplifting!

27 August 03

Big Is Not Beautiful

Professor Nigel Nicholson makes an interesting point about Evolutionary Psychology in his excellent book, 'Managing the Human Animal' (Texere, ISBN 1-58799-031-8): for much of our evolution we lived and worked in maximum group sizes of around 150. The implication for communications is that this is a 'natural' size for internal communications, mail groups etc, and that groups much over this size will function better if they are broken into smaller divisions or sub groups for management and communication purposes. The late John Garnett of the Industrial Society also used to point out that the largest sports team (Rugby Football) comprises 15 people. In other words, you can have effective informal communications with groups up to about 15, after which communications need to be more structured and formalised. And over about 150, you should think of breaking at least some of the communications structure into smaller groups.

Creativity And 'Accidental' Discoveries

'Did you ever observe to whom the accidents happen? Chance favours only the prepared mind.'

Louis Pasteur

6 October 03

Creativity: 'We didn't have the money, so we had to think'

This, one of my favourite quotes (by Lord Rutherford, who discovered the structure of the atom), sums up a key aspect of creativity. Of course, some innovations are achieved on big budgets – as the motor industry, Microsoft and Thomas Edison's

Menlo Park invention factory attest – but much of the best creativity is forced out of a combination of necessity and limited means. Some of the finest cuisines were developed as a result of limited types and supplies of food – Italian and Indian being obvious examples. And did you know that in the early stages of making the *Star Trek* series, they found that the expensive take-offs and landings of *Starship Enterprise* on remote planets were blowing the budget? The result?... **‘Beam me up!’**

Crisis Planning and the Pituitary Gland

It’s not only imaginary horrors that happen in the wee small hours when our pituitary is secreting (‘shut me down’) Melatonin and inhibiting (‘pick me up’) Serotonin. Bhopal, Chernobyl, Three Mile Island and many other disasters happened in the night when people’s concentration levels were low. Crisis planning should look hard at how the system would cope out of hours, when the members of the crisis comms team are deep asleep and dreaming about the new Corporate Social Responsibility plan (as if). During a crucial World Cup football qualifier match for Greece, a Greek tanker collided with another ship and it was reported that no-one was above decks – you can draw your own conclusions!

22 February 04

It pays to practise what you preach! I was at an event in Belgrade a couple of weeks ago and was asked to do an on-the-spot interview for Serbian television. While they were setting the camera up, I thought I’d better ask the interviewer what she wanted to ask me. She showed her carefully handwritten notes to the interpreter, who translated. The questions were utterly weird and I couldn’t make out what they meant, so I asked the interpreter to ask the interviewer for an explanation. ‘She doesn’t know herself,’ was the reply. ‘Her boss wrote them for her - and she doesn’t understand them either!’

A successful interview is won before the first question is even asked. Your own thorough preparation and rehearsal of key messages and examples is the biggest part, but winning the journalist over is important, too. When we meet important clients we try to soften them up by showing an interest in them and their company, and searching for areas of common interest. Ditto with a journalist.

It’s amazing how rarely people think to compliment them on something they’ve written or broadcast. Most PR calls to journalists start: ‘Hallo, it’s XXX of Blah Blah Public Relations here. Did you get our press release?’ without even asking if the poor harassed journo has a moment to spare. How much better and more successful is an intro like: ‘Hallo, it’s XXX of Blah Blah Public Relations. I loved that piece of yours yesterday about...’

And we can usually get an idea of the line of questions from the journalist before the interview, and even suggest some useful questions ourselves – especially helpful if the journalist doesn’t know what her own questions mean!

5 May 04

A Forgotten Crisis Audience

At a conference last year a speaker from Anderson said that a valuable ally during their *annus horribilis* was their own alumnus. A big organisation’s former staff can

number thousands, many in senior posts and positions of influence – worth adding to the crisis audience list.

Just When You Thought It Was Safe

One of our most vulnerable moments in life – be it in sport, business or relationships – is when things are going well and we allow ourselves to relax. Wearing my stress hat, we should of course enjoy the fruits of our labours; but wearing my crisis and media performance hats it is wise to remember the advice of the Australian Federal Treasury to a new Member of Parliament on speaking to the media: You are always a few sentences away from disaster. Another version of the same advice: the difference between a halo and a noose is about nine inches!

And Finally...

I am indebted to the New Scientist reader who was alarmed to see a notice at his local hospital warning that ‘guard dogs operate at this hospital.’

19 July 04

A Mountain Tumbles

For 30 years, double glazing company Everest has sold itself on the slogan ‘Fit the best – fit Everest.’ Now it has been made to change the slogan and withdraw all adverts, mailshots and posters which carry it.

Why? Because in 1992 they sold some windows to an old lady in Brighton and she complained that they were defective. Their failure to rectify her problem has led to her son registering a successful complaint about their slogan with the Advertising Standards Authority.

Those of you who have been on my crisis course will remember a similar situation where Benetton refused to compensate a couple who had been distressed (justifiably) by their advertising. The company lost 80% of its US business as a result of the negative publicity.

The lesson: when assessing a crisis or issue, ask yourselves: ‘What is *really* potentially at stake here?’ Bean counters and lawyers may see a disgruntled little old lady as insignificant - but we PR people ignore her at our peril.

Androcles And The Journalist

According to legend, Androcles was the escaped slave who saved a lion’s life by removing a thorn from its paw. He was recaptured and sentenced to be fed to a lion in the arena, where said lion turned out to be none other than the one he had saved. The beast recognised its erstwhile rescuer and (an unlikely tale, this) refrained from eating him. The crowd thought this was pretty cool and Androcles was freed to sell his story to The Sun.

As with lions, so with journalists. It’s an invaluable investment to be nice to them early in their careers. There’s a tendency for PR people to court and cultivate the big names and editors while ignoring the humble junior hacks. But young lions grow into big ones - nowadays very quickly. And they remember those who fed them stories and bought them lunch in their formative years. This is also true of junior researchers on TV and radio programmes - and of freelancers working from home, who receive fewer stories and invitations than their staff equivalents.

And Finally...

While journalists are seldom compared with lions, they are often called Rottweilers. The analogy is more appropriate than we might think. After all, you can have a good relationship with a Rottweiler - but you can never completely trust it. A Rottweiler will lick your hand, wag its tail and let you tickle its tummy - so long as you remember to feed it bits of red meat (ie stories). If you forget, it will take an unhealthy interest in your leg. Rottweilers have almost no distinction in their brains between pleasure and aggression. And the Rottweiler is the only dog which attacks without warning.

15 September 04

Under Our Noses

'Discovery,' said Proust, 'lies not in finding new lands but in seeing with different eyes.' Both when searching for creative solutions and assessing potential crises, the answer - or the problem - is often right under our noses. Just as companies habitually spend fortunes on hiring an inadequate outsider for a management position when the best candidate is already working for them, it is human nature not to spot what's under our noses.

On the crisis front, a couple of weeks ago there was a major scare about laser eye surgery, with equipment manufacturers Alcon at the heart of the storm. They were first warned of concerns by eye surgeons in October 2002, yet when the story broke they found themselves fighting a rearguard action. They claim that the concerns are unfounded - but that won't make the negative publicity conveniently go away for them. The crisis of August 2004 has been sitting under their noses, waiting to go off, for two years.

And on the creativity front, I was amused to read an account of a young chemist working for Bayer who in 1897 proudly showed his laboratory head a new pain killer he had developed - only to be told, dismissively, that 'the product has no value.' The valueless product in question was Aspirin. Under our noses again.

The Vital Chat-Up

Do remember that most of a media interview is won before the actual interview even starts, not just with your own preparation but also by softening up the interviewer by showing an interest in them, flattering them (where appropriate) and probing for an idea of where they are coming from. I recently came across a case of a client who was about to be savaged by a particularly aggressive broadcast interviewer until the interviewer was reminded minutes beforehand that he had accepted a substantial fee from the company concerned to front one of their corporate videos!

There's Always An Easier Way Of Saying It

'...the impact of an object on loosely packed granular material can be described by a simple, fluid-dynamical continuum model. In other words, the sand behaves like water.' (Physics World). Ah, now I get it.

7 December 04

A Seasonal Tip

One advantage of being in this business a long time is being able to resurrect old ideas that people have forgotten. Back in the 70s we used to get hectares of national coverage for the IOD by hosting a New Year's Day press conference. The whole PR

world was nursing a hangover and taking a day off – but the hacks were at work as they had to produce a paper for the next day. Ours was the only press conference in town so the press turned out in droves to listen to the D-G's otherwise monumentally un-newsworthy witterings. The Morning Star used to send two reporters and, in gratitude for a story and some decent wine, would carry a positive story about the IOD on the front page.

More recently, I dug up the idea for a charity with a thin story at year's end. A ring round a few journos in advance forewarned me that they are too thin-staffed these days to attend press conferences, but a lone press release was most welcome.

(If you do send a holiday release this year, remember that both Christmas and New Year's Days are a Saturday – but I bet the Sunday-for-Monday market will be full of easy pickings while your competitor's sleep off their excesses).

Ways Of Saying It

From ExxonMobil's CSR report: 'In 2003 our...tankers spilled less than one teaspoon of oil for every million gallons transported.'

8 February 2005

'60 Horses Wedged In Chimney'

This was an actual headline (Daily Express). It was a spoof but there can't have been a reader who did not read on. Given that the average journalist spends 1½ seconds looking at each press release, it really is worth putting a lot of time and effort into an eye-catching headline. Francis Thomas, the comms head at Suffolk County Council, recently sent one about a forthcoming fire service safety demo headed 'Advance Notice of a House Fire.' Not only was it well covered but the Ipswich Star even did a piece about the press release itself, saying how irresistible the journalist had found the headline. But then they do have the best football team up there.

Ask The Right Question

'Our research told us that there was a very low level of interest in where the water actually came from...' This explanation by Coca Cola's marketing head for the Dasani fiasco tells us much about the perils of blind faith in research. I wonder what the question was – doubt it was 'Do you mind if your expensive bottled water comes from the mains in Sidcup?'

Did You Know...

...that our senses are on the receiving end 400 billion bits of information per second – and our brain only processes 2,000 of them? In other words, we only take in one 200 millionth of the stuff that's chucked at us – a fact worth bearing in mind next time you write that long-winded press release of prepare a long speech with lots of slides! So saying, I'll stop there.

23 March 2005

Not waving, just drowning

When communicating normally we don't even notice what our hands are doing – but as soon as we have an audience they suddenly feel like two half-ton bunches of bananas. Use of hands is the single hardest physical thing to learn (and teach!) about presenting in public. 'Body language training' often does more harm than good –

think of Ian Duncan Smith's ridiculous Tory conference swan song – and I'm not sure there's a one-size-fits-all solution. But there is a quick fix! I find it helps enormously to carry a nice solid clip board with speech notes on it. Some are concerned that it looks obtrusive but, paradoxically, if it helps to relax the speaker the audience notices the notes less than they noticed the nervous hands. And having the script handy is a useful safety blanket. A lot of the finest speakers used their notes as weapons, not as something to be ashamed of.

Please Sir, it was him

Veterans of my crisis training will know of the techniques for ensuring that someone else cops the blame for a crisis (assuming they deserve it). A good current example of this was the media invective aimed at Network Rail for paying its bosses huge bonuses last week after they had cocked up everyone's Christmas travel by forgetting that people would want to return home again. It is hardly likely that the PR people at Network Rail said 'Look at us; we're paying our bosses a big bonus and it was us wot ruined your Christmas.' No, dare one suggest that somewhere in the dark recesses of a beleaguered Transport Operating Company someone was whispering down the phone to a friendly journo...

Einstein: science and spirit

Among the many urban myths about Einstein (he wasn't a dunce at school and his university did recognise his mathematical genius) I long believed the one that he never clearly stated his religious views. But curiosity, combined with a simple web trawl, has unearthed a series of his articles, in which he could not have stated his views more clearly. Describing himself as 'a profoundly religious unbeliever,' he believed in a universal pattern and consciousness but not in an intervening power. 'I maintain that the cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research.' 'All means prove but a blunt instrument, if they have not behind them a living spirit.' And the Times described him this week as unintelligible!

14 April 2005

The forgotten audience

PR courses, text books and magazines tell us of numerous essential 'audiences' such as the media, government and financial analysts. But we never hear of how to identify and win over one particular audience group which often has more influence on reputation and buying decisions than the media or anyone else: the product analysts. I've been guilty of omission here, too, but have seen the light thanks to Kim Horner, who has kindly penned some invaluable advice as an addition to this edition of *Alumnus Update*. Her contact details are included if you'd like to know more.

A great story out of nothing

We all know that surveys and case studies are effective devices for generating coverage – often out of nowhere. Full marks to Halifax (again) for commissioning a study on the best places to live – and then making a story out of the lady who lived in what the study claimed to be the happiest home in Britain. Actually the bungalow in question looked as boring as hell, but by hitting the media with a combination of a survey, a case study and a photo story, Halifax General Insurance got a load of coverage out of nothing much.

Stress? What stress?

I say on my Energy workshops that stress is an inbuilt human condition and we should put our (usually) comparatively minor stressors into perspective. A great example of this came from Keith Miller, a former WWII fighter pilot who went on to serve as Australia's cricket vice captain in the 1950s, and who died this year. When asked once how he coped with the pressures of test cricket he replied: 'Pressure? A Messerschmidt up your arse – that's pressure!'

15 June 2005

A change to the rule

When dealing with older hacks - and parliamentary ones - you may come across 'Chatham House Rules' as a euphemism for 'off the record.' If so, check that you and the journo have the same understanding of the term before divulging your darkest secrets (and don't divulge them anyway unless you know and trust the journalist). For a start, while most journalists understand 'off the record' to mean 'you can't use this at all' and 'non attributable' to mean 'you can use this but don't quote me,' I occasionally encounter the odd journalist who interprets the terms differently. And secondly, the original Chatham House Rule (officially singular) has recently changed! After 75 years of its famous rule calling for total non disclosure, Chatham House, aka The Royal Institute of International Affairs, amended it in 2002 to mean, in effect, the same as 'non attributable.' You can now divulge information discussed at a Chatham House meeting, and state Chatham House as the context, but not disclose the identity of the speaker. Not a lot of people know this, so make sure you and the journalist (or whoever) are both clear what you mean when agreeing to 'Chatham House Rule.'

A forgotten crisis audience

Here's another addition to the crisis audience checklist (if you don't have my crisis checklists. let me know and I'll send you a download): at a time of bad publicity for a company, one worried stakeholder group in need of information and reassurance will be its **pensioners**.

Thought for the day

'The supreme achievement of reason is to realise that there is a limit to reason. Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it.' (Pascal).

September 2005

Creativity - a good excuse for a bottle of sake

Summer is pleasant enough, but when you live across the road from the Ealing jazz festival it's just perfect. This year, sponsors JVC displayed posters everywhere for the world's first conical wood speaker - which put me in mind of how the speaker's inventor, Satoshi Imamura, developed the technique after 20 years of failed attempts to bend the thin birch wood without it cracking:

After yet another day of failures he found himself eating dried squid in a restaurant and wondered how something dried and hard could be so chewy. So he asked the waiter, who said that the squid was marinated in sake. He went back to his lab with a bottle of sake, soaked some wood in it and came back next morning to find that he had solved the industry's most intractable problem. It's yet another example of how

much of the best creativity comes from working on the subject with the intellect, then relaxing - and stumbling on the answer by 'accident.' But it's an accident that can only happen when you're looking in the first place.

Crisis resources - an addition

A small but important addition to the checklist of resources for the crisis communications room: chargers for mobiles, laptops and any other battery operated communication devices.

January 2006

Speaking from the heart

Last year saw two major outcomes swung by a brilliant speech. While Britain's securing of the 2012 Olympics was a fine team effort, much credit was given to the final speech by Lord Coe (still in my book the greatest athlete of all time). And David Cameron knocked David Davies off his front runner's spot for Tory leadership in a battle of the speeches. And what did the two speeches have in common? No PowerPoint; no visual aids; no special effects; no set piece from the podium. In both cases the winning presenter gave a sincere, seemingly informal talk from the heart, full of personal examples. Coe and Cameron will undoubtedly have prepared and rehearsed their material, - and then they let human chemistry and personal persuasion play their part instead of the usual paraphernalia that get in the way of a good speech.

How good is your internal reporting?

We are now a year into the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act and most public bodies will have learned by now that when the FOI department receives a seemingly harmless request for information about how many times the Minister has used the official car and chauffeur to visit the red light area, you can spot a crisis coming from the other end of Victoria Street. It highlights the need in all organisations for everyone to be aware of the PR implications of what goes on in their department, and to feed anything that might be a potential news story - good or bad - to the public relations department. This is not as easy as it sounds! As former Lockheed Martin boss Norman Augustine said, getting the people who own a problem to communicate it upwards is 'like delivering lettuce by rabbit.' A PR needs to be as ruthless about extracting information from internal managers on a regular basis as a good journalist is at getting it from his or her contacts.

March 2006

Mentioned in Dispatches

A major investigative TV programme announces in the media that it is about to air an undercover exposé that will show your company in an extremely unfavourable light. You can sit and wait for it to hit - or you could pre-empt the programme by joining the media debate in advance. In my experience it would be a rare management that would do the latter, the standard excuse for rabbit -in-headlights inaction being: 'It will only play into their hands and fuel the adverse publicity and make more people watch the programme.' But the adverse publicity is already there and people are going to watch anyway, and the pre-publicity provides a vital forum for airing your messages. Full marks, then, to Ryanair, for laying into *Dispatches* ahead of its programme on secret filming of alleged sloppy practices. Ryanair's vigorous response

included boss Michael O'Leary taking on the *Dispatches* producer live on TV, and saying they could 'stick the programme up their jacksie.' Fuelling the flames? You tell me - the following week Ryanair ticket sales were up 25 percent.

'If I don't see it it isn't happening'

At the other end of the scale, I learned recently that in the 12 months preceding the *Sudan 1* crisis no less than 58 percent of all the enforcement alerts issued by the Food Standards Agency related to *Sudan 1*. Most crises can be spotted in advance with good monitoring and analysis - and if the FSA notifications weren't early warning of a crisis then I don't know what is.

And talking of quotes...

...Einstein, despite his prolific output of great quotes, is one of history's most misquoted and misinterpreted figures. I cannot recommend highly enough, therefore, *The New Quotable Einstein* (Alice Calaprice, Princeton Paperbacks) as a rich mine of brilliant quotes from the great man. I al atheists whose intolerance is the same as that of the religious fanatics, and it springs from the same source: they are creatures who can't hear the music of the spheres.'

July 2006

Painting a picture Those who have done my crisis course will recognize a spooky similarity between the recent Cadbury chocolate crisis and a training scenario I have been using for some years! The massive furore is a harsh reminder of how a minor occurrence gets blown up by 'context' factors such as being a household name and the possibility of sick children. The world and his wife have had a say in whether the crisis was well handled or not; my main comment is that I would like to have seen a decent analogy quoted to drive home the figures (the contaminated chocolate only contained 0.03% of the accepted danger level). I remember when the French government was caught dumping nuclear waste off the Channel Islands its response was 'you would have to eat a ton of fish every day to be in any danger.'

'I don't believe it!'

There's a lot of hype about the impact of blogs on reputation. Again, the context is important. The key question is 'who are your key audiences and where do they get their information from?' For example, someone like a civil service principal or a chief executive will be far more influenced by *The Times* than the self-centred ramblings of a spotty teenager on the Web. There are indeed a few horror stories such as the Kryptonite bicycle lock, but for the most part I remain sceptical - while of course watching developments. I saw some statistical support for my view last week in a study by Universal McCann which claimed that only 5% of people would trust something they read in a blog as opposed to 55% for a quality newspaper.

September 2006

Letting go

Back on the Cadbury's theme, I don't know what went on behind the scenes when the company decided to keep quiet about the salmonella in its chocolate, but the resulting furore did remind me of an all-too-familiar scene - one in which I have played a part many times. In this kind of situation the PR priority is to protect corporate reputation,

which means, among other things, a prompt announcement, while the FD and sales boss need to keep the show on the road and don't want to recall the product. Meanwhile, the lawyer is saying 'Don't say a word, it could cost us millions.' It's important to remember that each proponent is giving the 'correct' advice from their specialist perspective. Ours is only one voice and sometimes all we can do is give our best advice and then let it go (and be careful how you say I told you so afterwards!).

The most important lesson from this sort of situation is to have your family argument **before** the crisis ever happens. Crisis planning meetings, training, simulations - all can help to effect a quick and correct response when the crisis actually happens. And a personal challenge is to be able to let go emotionally of the fact that your bosses and clients are ignoring your advice and doing the wrong thing.

Managing expectations

I am indebted to my old crony, Tony Hilton, for one of his superb PR Week columns in which he drew our attention to how the blow of ITN CEO Charles Allen's departure with a hefty £2m payout was softened. First, a mystery source leaked it to the Sunday Times that he was thinking of leaving; then a payout of £10m was mooted. So by the time his departure was announced it was no big surprise - and two million quid seemed but a small price to pay.

This is a great example of **managing expectations**: the advanced PR skill of creating the right backdrop for a message - especially an unpalatable one. Another excellent example of this technique was when London Mayor Ken Livingstone heralded the introduction of the highly controversial congestion charge by predicting it would be a complete cock-up. The actual event was then welcomed as a comparative success!

5 March 2007

The Good...

Whatever the politics, hats off to Tony Blair for "involving" the public online in the new vehicle tax proposals. Everyone I know who's posted to the petition says they know it won't be acted on - but they've still written! Even something as minor as contributing to a cyber petition and receiving a standard reply can help to defuse some of the frustration and anger caused by feeling powerless in the face of bad management.

But the real genius lies in the fact that it gives Blair a direct line of communication to his audience. A vital principle of good crisis preparation is to develop direct channels to key audiences rather than reaching them via the distortion of the media. This ploy by the government means that, at the push of a button, the Prime Minister can send his side of things, unedited and unsullied, to millions of voters.

In his column in PR Week, Charlie Whelan slagged the scheme off as a disaster - what further proof of success is needed?!

The idea can easily be adapted for people to have their say to your organisation, thus providing you with their e-mail addresses and a direct channel of communication.

And what brilliant handling of the Cumbria train crash by Virgin. One of the key crisis strategy questions is: “Can the spotlight of attention be transferred?” Two recommended methods are to ensure that other blameworthy parties are identified (usually without you being seen as the whistleblower) and to divert attention to a human interest angle. Well, ‘ole Beardy’s statement plausibly passed the buck to Network Rail *and* made a hero of the driver, all inside 10 seconds! And despite the fact that one had died and many had been injured, we were soon all made aware of the fact that it would have been far worse were it not for Virgin’s new crumple proof carriages.

..The Bad

Contrast these examples with the way the US government handled the “friendly” fire killing of British troops in Iraq in 2003. They screwed up, they knew they screwed up, and they should have said so and apologised from the start.

If we’d only known at the time what we learnt last month as the result of leaked information, the US military and government could have saved themselves a lot of opprobrium and flak. And the standard excuse of not releasing information “in the interests of security” was the usual rubbish.

I trained alongside the American forces in the 1960s and rapidly concluded that the safest place in a war was on the other side. In WWII, their nickname was the “HBWs,” standing for “Halt, Bang, Who goes there?” So for the last three years, in keeping with many, I have assumed that the terrible incident was an example of the Americans shooting everything in sight and asking questions afterwards, and it took a brave leak to make me see it differently.

Educating senior management in the need for a high degree of openness in a crisis is a long and challenging process that has to take place *before* the crisis happens.