

## **2003 Pensions Convention**

### **Media Communication – Getting your views across**

By Iain Taylor, Taylor Communications  
(PR Consultant to the Actuarial Profession)

### **Sources of Journalists' Information**

- ❖ Press Releases
- ❖ Contacts
- ❖ Other newspapers/media
- ❖ Electronic screen-based services
- ❖ Private research
- ❖ Websites
- ❖ Friends, gossip, pub etc

### **What makes a good story?**

**"The definition of a good story is something that somebody, somewhere, wants to keep quiet or makes them say -'ouch'. Everything else is just advertising"**  
*- unknown.*

Or: "What do the readers want to read about, what will they find interesting, what will draw them to your article as opposed to the others on the page?" Readers are interested in scandal, negative stories, new angles on old stories, something different or challenging. In short **news**. So that is what journalists are looking for, too.

Detailed new research, opinion polls and surveys are generally received well, and can help to dress a PR initiative as news.

Obviously the readerships of publications – and therefore the issues they find interesting - will vary. So, readers of Pensions World tend to have a far greater knowledge and interest in a report produced by the Actuarial Profession than would the average buyer of a tabloid newspaper. But things change. We are all aware of how pensions has moved up the public and political agendas over the last couple of years. Pensions stories therefore now make front page leads in the Daily Mail, which they most certainly did not a few years ago.

### **What IS news:**

New:

"At a speech last month, Jeremy Goford said: "... is NOT news

"At a speech tonight, Jeremy Goford will say: "... COULD be news.

*Important:*

"New website launched" is NOT news

"New on-line weapon in fight against child abuse launched today"  
COULD be news

*Topical:*

"Actuarial Profession calls for more research on state pensions"  
is NOT news

"New research by Actuarial Profession shows that 73% of FT-SE 100  
companies not prepared for S2P" COULD be news.

*Ordinary:*

"'Insurance premiums for young drivers too high', say Actuaries" is  
NOT news

"'Young drivers could cut cost of premiums by agreeing late night  
driving curfew', say Actuaries" WAS news.

*Confrontational:*

"'I welcome the government's initiative on xxx' says IDS" is NOT news

"'I condemn the government's initiative on yyy', says IDS" COULD be  
news

## **The Media**

Different media have different methods and agendas. They MUST be handled in different ways:

### **Trade press**

- ❖ Receive a lot of stories (hundreds of press releases a week, for example)
- ❖ Will use the best ones - but will discard the rubbish ruthlessly
- ❖ Are very short staffed - so rarely attend press conferences
- ❖ Don't (usually) require exclusives – but won't turn them down
- ❖ Like personal contact with a good source of stories - a phone call, or a lunch
- ❖ But NOT when they are on their deadline
- ❖ EXCEPT when the story is so good they must remake the front page to accommodate it
- ❖ The inside pages are done well before the final deadline
- ❖ Are desperate for good photos
- ❖ Will pick up on negatives when they are there
- ❖ But will rarely have a real go at an individual, even when he or she has got it wrong

### **National press and broadcasters**

- ❖ Normally always seek out the negative
- ❖ Will sniff out stories over weeks or months if they want to
- ❖ Will use the lowest tactics to get the story if they have to
- ❖ Love humiliating major figures such as politicians, England football manager etc
- ❖ But love to suck up to the fashionable ones (Posh & Becks)
- ❖ Are ruthlessly competitive and are always trying to scoop their rivals
- ❖ But will often follow up stories from other news media
- ❖ Get thousands of press releases a week. And use very few of them.
- ❖ Are most receptive to exclusives
- ❖ Demand proof before running conjecture
- ❖ Use their own photographer, not yours
- ❖ Have distinct 'news agendas', normally dividing on political lines
- ❖ Love human interest angles
- ❖ Will insist on presenting both sides of an argument – even if the 'other' side lacks what we might consider credibility
- ❖ The BBC in particular has a very politically-correct agenda
- ❖ They have so much choice a story must be especially strong, or negative, before they will use it
- ❖ Tabloids and broadsheets have totally different agendas

## Communicating with journalists

Whatever your opinion of journalists or of their publications, radio or TV programmes, remember that they are very influential. They help to form and shape opinions in wider society. Journalists do not exist to "do the dirty" on the subjects they write about. They generally want to build long-term contacts and relationships - that is where they get the majority of their stories from.

With some exceptions, it is safe to assume that journalists:

- ❖ do not know as much about the subject as you do;
- ❖ like to be "spoon-fed" good stories - but their idea of a good story may differ from yours;
- ❖ definitely prefer exclusives, where they are offered the story first;
- ❖ are being offered more stories than they can possibly cover;
- ❖ are most interested when they suspect a scandal or a cover-up;
- ❖ will normally respect accepted conventions, such as "off the record" and "non-attributable" conversations, but proceed with caution nevertheless - such conventions should be used rarely (see later);
- ❖ can be very persistent: refusal to return their calls makes them even more determined to suspect a scandal and uncover the story;
- ❖ often work to deadlines hours, rather than days or weeks away;
- ❖ rarely have secretaries with whom you can leave messages;
- ❖ will not always return telephone calls;
- ❖ want printable facts, not rhetoric or opinions.

## Responding to press enquiries

Journalists, including radio and TV correspondents, may want to speak to you for a number of reasons:

**In response to a press release** - If your name appears as a contact on a press release it is vitally important that you make yourself available for the journalist to contact you. If you are going to be in meetings or on leave, either delay the press release or make arrangements for somebody else to be the contact. Make sure that you have a copy of the release with you to answer questions. The more details and relevant comment that you can provide, the greater the potential coverage.

**On the trail of a rumoured story** - Your ability to co-operate depends on how much you know, the story's sensitivity and your organisation's relevance and level of involvement. If you want to help, but you do not want to be directly credited, you can have an off the record or non-attributable conversation with the journalist. While this carries some risk, such conversations can lay the foundations for regular contact between you and the journalist and these will pay dividends in the future.

**Seeking an opinion or background information** - To write authoritatively on a given topic, a journalist may seek your opinion or background information to help "flesh out" a story. Again, the degree to which you can help depends on your level of knowledge and the story's sensitivity. Apply the same advice as above.

This approach provides a good opportunity to demonstrate your expertise in a given area. If it is a long-running issue, it will probably

be "PR profitable" to establish your organisation as an authority at a very early stage.

### **The all-important deadline**

All journalists work to deadlines, and will frequently be up against them when they call for comment or information. It is essential that you understand the time frames within which the press operates. When a journalist calls you should always check the deadline. If you do not have time to speak to the journalist try to give him or her the name of another expert.

Given the competition for quotes in the nationals, the aim must be to provide something that is pithy, topical and, ideally, a little out of the ordinary - the well known "sound-bite".

### **General guidance on deadlines:**

Each media type has its own deadlines. The following details are for general guidance only. Make contact with your target media and find out exactly when their deadlines are. Remember, do not contact journalists close to the paper's deadline, unless it is with real breaking news.

**Morning newspapers** - late the previous afternoon.

**Afternoon/evening newspapers** - around noon the same day (later editions) or mid-morning (first editions).

**Sunday newspapers** – Thursday/Friday for most stories, Saturday mornings for hard news and front page pages.

**Weekly publications** - two or three days before publication.

**Monthly/quarterly publications** - usually up to two months before publication, but some have deadlines as far as three months in advance.

**Radio and television programmes** - depends on the type of programme and whether the material is recorded or live.

## General rules

Dos	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Establish at the outset how much the journalist knows or understands about the subject, what exactly they are after (e.g. clarification of the issues, in-depth comment or a sound-bite) and the context in which the story will appear</li> <li>❖ Avoid jargon, over complication or too-technical language - it won't help anyone and can lead to misunderstanding and misquotes.</li> <li>❖ Correct a journalist if they make a mistake or a wrong assumption - by remaining silent you appear to agree.</li> <li>❖ Direct a journalist to an alternative source, or to the Profession if you are unable to help.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Try to answer questions that you do not know the answer to. Try and find an answer and call them back within an agreed timescale.</li> <li>❖ Waste time by skirting around a question - if you have no intention of answering it, say so.</li> <li>❖ Be afraid of making points of your own (rather than just answering questions) and highlighting other areas of your organisations expertise, where relevant (answer and offer).</li> </ul>

## Facing up to tricky calls (or you could just pass them to your press office!)

Dos	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Return a journalist's call promptly – ignored calls will make you appear unreceptive, and the next time you most want to be included, you may be ignored.</li> <li>❖ Give a truthful reason if you cannot answer difficult or awkward questions, such as: "that is confidential", "it would be premature to comment", "I don't have any information on that", or suggest an alternative source.</li> <li>❖ Stall for time if you need to check the advisability of releasing certain information and offer to telephone the journalist back, within an agreed time-scale, once you have verified the facts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Miss an opportunity to correct false rumours or place a story in context if, by doing so, it will improve the story from your organisations point of view</li> <li>❖ Deliberately avoid speaking to journalists in the hope that they will give up chasing the story - it only makes them more determined and will not prevent a story from appearing. This tactic often results in the line "Acme plc was unavailable for comment", which has such negative overtones.</li> <li>❖ Use "no comment" if it can possibly be avoided –not only is it negative but it also appears as if there is something to hide or that you are avoiding facing up to reality.</li> </ul>

## **Written contact**

### **News Releases**

Journalists generally receive dozens or more news releases every day; many are filed in a large circular file next to the journalists desk (the waste-bin). National newspapers and media organisations receive thousands of press releases every day. A news-intake assistant (not normally an experienced journalist and often a secretary) will read the headline and first line to decide if the release meets certain criteria - if not, they are thrown away. Some news organisations, including the Sunday Times, don't even open the envelope if it is addressed simply "news editor" or to a journalist who has long since left the organisation.

One of the questions the journalist reading your release will ask is 'so what' – ie why is it important or significant; why should THAT story make the paper rather than the hundreds of others?

### **Timing and distribution**

A PR consultant or a professional press officer will be able to advise on the most appropriate media for the intended audience. This could include less familiar, specialist publications, as well as radio and television programmes. The timing of the release is critical and will depend on the key publications you are targeting and the availability of the people named as contacts for further information.

If a story breaks (or the release is approved) close to the publication's final deadline, it should be faxed or delivered by hand/courier.

## Articles

A press release is only one weapon in the press officer's armoury. Another way of achieving publicity is to offer articles and features for publication.

A placed article is usually written under that person's by-line by someone other than a journalist and is published by prior arrangement. For example, a newspaper may use a feature by an organisation's chief executive, explaining the latest initiative or development or commenting on an issue in the news. The features editor will be inundated with ideas and only the best will be commissioned. Editorial space is often at a premium and the features editor is under no obligation whatsoever to commission every article suggested.

A negotiated article is written by a journalist, based on an idea and/or information provided by an external source. Although the journalist is responsible for writing the article, the organisation will be expected to invest a significant amount of time in giving interviews and providing detailed background information and material. There is less control over the ultimate content of the article and you are unlikely to be offered the opportunity to check the article in advance of publication. The advantage of negotiated articles is that any favourable comments the journalist makes about the organisation are seen as being more objective (and therefore more credible) than the same commentary provided by an interested party.

## Getting an article published

- ❖ Decide which publication is most appropriate for the audience you are targeting.
- ❖ Produce an article synopsis first. This should be brief (i.e. a few paragraphs or even bullet points) and should summarise the key points of the article, highlighting its topicality. The synopsis will help us to "sell" the article idea to the publication. Writing the article first would be a waste of time if no publication will use it.
- ❖ Once you have committed yourself, you must stick to the deadline. If no deadline is given, it is still important to produce the article quickly, i.e. before the publication loses interest, and commissions something else.
- ❖ Failure to meet a commitment reflects badly on you and your organisation. You may also irretrievably damage your relationship with the publication as a consequence.
- ❖ Try to stick rigorously to the word length (and the brief). Too short, and you may greatly inconvenience the journalist looking to fill a specific gap; too long, and you may end up with an article so edited as to be unrecognisable from the one you submitted.



## **Letters to the Editor**

Letters for publication are often overlooked as a way of publicising information or a point of view - yet percentage wise, letters are far more likely to be used than a press release, especially in the national press. They are better known as a means of complaining about something that has appeared in print, but they are also a powerful means of getting a point of view across. Every national newspaper has a letters page. The Times has the most influential letters page, but as a result, there is more competition to get a letter published.

The same degree of care and attention should be applied to letters as to articles. A carefully structured 200-word letter, which seizes the opportunity to make crisp, constructive points, will reflect better than a belligerent rambling missive.

The media is under no obligation to print every letter it receives and they will normally edit them for clarity and size. Never send round-robin letters – ie, identical letters to several publications. Each letter intended for publication has to be original. You may get away with this once – but an editor who sees a letter he has published printed in another newspaper will blacklist you without hesitation.

## Exclusives

Before entering into exclusive arrangements with journalists, consider your PR goals. By offering to give one magazine/paper the first story, you may minimise coverage elsewhere. Your target publication, however, is likely to devote more space to the story than it would otherwise have done. Avoid giving exclusives to the same journalist or publication as, over a period of time, you will alienate other news outlets and do immense PR damage to your organisation.

If a journalist picks up on a story prematurely, you may decide to give them the full details exclusively at a later date, in return for holding back publication. However, in a very competitive media environment this might not work - the press live in deadly fear of being scooped by their rivals. They may therefore insist on publishing before you want them to, despite being offered the later exclusive. You cannot prevent a journalist from running a story simply because you don't want them to, or because he wants to run it before you are ready.

### 'Off the record' and 'non-attributable' conversations

**Off the record** means that the information given by you may not be published. It is provided only to aid the journalist's understanding of the subject or to point them in the right direction.

**Non-attributable** means that the information may be published – verbatim - but must not be attributed to you personally, or to your organisation. The classic non-attributable line is "sources close to the Prime Minister said...."

There is no real protection in making a statement "off the record". When John Major talked off the record to ITN's Michael Brunson prior to an interview about the "b\*\*\*\*\* in the Cabinet" a few years ago, it was picked up by other news organisations sharing the audio visual link to Downing Street and reported widely - including on ITN.

When President Reagan joked during a sound-check in advance of one of his weekly radio addresses, that he was outlawing the Soviet Union and despatching nuclear weapons, the story went around the world in seconds.

Restrict 'off the record' and 'non-attributable' conversations to those journalists that you trust and know well. Make your intentions clear at the beginning of the conversation – never say something and then add "that was off the record". Most journalists recognise that if they fail to honour such conventions - even once - they will lose a potentially important source of information and all the goodwill they have built up with their contact. Be particularly wary about going OTR with tabloid journalists

## **Making contact with the media**

Good PR is all about maintaining regular contact with key journalists. Strong working relationships between Christians and the media are essential in generating quality coverage and removing the mistrust that exists.

### **Initiating Contact**

Journalists are extremely busy - don't telephone just before their deadline just to say "hello". Always be up front with journalists from the start about the reason for making contact, and if telephoning, check that it is convenient for them to talk with you and don't be offended if they say no and ask you to call back later. Always have a story to offer a journalist - even if making contact to arrange a lunch or introduce yourself, but don't be annoyed if the journalist doesn't like your story.

Do not always wait for a journalist to call you for comment on a topical story or issue. If you have advance notice/knowledge of a story that is about to break, such as new legislation or the publication of a report, in your organisation's area of expertise, prepare a response. Then make sure that you alert the relevant journalists.

## **Crafting a press release that will not be ignored**

Always put the most important information (ie the Story) in the headline and first paragraph. Remember, a press release has to answer six key factual questions – what (is the story), who, where, when, how and why (which will hopefully answer the ‘so what’ question). Don’t try and be creative by padding it out. There has to be very good reason for a press release running to more than two pages.

Opinions should be confined to a quote from as senior a person within the organisation as possible. Short and sweet – journalists DO like strong soundbites.

Corporate stuff/background information should feature in a brief ‘Note to Editors’ at the end.

The sole purpose of a press release is to convey information to a journalist. It should NOT read like a finished newspaper feature.

Writing the release – ‘Keep It Short and Simple’. So use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs. If you need pointers on how to write jargon-free english, in my view George Orwell’s short (30 page) essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, first published in the 1930s, has not been bettered.

For something a bit more up to date and in a business context, the *Economist’s* writing style guide is excellent

Finally, four ‘Do Nots’

- ❖ Do not try to be too clever, or too creative (but witty headlines are OK)
- ❖ Give facts, not flowery adjectives
- ❖ No actuarial jargon
- ❖ Avoid cliches like the plague

Have fun and Good Luck!

