

Sex, lies and voicemail: Lessons in campaign PR from the phone hacking scandal

If you're anything like me, you will have been fascinated by the select committee questioning of News International staff about the alleged involvement of its newspaper, the News of the World, in phone hacking - as well as the associated resignations like those of James Murdoch from News International.

These events have not only led to debate about media ethics, but they've also shown what a self-inflicted PR disaster the company has brought upon itself.

As campaigners, we can learn a lot from these PR mistakes. If we can't 'sell' our campaigns effectively to our target audience, be they MPs, journalists or the public, how can we succeed?

Here are some PR and crisis communications lessons that campaigners can draw from the News of the World scandal:

1. Know what you stand for.

That might be serving up sensationalist stories to the masses or taking an 'insider' approach to politics. But high profile or not, you must be able to [justify how you work](#) when taking a public position on an issue. Your detractors will always find ways to undermine you, so you need to be robust and clear about your work, your message and your values.

2. Know your audience.

To galvanise support for a campaign you need to tell compelling, evidence-based stories. At past employers I have seen internal

clashes due to a perceived over-reliance on asking service users to take part in media work. The relationship and understanding you have with the people you feature in your work must be respected. If you abuse the trust of those you claim to be helping, as the News of the World did with Milly Dowler's [parents](#), you will be seen as exploitative.

3. Lead the conversation and cover the space that your target audience occupies.

PR is increasingly a two-way street – a lesson that the News of the World, who never mastered its social media profile, [did not learn](#). While people were using Twitter to lobby advertisers not to do business with the paper, not even the NoTW itself came to its own defence on the social networking website. The ensuing panic led brand after brand to cancel its advertising. Campaigners can benefit from using social media to engage in open conversation with all kinds of stakeholders about their successes and failures and crowdsource ideas to improve their work.

4. Plan, test and monitor the situation.

Why not speak to the people in the know in political, media and public spheres to test your messaging and adapt to reactions, just like many groups like 38 Degrees test their campaign emails? News International made the mistake of thinking it was safe from prosecution – only then to be caught unprepared and unable to react in a measured way. No one wants to have to change their line from an outright denial to a humble apology and forced redundancies.

5. Show a personable side and a sense of humour.

[Repeatedly banging the table while being questioned](#), and

rewarding senior outgoing staff with [continued chauffeur-driven transport](#), doesn't look good. But showing a sense of humour and turning the tables on those that mock you does serve as a great counter and distraction – [Wendi Deng did that much](#) by intercepting a custard pie thrown at her husband. Another example of using humour to turn around a situation is that of the recent [Greenpeace Barbie campaign](#), which pointed out the unacceptable behaviour of Mattel and succeeded in changing the toy maker's policy.

6. Accept responsibility for your mistakes – and don't make them again.

News International failed to admit its culpability early enough – and was then found to be [snooping on the lawyers of alleged hacking victims who were prosecuting the paper](#). Some NGOs encounter trouble again and again because they do not check all their facts thoroughly enough. Libel and invasion of privacy are hot potatoes and not to be dealt with lightly when campaigning against litigious individuals and companies.

7. Be solution-focused.

Once you have admitted to your mistakes, there is only thing to do. Put forward a solution and make it happen. The "International Tiger Moth Charitable Trust" for example, should have shut itself down or completely rethought its ways of working after it was found to have [taken sick and terminally ill children for a ride in a World War Two Tiger Moth aeroplane without doing sufficient risk management](#). It can take years to build a reputation, but minutes to destroy it. As campaigners we should all remember that.

This piece also appears on Campaign Central [here](#)