

Business and Communication Insights

A good reputation doesn't go unnoticed with buyers, investors and recruits. In many markets it is the most valuable asset you can have. Kelso Consulting works with ambitious businesses of all sizes that want to significantly enhance their reputation so they are recognised as leaders in their markets.

We particularly specialise in securing prominent editorial coverage in the national and international business media.

We also create and implement integrated business development programmes for businesses that want a pipeline of leads created quickly. These campaigns combine a range of marketing techniques to secure meetings with decision-makers for our clients at their targets.



Spin & substance

John Redwood MP looks for lessons from the Government's approach to spin and argues that continuous engagement is the only way to make PR pay.

The Government's passion for spinning has spun it into trouble. There is a warning for businesses about how to conduct public relations as we watch New Labour in a tail spin. You can overdo the media briefing. If your story gets too far out of line with reality, at some point reality will catch up.

The message from recent events is to use the right PR specialists in the right way. You can't do away with all media communications, and trust that the facts will speak for themselves. Facts are mute, and are regularly twisted by people with an interest or with attitude. If you don't tell your story, it is unlikely others will. Your customers will not be on the phone to the media to tell them how wonderful you are without a prompt. Your suppliers, friends and neighbours are unlikely to sell your story for you unaided. Only you and your advisers can tell it as you see it.

But telling it as you see it is not enough. There has to be external corroboration of what you are saying. Most business people know that external endorsement of products and services, and of the claims made about them, usually produce better results than just asserting your claims yourself. So it is with potential stories for TV or the newspapers. The fact that you believe it helps, but your ability to show that others endorse what you are saying can be the clincher to make it a story a cynical journalist will trust. In other words, your view and the claims you make have to be based on observable facts, or backed up by the views of others.

That is where the Government's spinning went wrong. Their claims about the dangers of Iraq were undermined by two recalcitrant facts. The first was the inability of the victorious forces to find any of the weaponry they had warned us about before the war. The second was the testimony of certain senior officials working on the Iraq question, who thought the dossiers of evidence against Iraq had been overspun, stretched beyond what the evidence would stand. These two developments did not completely disprove the Government's view, but they were deeply damaging to its credibility with many voters, and therefore with the media. It reduced the probability that the Government was telling the whole truth.

Business and Communication Insights

The Government delights in telling us that the public services are improving because they are spending so much more of our money on them. No one doubts that they are spending more of our money - we have felt the substantial tax rises that pay for it all. The problem with the claim of improvement is that it clashes with many people's daily perceptions of what is happening on the ground. Transport remains poor, with many of the statistics compiled to assess train quality showing a shortfall on the inherited position in 1997. By a big margin a majority of the public think that Labour has spent the money but has not delivered on service quality or quantity. Reinforcing the message that it is improving - when that is not the everyday experience of the man on the 8.15 or the woman in the hospital queue - only serves to undermine the Government's reputation for honest dealing.

Companies can learn from this. Establishing and maintaining a brand in the marketplace requires years of attention to detail, adherence to a consistent and attainable set of brand values, and constant communication of the message to the market. It is no good for a car maker to establish the best reliability or good fuel economy for his vehicles, if he doesn't regularly tell people it has done so, and seeks external validation and endorsement of those claims. Nor is it any good trying to claim its cars are the most reliable if they are not. There will be plenty of customers and the odd competitor ready to put the alternative view. Rule one in media relations should be: Don't lie. Rule two should be: Don't make an issue of something where you are weak or seeking to mislead. You are likely to be found out and will only have yourself to blame.

The Government breaks the rules regularly, believing that the slickness of its 24 hour seven day a week media operation permits it to exaggerate claims or highlight its skating where the ice is thin. It was high risk to claim the public services are improving when experience belies this in many individual cases. It was high risk to claim threats to us as a reason for going to war against Iraq. The Government is now paying the price. When the public by a majority no longer believes what you say, the value of your public relations, however slick, is greatly reduced. You can reach the point where it doesn't matter what you say, because practically no-one believes you.

It's far better to claim what you can prove, and to recognise that good PR for a company, a brand or a government does require continuous engagement with the media based on interpreting the facts, not denying or twisting them too far. The best PR is to have a good product or a good policy, but it rarely sells itself. Help people identify it, but don't overspin - that way leads to spinning out of control.

■ ■ Spin & substance



Rt Hon John Redwood
MP for Wokingham

**For further articles from
Kelso Consulting please visit
www.kelsopr.com**

KELSO CONSULTING

PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANTS

114b Cleveland Street

London W1T 6PB

Tel **020 7388 8886**

Email **timp@kelsopr.com**