

## Both sides now<sup>1</sup> Or

### *How not to be hung by your job – transparency & accountability*

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Speaking notes for the National Communications Officers' Conference  
February 2009 By Jean Shannon

**This morning we will cover two inter-related issues:**

- a) How to avoid your career being isolated or 'branded' in you corporate PR/media relations role
- b) How not to left out to dry when the inquiry comes - and it will, and they will – because the more on the outside you are, the more likely that they will be comfortable in hanging you out to dry

**What is my perspective – I** have worked in public affairs corporate communications in 3 federal departments, cross Tasman; in a Minister's Office and now as a consultant, president of an NGO & ordinary citizen, as a user of the services. I had over 10 years in counter terrorism & crisis management and sadly, I have been around so long, I worked for a previous Australian Labor and New Zealand conservative governments. I've seen the full circle and from both sides now.

**What am I talking about?**

In many departments, the journalists/public affairs people are isolated from everyday decision-making and corporate growth. While you may have a direct line to the boss, you're not in the running for general promotions and camaraderie. It is as if they fear you are tainted by contact with the public and media. In some cases, the more you work with the media, the less you are trusted. They fear what you do and there is little understanding of what's involved. It seems a little airy-fairy to some and too much like art and not enough like science for a government department. One of the 1<sup>st</sup> things I noticed in the Commonwealth is that people from public affairs did not make it

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<sup>1</sup> Apologies to Joni Mitchell – speaking notes for the National Public Sector Communications Officers' Conference 2009, Canberra, 26 February 2009

to the top...in fact, rarely made it to assistant secretary. ..even though we managed more people, larger budgets and more risk than our colleagues.

Much of what I'm going to say has been or will be covered by others in these 2 days but I'm coming to it from a different perspective.

### How to avoid the ghetto?

- 1) Be professional. Don't need me to elaborate because you're here, doing just that...but I will
  - a) Professional in what you do, the highest skills in your field whether it's PR, Corporate communications, media liaison, marketing , community education , journalism etc. Up-skill at every opportunity. Get out there and gain respect amongst your peers (like joining the PRIA), publish, speak, donate your time to NGOs. Maintain the highest ethical standards of your professional group.
  - b) Be pro-active – again, I'm sure you're already doing this but it's important that the whole department understand what your area contributes and what skills are on offer so seek opportunities to speak to business teams, write articles for staff news, hold lunchtime seminars to help others develop speaking, writing and other skills. Offer your services to the training section.
  - c) Be professionally run – don't let your or others creative side get in the way of creating a well run work unit famous for budget & time management, coordination, cooperation, tidiness & record keeping up to or better than average public sector standards.
  
- 2) Identify and service your customers. Again, you already know that your clients are:
  - a) The department (and what other departments you service)
  - b) The minister
  - c) The public
  - d) The media

And you already know they have different needs and different drivers...but what are you doing to be strategic instead of reactive? You are probably very

strategic about your public communications but not with your 'internal' clients. Can you anticipate their needs...and meet them before they ask? Did you contribute your 2 paragraphs to the in-coming Ministers' brief and that's all or did you prepare a separate, more detailed one before you were asked> (Not like you didn't know there was an election)...then make an appointment with a staffer and go through the brief- Same for the head of department. Do they really know what your section does? Do you participate in all in-coming and orientation programs?

3) Transparency and creditability. After all, credibility is your **only** asset – you need to nurture & protect it, no matter what.

### Advertising

New Commonwealth advertising guidelines returns us to the world of ethical, independent decision-making. Launched in July 08 by Faulkner, the gist of the guidelines is:

- Campaigns over \$250,000 to be approved by Finance
- Advertising must be objective, factual, informative, fair, non partisan and free from policy or political argument
- Only policies or programs underpinned by legislative authority and appropriation can be the subject of advertising
- Fostering positions, emotive political imagery etc are expressly banned
- Home departments will be responsible for commissioning, research & communications strategies (with the guidance of Finance) "*without political interference*"
- The Ministerial committee for government communications and the section in PM&C (Government communications Unit) were abolished. All advertising will now be apolitical.

This is a return to 1980s where departments vetoed campaigns that they thought were tainted with political ambition/intentions. But then there was an independent Commonwealth Public Service with permanent secretaries (which is a misnomer) offering free and frank advice. The State rarely had this luxury.

Media liaison & public affairs

- i) Equality – treating all ‘customers’ with equal respect whether they are from the Urdu Times or the SMH. Make them all feel special. Special treatment for some over others always comes home to roost...but feeling special, nearly always has benefits.
  - ii) Open handed – The nothing up my sleeve approach. Open briefings. Need to fight the culture of no info for opposition and others. If they think you’re hiding – you’ll be a target instead of the story
  - iii) Records – directly linked to proactive & professionalism.
    - (1) Because many in your department think what you do is fairy dust, you need to add bulk by generating :
      - (a) activity reports -weekly /monthly (so much of what we do is **not** reported)
      - (b) Post event evaluation
      - (c) Quarterly reports against strategic goals
    - (2) Keep a contemporaneous record of conversations, interviews & media liaison so you can demonstrate what was actually said as compared to what might have been reported. File/circulate these daily amongst colleagues so they will not be tripped over trick questions. These give you a great record for historic analysis, trends, etc
    - (3) These records are also ‘legal’ documents when it comes to FOI, coronial & Ombudsman inquiries and Royal Commissions. They protect you and they help you be...
  - iv) A Credible witness – well informed, prepared substantiated by documentation rather than imperfect memory influenced by stress etc. The longevity of your career could depend on this.
- 4) **Be better than everyone** – better dressed – better organised and cover more disciplines
- a) Demonstrate your project management skills to deliver on-time and on-budget. Seek opportunities to project manage beyond ‘advertising’ and ‘PR’. Volunteer to manage the whole packages that include things like:
    - i) public consultations
    - ii) submissions

- iii) campaigns
- iv) timetables & road shows
- v) the budget
- vi) the cabinet submission

These are risky activities and you'd be surprised how happy others will be to step away and let you have a go. Better your career than theirs.

- b) Then you have the track record to 'jump the fence' to take every opportunity act in 'normal' management positions in other parts of the department furthering your credibility and skills. And make sure you apply for those leadership and management development scholarships such as SWIM & EDS<sup>2</sup>.

## 5) Conclusion

So I was looking for a way to sum up my experience in public sector public affairs into some useful advice. If the only commodity we have is our credibility – fiercely protecting our transparency is certainly #1 on our career priorities. But I've taken you on a journey linking it with our professional development, management acumen and persona. So to make it memorable, I've reduced it to:

### **P.A.S.H**

**Professional** – highly skilled in your discipline, proactive & professionally run

**Active & Anticipating** – customer needs especially internal customers. Actively involved in 'educating' your department through orientation programs, skills transfer, getting involved with marginal projects committees

**See-through** – transparency & record keeping will save your budget and your bacon

**High & mighty** – better dressed, better organised and with a broader skills base than those around you. Parlay your project & people management skills & your negotiation /mediation abilities into wider departmental activities. Prove yourself in operational positions. **Act up! Don't wait to be asked.**

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<sup>2</sup> Senior women in Management & various executive development programs