

# “HarveyLeach”

**Why and how to focus on traditional media**

## **Part 1: Why focus on traditional media?**

### **Introduction**

A little over a decade ago, working in public relations was fairly straightforward. You would decide what message you wanted to communicate, then you would do your best to get that message onto the TV, radio or newspapers.

When you landed some coverage, your job was done - you could be confident that it would have a significant impact.

Today, it's more complicated. The proliferation of social media means that you not only have to consider a far larger number of channels for your message, you also have to learn to approach different types of media in completely different ways.

But some things haven't changed. You still have only a certain number of hours in the day, and you can still focus on only a certain number of things.

So what should you do? Attempt to cover all media? Focus on social media? Or focus on traditional media?

In part 1 of this paper, we look at the pros and cons of each of these approaches, and explain why we believe a focus on traditional media is best.

In part 2, we look at *how* best to focus on traditional media.

## Focusing on social and traditional media

Of course it's tempting to try to cover all bases. If you can get your message across in the right way in both traditional and social media, you're pretty close to PR perfection.

But getting it right is extremely difficult. Traditional and social media are very different, both in the way you communicate through them and the way in which your audience interacts with them. To get a traditional media campaign working in perfect harmony with a social media campaign, you need the perfect strategy and you need huge resources to implement it.

In most cases, the perfect strategy doesn't exist and as you try to cover all bases, you end up spreading yourself too thin. In the end, you won't do justice to either form of media and you're unlikely to achieve much of what you hoped.

And it's at this point that mistakes start to happen. Having too many fingers in too many pies will lead to a loss of control. Messages will get confused between one medium and another.

When the horse meat scandal broke in January 2013 and Tesco spokespeople appeared across traditional media apologising to their customers, this pre-scheduled tweet appeared:



It's sleepy time so we're off to hit the hay!  
See you at 8am for more #TescoTweets

An apology for the tweet swiftly followed.

And this was rather embarrassing. In October 2012, as Susan Boyle's management promoted her new album across press, TV and radio, somebody forgot to proofread this tweet properly:



Oh dear.

These are light-hearted examples, but you can see how easily a disconnect happens between the two very different types of media when you are trying to

cover both equally - they can end up almost competing with each other, and unfortunate clashes occur.

The few examples where covering both traditional and social media really does work are where the media have been bought, through advertising, and complete control is guaranteed. With PR, this level of control simply isn't possible.

## Focusing on social media

So why not focus your efforts on social media? If you get it right, the rewards can be huge.

And the most successful social media campaigns will even filter up to traditional media, so that you successfully cover all bases.

The problem is that there aren't many examples of this actually happening. One example that is often cited is the Dove "Real Beauty" campaign, which certainly received a lot of coverage in mainstream media. However, much of the success of this campaign was down to paid advertising, which helped to increase the impact of the social media part.

For a social media campaign to filter up to traditional media, it needs to achieve an unusual level of success.

And there lies the first major problem with focusing on social media. Successful social media campaigns, where your message is shared and goes viral, *are* very unusual. The inconvenient truth is that your campaign is more likely to die a quiet death, having virtually no impact.

The second major problem with focusing on social media is at the other end of the spectrum - where your campaign spreads, but for all the wrong reasons. Social media is controlled by your audience and not you; it can therefore backfire in spectacular fashion.

In October 2013, British Gas organised a Twitter Q&A with its Customer Service Director having just announced price rises of 11%. The hashtag, #AskBG, was hijacked by angry customers.



Starbucks went one better in December 2012 by displaying Tweets with the hashtag #spreadthecheer on a big screen at the Natural History Museum, just as they were facing a backlash for not paying UK taxes.



Unfortunately for British Gas and Starbucks, these are both examples where a social media campaign did manage to filter up to mainstream media.

The final problem with focusing on social media is based on an assumption that social media professionals encourage you to take for granted: that a "successful" social media campaign will necessarily have a significant impact.

According to We Are Social's "[European Digital Landscape 2014](#)" report, 51% of the UK population have used Facebook in the last month. For Twitter, it's just 22%. Even if your message spreads, only a small proportion of these people are ever likely to see it. Compare this with newspapers, where [81% of UK adults](#) read a national newspaper each month. TV penetration is even higher than this.

Social media is simply not the panacea it is often made out to be, and to make it your communications priority could be a big mistake.

## **Focusing on traditional media**

What happens if you focus your efforts on getting your message across in traditional media?

We have already looked at the advantages of traditional media in terms of audience numbers. But what about trust? Which media will your audience trust most when it comes to your message?

The [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) looks at this in detail every year. And every year, the results are the same: traditional media are more trusted than social media. As sources of information, trust in traditional media in 2014 is at 65% - for social media, it is 45%.

We highlighted some examples above where social media campaigns backfired due to lack of control. Can the same thing happen in traditional media?

Absolutely. There are countless examples of innocent spokespeople being caught out by tricky journalists looking for a headline.

The truth is, when it comes to any form of unpaid-for media, there is no such thing as total control. But there is a big difference between the amount of control one has in social vs traditional media. When putting your message out via social media, you are interacting with hundreds or thousands of social media users. When putting your message out via traditional media you are usually interacting with just one journalist. You can also be fairly confident that the journalist will be acting within certain professional boundaries. This isn't something that can be said for social media users.

That's not to say it's easy to interact with one journalist. Far from it. But with the right preparation it's certainly possible to stay reasonably in control. We look at how to do this in part 2 of this paper.

We've said that it's difficult for a social media campaign to filter up to traditional media, but what about traditional media coverage filtering down to social media? The good news is that this happens almost on its own.

Look at almost any piece of TV coverage or newspaper article and you will find that it has been discussed or shared on social media to some extent. The fact that every TV channel and newspaper also has a strong online presence makes it very easy for social media users to interact with their content in this way.

And this is where you really can use social media in conjunction with traditional media. When you get any coverage in the press, TV or radio, you share it and comment on it, repeating the crux of the message you want to get across. Confirmation bias will then kick in, so that the message you want to

come out of the coverage really stands out in the viewer's mind, making the traditional media coverage even stronger.

There is no question that social media are extremely useful for direct engagement with your audience, especially when it comes to communicating on an individual level. But when it comes to straightforward message communication, traditional media come out on top.

## **Part 2: How to focus on traditional media**

### **Getting the attention of the media**

Never forget how useful you are to traditional media journalists. Their job is to take a story, an issue, an event and explain it to their audience. And you can provide the expertise to guide them through that.

So let's assume you have something that the media might be interested in. It might be a new product or new service your company has developed. It might be a contribution you feel you can make to a national debate or issue. Or it might be a crisis in which it is important your voice is heard.

Whatever it is, you have to consider how to catch their attention. The best way to do that is to understand what they want. They want information and they want it fast. Journalists are now producing four times as much material as they were ten years ago. They are under pressure and if you can do part of their job for them, you will stand a better chance of placing your story.

Provide them with information, facts, statistics. Give them "proof points" demonstrating that this information is accurate and reliable. Add brief, strong quotes or soundbites. Other things to consider – do they need pictures? If so, what have you got to offer them? Most importantly, can you help bring out the human angle in this story – perhaps a case-study involving real people, which demonstrates the effect and significance of this particular story?

If you simply want to add your views or those of your organisation to an ongoing debate, make sure you have something new to say before contacting the media. You must be able to demonstrate that you are bringing something fresh and authoritative to the discussion.

## Handling positive stories

Once a journalist has expressed an interest in covering your story, it's vital that you don't waste the opportunity. You must know how to handle an interview with the media.

It's quite possible that you will have far more information in your head than can possibly be included in a short interview. Go into an interview with all this washing around in your brain, and you will be lost from the start. This is where preparation comes in. Don't think to yourself, "I know everything there is to know about this subject. I don't need to prepare." You do. Preparation means reducing everything you know about the subject to no more than one or two key points, as far as a broadcast interview is concerned, or three or four when it comes to a press interview. Don't try to cover too much ground.

Furthermore, make sure you can deliver the key facts relating to your story in a concise form. Don't go off on a rambling journey, with the journalist at the other end of the phone wondering whether the conversation will ever get round to the main news angle.

There's also the question of what language you use when being interviewed. Is it the in-house mumbo-jumbo of your company or organisation, or can you speak in a way that the average member of the public will understand?

If the interview goes well, as far as the press journalist or the news programme is concerned, you go into their contact list or onto the newsroom database. You're the person they'll turn to next time a similar news topic comes up because they feel confident you can convey your subject in a way that readers, viewers or listeners will understand. You've not been talking above their heads. That's why you see the same faces on television so often. The news programme trusts that person to get across their subject matter in a user-friendly way.

## **Handling negative stories**

In the case of a crisis, the media will be hammering on your door, rather than you knocking on theirs. In that case, make it clear that you are available for comment. It rarely pays to go into hiding when a hostile or crisis story breaks around you. The media won't stop covering the story because you are not available.

Be as helpful as possible, but make it clear that there is only a limited amount you can say. Make it clear too that you only have a limited amount of time available. After all, you have a crisis to deal with, as well as satisfying the needs of the media and perhaps answering the concerns of a wider audience.

And always remember that when you're under fire or have a crisis breaking around you, the manner you adopt towards journalists will be as important as the information you convey to them.

If you start coming across in a belligerent way, blaming the messenger rather than the message, you do yourself no favours. React in a hostile way to a question put to you by a television interviewer, for example, and the viewers will immediately infer that the interviewer has touched a raw nerve with his or her question.

Not only will a spokesperson's meltdown make a good headline for the journalist, it will spread across social media faster than you can say "should have had media training"...

## Authors

### **Andrew Harvey**

Andrew has spent the last 30 years presenting the main TV news programmes on BBC and ITN. In fact he is one of the very few presenters to have fronted all the BBC's daily news programmes.



Beginning with the launch of breakfast television in Britain – BBC 1's Breakfast Time – he went on to present the Nine O'Clock News, the Six O'Clock News, the One O'Clock News and Breakfast News. He has also fronted the BBC's regional programmes in Southampton and Bristol.

Andrew has won awards for writing and producing programmes on Aids and meningitis (he is President of the Meningitis Trust).

Most recently presenting the 24-hour ITV News Channel, he has also worked for 20 years as a media trainer with many leading companies.

### **Graham Leach**

Graham has spent thirty years working in broadcast news, both studio presenting and reporting from world hot spots.



After joining the BBC as a graduate News Trainee, he spent several years based in Belfast covering the early stages of the recent troubles in Northern Ireland.

This was followed by a spell in London reporting on major national and international news stories. He then spent seventeen years travelling the world as a BBC foreign correspondent with postings in Bonn, Beirut, Johannesburg and Brussels.

He has presented the flagship 'Today' programme, the breakfast programme on LBC and most recently worked on the Sky News channel. He has been involved in media training for 15 years.