

- >be constantly unavailable
- >send inaccurate information
- >make inconsistent statements.

Pro-active media strategy

Department of Education taken to court

The Department of Education has been taken to court by a group of parents because it has decided to reduce the subsidies of private schools without warning. All media are showing keen interest because the Human Rights Commission and some Members of Parliament have come out in support of these schools. The MEC for Education calls a press conference in which she announces that the department never intended to cut subsidies. In fact – the MEC explains – subsidies are to be increased but there will be a delay in depositing the money into schools bank accounts. The opposition parties issue scathing statements in which government is accused of inefficiency and call for the MEC to resign.

What you are thinking is correct. This problem could have been avoided.

How?

Clearly, this Department had something to communicate **BEFORE** it was faced with this public relations crisis.

What are the specific steps they should have taken?

When it was discovered that there would be a delay in the payment of subsidies, a communication plan should have been designed. Such a plan should take the following into account:

- identify and design the message which must be communicated
- identify the target audience(s)
- identify the means through which the message will be communicated
- identify the key person or people who will speak on the matter. Ideally, and for the sake of consistency, it is better to have one person talking to the

media, especially during periods of crisis

- design an implementation plan which stipulates:
 - The person who will manage the process
 - The person or people who will write the statement
 - Members of the media to whom the statement will be sent
 - A monitoring and evaluation mechanism
 - The briefing of another or other departments if there is a need
 - Clear time frames for all specific activities
 - The person who will handle all enquiries.

REMEMBER!

If you can, avoid giving bad news to parties who will be affected by your decisions through the media. Media statements must complement direct communication with such parties.

Press Statement

Whether times are good or bad, you will issue a press statement or media release at some point.

If this is the first part of the handbook you went to, you are not alone. Government spokespeople love issuing press statements and get quite agitated when they pick up the newspaper and see nothing.

REMEMBER!

- We write press statements in order to promote good relations with the media, publicise our programmes and inform the public and put something on record.
- On an average news day your press statement competes with hundreds of other stories
- Most press statements feed the rubbish bins of the newsrooms they are sent to. In this day of the e-mail, most press statements enjoy the status of junk mail.

Some government communicators seem to be confused about what press statements were designed for. They seem to write them just to impress their bosses or to be seen to be working. That is why I end up keeping a large collection of government media releases in my dustbin. *Print journalist*

Although arrogant and pompous, this journalist has a point, doesn't he? So, we will – like the dedicated and professional government communicators we are – keep our shirts on and follow the advice he gives below.

10 POINTS TO REMEMBER!

1. Your writing must be accessible, clear and direct.
2. Your first paragraph must be punchy but avoid going over the top.
3. Talk to the journalist before you fax or e-mail the press release.
4. You should seek to inform and arouse the interest of both the editor and the journalist who is going to write the story.
5. Your statements must be newsworthy. Check this with the journalist because what is newsworthy to you may be as exciting as watering dead plants to a journalist.
6. Give your statement a title, not a headline.
7. Your typing should allow space for editing. Statements typed in double spacing are preferred.
8. Never type on both sides of the page.
9. Provide all your contact details and where additional information can be obtained, e.g. website.
10. In terms of lay out try to put all the information in one page and any variation of the following structure:
 - subject
 - name of the department
 - the information you are communicating
 - in the case of events, state the venue or place
 - give the date
 - indicate the benefits of your programme or project
 - identify the beneficiaries
 - contact person.

Message Presentation Strategies:

REMEMBER!

Government communication exists to ensure that the public is constantly informed about service delivery and the challenges facing the state. In the process, government communicators are delivering a service that is as important as the delivery of houses, water or electricity. It is, therefore, important that you construct government messages in a way that would capture the attention of the public.

A badly constructed message can be as bad as denying citizens their right to information.

How can I avoid badly constructed messages?

- organise a brainstorming session with the communication team and relevant officials
- identify key messages
- identify target audiences
- identify appropriate media and journalists.

Handling a media crisis

Since you will not be able to prevent crises all the time, there are a few things you can do once it has arisen:

- do not lie
- do not issue statements if your department has not made decisions about what to say
- if the crisis is going to impact on government as a whole, develop an inter-departmental or government-wide approach
- do this while approaching members of GCIS to coordinate the process
- have a central point from which statements will be issued and coordinated
- develop a parallel process for managing the parties who will be directly affected by the process.

GCIS Communication Centre: City Press: June 3, 2001

Hands up if you know what the NYC stands for

SINCE its launch in 1997, the National Youth Commission (NYC) has been dogged by controversy. To worsen matters, it is widely perceived as suffering from a serious leadership crisis.

Some observers comment that, ineffectual as it was under the leadership of previous head Makhlongi Rhenya, it has gone from useless to worse.

Just how disorganised the NYC is became clear to me while doing a story about the 28th anniversary of Youth Month, June.

When first approached to comment on the NYC's planned programme of action for Youth Month, NYC chairperson Jabu Mkhahle insisted the organisation had just resolved that Monda Mkhahlepi was its designated spokesperson, the person who could handle all media inquiries.

Mkhahlepi in turn referred us back to Mkhahle as the "proper person to speak to", and he in turn has never had anything to say.

It took some 30 hours of thought before Mkhahlepi finally thought he should carry out his duties as a spokesperson of sorts and stop referring us back to his chairperson.

Even then, Mkhahlepi would not be drawn on as simple a question as whether the 28th anniversary of June 16 had any significance for young people.

On the eve of this significant anniversary, it is to be hoped the NYC is a little more accessible to the youth - whose interests it supposedly represents - than to the media.

So what exactly is the National Youth Commission?

Ask a cross-section of youngsters at random, and you are guaranteed to draw blank stares. That happened on a SABC youth programme two years ago.

Seemingly preferring the lofty position of helping to craft policy rather than to get in touch with young people in the streets, the NYC has no credibility with the youth.

In its defence, the NYC has said it does not need to make itself visible in the streets because its mandate was always to influence government policy.

There is some evidence of this in the "victories" the NYC claims: establishing the inter-departmental committee on youth affairs to co-ordinate the youth programmes of 28 government departments and agencies, and influencing the establishment of the National Youth Service. This latter project has led to national youth pilot projects being launched in partnership with the department of public works.

The NYC was established by an act of Parliament, the National Youth Commission Act of 1996, and consists of five commissioners, whittled down from the original 19. The commissioners are appointed by the office of the presidency.

Mkhahle took over as chairperson at a time when the NYC was already mired in controversy after it emerged that his predecessor, Rhenya, was getting an annual salary of R280 000.

It is these kinds of salaries, paid by government to an organisation that apparently lacks concrete programmes and a purpose, that makes the NYC's commissioners look like young fat cats.

Previous commissioners pocketed annual salaries of between R171 000 and R260 000 at a time when the NYC's very existence was being questioned because of its tendency to hold what many considered were totally useless conferences (called summits).

The other commissioners are deputy chairperson Yodiswa Matima, Nkethu Matima, Daniel van Vuuren and Ngwanakope Ramotha. The NYC has an administrative arm headed by Leani Mboyi, who serves as chief executive.

Andile Nogata

This is an example of a communication effort that went wrong.

5 NEW MEDIA AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The mouse, not the dog, is a communicator's best friend!

The developments in information technology in recent times have granted government the opportunity to communicate in new and exciting ways. Developments on the Internet front have resulted in an explosion of information that is available to both government communicators and members of the public. The Internet has become an important tool for research and the distribution of government information.

Government departments are investing in their own websites as a means of extending the dialogue between government and civil society. As a communicator you may have to ensure that the information contained on the website is relevant, topical and addresses the needs of citizens.

In order to sharpen your research and other skills, please visit the following websites:

A. SEARCH ENGINES

International Search Engines

- www.altavista.com
- www.Askjeeves.com
- www.dogpile.com
- www.excite.com
- www.hotbot.com
- www.Infoseek.com
- www.metacrawler.com
- www.yahoo.com

South African Search Engines

- www.aardvark.co.za
- www.ananzi.co.za
- www.Intertainment.co.za
- www.max.co.za
- www.worldonline.co.za

B. GRAMMAR AND STYLE

- Government Communicators Style Guide
- www.bartleby.com/141/
- www.ccc.comment.edu/grammar/

C. GOVERNMENT SITE

- www.gov.za
- www.gcis.gov.za

D. NEWS SITES

- www.ananzi.co.za
- www.fanagalo.co.za
- www.iafrica.com/news
- www.iol.co.za
- www.mg.co.za
- www.mediaweb.co.za
- www.bday.co.za
- www.news24.com
- www.cnn.com
- www.bbc.com
- www.timemagazine.com
- www.reuters.com
- www.nytimes.com
- www.google.com