

# WEATHERING THE STORM

A picture paints a thousand words. We've all witnessed the media fighting like a pack of hungry wolves to get 'the scoop' – but what if you find this unruly pack camped on the doorstep of your school? Dr Peter Spence, Principal Consultant of Holistic Educational Marketing & Fundraising, gives advice to head teachers facing a media crisis.



Peter Spence



Head teachers sometimes assume that events that become national press headlines will never be an issue for them. But that complacency is dangerous. Think about the head of finance at an academy in Milton Keynes who was jailed for stealing £120,000 from the accounts. Or the physics teacher at a secondary school in Bristol who was banned after having sex with a male pupil during a school trip. And then there was the drama teacher at a leading independent school in Buckinghamshire who was found guilty of unprofessional conduct with a female boarder. What would you do if you arrived at work to discover such a headline about your school?

## Early warning systems

Before anything like this happens to you, ensure you have appropriate protocols in place. Remind your teachers and support staff on a regular basis that any approach by members of the press, or any media cuttings about your school, are to be directed to the designated senior member of your staff immediately. If the news is positive, you can post it on your website straight away. If it is a request for an interview with a member of your staff, you can help to brief them on key themes and questions.

***"Head teachers sometimes assume that events that become national press headlines will never be an issue for them."***

If the news is negative, you have time to start considering your response and, in these instances, time is of the essence. Furthermore, cultivate a few supportive members of your parent and alumni community to watch for references to your school on social media. Not only can they alert you to possible negative stories, but in some cases (particularly conversations on platforms such as Mumsnet and Twitter) they can intervene with your guidance to limit the impact.

## The bombshell

Whether you hear about the crisis from a reporter, or from the police, or from a friendly parent, do not ignore it and assume it will go away. The decision by the media to run a story depends entirely on what other news is current. On a day that North Korea launches a nuclear test, your issue may well fall into the reject bin, but on a slow news day you may become the lead story. So be prepared. Research and ascertain the potential full extent of the crisis: don't obstruct it but, instead, prepare for your response.

## Legalities

There will of course be times when legal assistance is required, and either your own solicitors, or a governor with a legal background, or the PR agency you have appointed will assist in this regard. It is important to ensure that you do not make matters worse by an inadvertent statement or insinuation. Yet it is also important to craft your response in a way that does not seem too defensive either.

## Checklist

If it is particularly salacious and a story highly likely to attract reporters to doorstep you, then appoint a public relations consultancy to give you advice. You do not want to appear on the news without being prepared for the questions you will be asked.

When you understand the gravity of the circumstances, immediately prepare (but do not dispatch until necessary) three statements:

- one to your staff, who should be the first to know of any crisis as soon as it breaks
- one to your parents, who should be advised as soon as a story breaks, and
- one for the media – journalists will usually be perfectly happy if advised that a press release will be sent to them within a few hours.

These statements must be amended if any further information emerges and should be checked on a weekly basis, at least.

***"Whether you hear about the crisis from a reporter, or from the police, or from a friendly parent, do not ignore it and assume it will go away."***



Critically, the statements should tell the truth but should strive to limit the damage. For example, 'We at Hogwarts are saddened by the news concerning Gilderoy Lockhart and apologise for the pain that he will have caused to many in our community. Nothing can diminish his impact on innocent young lives, despite the many years since these offences took place. However, we at Hogwarts can confidently state that the pastoral care systems we have instituted over recent decades will ensure this can never happen again.'

Having researched to understand the full gravity of the situation, appointed a public relations consultancy to help you prepare appropriate printed and interview responses, and prepared statements for your key audiences, subscribe to a news monitoring service that can monitor media and social media sources to spot any references to your school. Then wait.

## Afterwards

It is likely that your story will never appear in the press, in which case keep a watchful eye on the media and keep your statements current. Otherwise, as time passes, you can relax. If, on the other hand, the story does break, you will be prepared to deal with the immediate press interest. Clearly, you and your public relations advisers will need to periodically assess your responses and reactions as the story grows. But most media interest will fade, particularly if the press and your wider community feel that you have responded to the news in an open, transparent, appropriate and honest way.

## The upside

Depending on the gravity of the situation, this will be a worrying and unpleasant period. However, be comforted by the knowledge that an appropriate response, delivered in a timely way, will go a long way to offset the initial concerns from your staff, parents and community at large. And while their immediate attention will be unpleasant, you will have established connections with the media that, in due course, you may be able to turn to your advantage. ■

**ISBL welcomes Peter's advice. If a negative story about your school is likely to appear in the media, appoint a public relations consultancy to assist. A search on the internet for PR consultancies specialising in education will help you find the right expert.**

## TOP TIPS:



- 1 Build early warning systems that allow you to learn about, and counter, negative news stories as soon as they appear.
- 2 Ensure your responses are honest, open, appropriate, and transparent. Avoid any hints of complacency or dishonesty.

## About the author:

Dr Peter Spence  
Principal Consultant of Holistic  
Educational Marketing & Fundraising  
[www.holisticemf.co.uk](http://www.holisticemf.co.uk)  
[office@holisticemf.co.uk](mailto:office@holisticemf.co.uk)  
T: 01904 215615

Holistic was founded to offer advice on all aspects of advancement to independent and state schools, academies and academy trusts, and 6th Form and FE Colleges. Its central ethos is that all external facing aspects of any educational institution should be coordinated to ensure maximum benefit.